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Dimension Wave

Author: **Aneko Yusagi**
Illustrator: **Ryo Ueda**

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“Hmm...?”

Kizuna was lying on a sandy beach, around half of his body being lapped at by the waves.

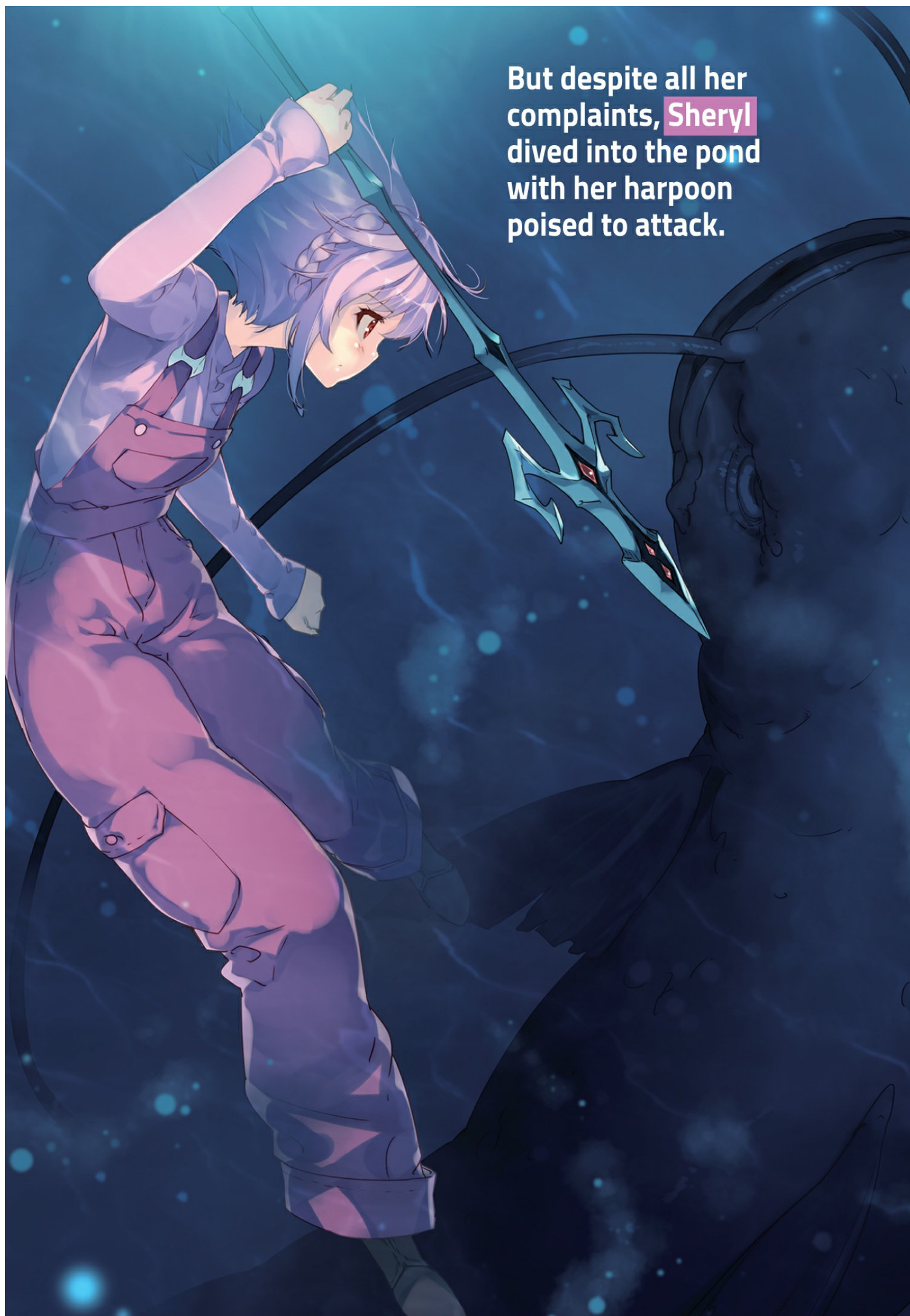
Dimension
Wave



“peeeen!”

The moment I
hit the button,
a **Pekkle** emerged
screaming from
within.

But despite all her complaints, **Sheryl** dived into the pond with her harpoon poised to attack.



A massive, decrepit ship floated in the water before us. Its sails were tattered, the wood was crumbling—if it wasn't for the eerie glow, it would have been dismissed as a shipwreck. I glanced at Alto, hoping for a fun reaction, and saw him trying his best not to look.





“Here
I go!”

“Nice one,
bro!”

Together, **Tsumugi** and **Shouko**
launched blow after blow, leveraging
what was only the slightest gap in
the Chimera’s defenses.

CHARACTERS

Dimension Wave 2



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.



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.



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.



Altorese

A merchant. He has a special fondness for money, and is called the Merchant of Death (by Kizuna).



Sheryl

A girl with a knack for crafting skills. Her race is Jewel. A quiet girl of few words.



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.

Dimension Wave 2

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Prologue: The Plank of Death

“I daresay you’re being a nuisance, milord!” Yamikage said as she stood on the deck.

We were far out at sea with nothing but the ocean around us. Yamikage seemed dissatisfied about something and voiced said dissatisfaction directly to my face.

“Now look here... Are you really saying that straight to my face?”

“I daresay, I’m sick and tired of squid!”

“She’s right. Incidentally...Ms. Sheryl, you mustn’t waste food.”

“I’m not wasting it... I’m using it as a weapon.”

Yamikage lamented while staring at her squid lunch; meanwhile, Sheryl loaded the squid onto the ballista in place of a bolt, and Shouko chastised her for it.

We had two other members on board apart from them.

“Ah ha ha, you’ve got a fun group, bro!”

“Hah... Why did I have to come along...”

Tsumugi laughed while Alto sighed.

How had the six of us ended up in such a bothersome situation...? To answer that, I’ll have to go back a little over a week, to the day right after the Dimension Wave ended.

†

We’d gone to Romina the blacksmith to turn the dismantled Cerberus parts into weapons. After a bit of discussion over what would be made, it was strongly and unanimously decided that the new weapon would be for me.

“You’ve brought in even more unfamiliar material... Not that I’ve got anything against it. If it’s for Kizuna, then it’s got to be a dismantling weapon. All right, I’ll

get right to it.”

Romina eyed me suspiciously but promptly got to work. *Yeah, of course she'd be suspicious after I brought in a mountain of Cerberus items.*

The weapon that came out was called Cerberus Slaughter. It was a simple kitchen knife whose hilt with a black flame motif seemed to reflect absolutely no light... Yes, a simple knife; at least, that's what it seemed to be. However, it was a weapon made from such a powerful boss. Surely it had to be strong.

The problem was that I'd lost so much Energy during the Dimension Wave that I didn't meet the requirements to equip it. That was the big downside of choosing a race where Energy was everything. By now, I could somewhat understand how Shouko felt after she'd greatly weakened herself in the battle to open up the Second City.

“Why don't you give it a try once your Energy has recovered? I'm sure it will be formidable.”

Before encountering me, Shouko had been driven out by her comrades, who'd insisted they didn't need any weaklings in their party. *She's a great person who'll never do that to anyone else...*

“Yeah. I'll do my best to meet everyone's expectations. I guess Cerberus Slaughter will have to sleep in my inventory until then.”

And just like that, Cerberus Slaughter was buried under a host of other items. Everyone else made sure to branch off their weapon trees and buy Intermediary Stones among other things. We explored the Second City under the guise of looking into the newly implemented items. I acquired a reel and felt quite pleased with myself as I walked alongside my party members: Shouko, Yamikage, and Sheryl.

“Ah, look who it is. What do you think about this shop, little lady?”

As we coincidentally bumped into L'Arc and Therese, the casual couple beckoned us to check out one of the stalls. And that was where I had a meeting with destiny.

It was a lure. It was a shining, glistening lure—and I wasn't exaggerating. It was actually imbued with the light element. Fate had brought me to a merchant

who sold lures made for night fishing. The price was ten thousand Serin.

At first, I tried to buy it at the listed price, but Shouko pleaded, “No, don’t. It’s a scam. Please stay strong.” I barely managed to regain my senses. And after much haggling, we brought the price down to ten thousand Serin.

“So... Back to business. How much can you lower it for me?”

“Ten thousand Serin. I can’t go any lower than that.”

“Did you see that, Shouko?! That’s the power of my haggling skills!”

“You didn’t lower the price at all. You just chatted a bit! He’s completely tricking you! Please listen to me!”

Sure, the price might drop eventually, but time is money, as they say. Using the newly implemented lure as quickly as possible would give me an advantage over the other players and make it more than worth my time. I’d make up for any losses in the blink of an eye. The only real counterpoint to that argument was that I barely ever saw any other fishing players apart from myself.

“Calm down, little lady.”

“L’Arc, didn’t you know this would happen if you showed it to him? Help him out a bit.”

“I know, Therese.”

And so, L’Arc stepped in between me and the merchant, dragging the price of the shining lure down to six thousand Serin.

“Thanks, Mr. L’Arc. You were a big help...” Shouko groaned.

“I could have probably pushed it down to three grand if I kept at it. But it looks like our little lady wants to support the merchant in his future endeavors, so let’s keep it at that.”

“Right... As long as he wasn’t trying to deceive us, it’s fine.”

And so, the Lure of Light became mine. The day carried on peacefully with shopping and other laid-back activities until finally I hit the hay. In retrospect, I can say that the actions I took back then were not a mistake.

The next day, on Shouko's decision, we set off on our Sailboat into our home turf, the sea, to restore as much of my lost Energy as possible.

"Lord Kizuna, it will all be for nothing if you take damage. Please rest inside the ship."

Still worn out by the Dimension Wave and yesterday's shopping, I felt unusually sleepy. And so, I left the fighting to my comrades and decided to take a nap under deck. There were two break rooms inside the ship, and as I was a bit embarrassed at the thought of anyone seeing me asleep, I locked the door before lying down. It wasn't as comfortable as the NPC-run inns, but still, I was overtaken by drowsiness soon enough.

After a few hours had passed, I arose and climbed back onto the deck. It seemed strangely noisy, and I soon understood why. I came face-to-face with my comrades...acting practically like pirates.

To be more precise, my sister Tsumugi†Exceed was standing tied up on a wooden plank barely wide enough to fit her. The plank was fastened to the deck with most of it hanging off the edge, and it looked like she was going to be pushed off at any second. I'd come across quite the nonsensical scene.

Below, on the water's surface, three Blue Sharks were circling, eagerly waiting for the moment of her inevitable drop.

"Stop! Stop! Save me!"



Honestly, it felt like an old comedic cliché.

“The hell are you people doing?!” I shouted, quickly regaining my composure.

“Stowaways must be executed!” Shouko shouted back.

Her eyes are completely glazed over! What could have happened to make that serious girl like this?!

“Tsumugi is my little sister. What happened?! Please explain the reason!”

What was Tsumugi even doing here in the first place? *No, they called her a stowaway, so I guess she sneaked onto the ship? But even if she did, why does she have to be executed?*

Neither Shouko nor Yamikage nor Sheryl was this bloodthirsty, at least as far as I was aware. It would be one thing if Yamikage was just going along with the bit, but to see even Shouko joining in on it was downright abnormal.

“I daresay, stowaways must face judgment!”

“You stay quiet!”

“Stowaways...are shark food.”

“You’re not making sense.”

“Seajackers shall be eradicated, I daresay!”

“Just stop talking, The Dark Shadow!”

Unable to make any sense of the situation, I focused on saving Tsumugi and dispelling my party’s mysterious tensions before asking again. To my astonishment, it turned out there had been a seajacking attempt while I was taking a nap. A party of four had attempted to occupy the ship.

The four seajackers were Shouko’s old party members. They had come to investigate the secret behind our performance in the Dimension Wave and had stowed away below deck... Once we were out at sea, they sprung into action. Did they seriously think it would all work out if they threatened us a bit?

My party members met them head-on, and the seajackers—who lacked the Shipboard Combat skill—had the tables turned on them and were easily subdued. *This game has no PVP or PK as of yet, but you can still restrain players*

or kill them through environmental damage, I reminded myself. As a result, they were now trying to execute Tsumugi. How did that lead to this?

“So Tsumugi ended up like this because of the seajacking?!”

“Yes.”

Afterward, as they were discussing what to do with the four captive seajackers, one of them tried to appeal to Shouko. “We used to be comrades, right?”

He tried to abuse their past friendship to earn sympathy. He tried this after they had so smugly claimed that there had to be something shady behind Shouko and the others succeeding in the Dimension Wave despite being mere Spirits. And he tried this after they’d cackled about how our party must have somehow cheated. Shouko flew into a rage, fastened a plank to the ship’s edge, and threw them all overboard.

Their leader’s parting words: “I’ll spread bad rumors about you, wench.”

It was a line I’d expect from a heroine of an old dating sim. As for the other three: “You won’t get away with this!”

“We’ll defeat you in the next Dimension Wave.”

“Uuuuuurgh!”

What a grab bag of petty responses. I had no idea what she was even “getting away” with, and I couldn’t understand why we’d be fighting one another in the next Dimension Wave either. And the last guy. Did he have his son taken hostage or something? Like in the fifth installment of a famous RPG series?

The baseless grudges of these sorts were a mystery to me... It was idiotic to even give them the time of day. People like them weren’t exactly rare in online games, and it was essentially a part of the experience. Anyway, the gist of it was that Tsumugi had been hiding in a barrel to surprise me, and she was discovered by the three of them while the seajacking had put them in quite a peculiar state of mind.

“You guys need to get a grip!”

“Indeed.”

“Shouko. Why are you acting like this is someone else’s problem? You were the ringleader here.”

“I’m sorry...”

I’d never even imagined that Shouko could be this unhinged.

“Now on to you, Tsumugi... What are you doing here?”

“Your party looked really fun, so I left the party I was in before.”

“Are you sure you should be leaving just like that?”

“They said it was fine. Things were getting stale anyway, and with the new update, it feels like the right time to start something new.”

Every party had its own circumstances, but it seemed Tsumugi had left on good terms.

“And...mumble, mumble, mumble.”

You tried mumbling it, but I heard you!

“What was that? You got tired of doing death game RP?”

“I kept my voice super quiet! How did you hear that?!”

Unfortunately, I had good ears. In the first place, there was no way I wouldn’t hear her when we were this close. So it wasn’t just me...probably.

“And wait, what do you mean ‘death game RP’?”

“It’s a fairly popular role-play people do in VRMMOs,” muttered Sheryl, who seemed to know all about it.

“Hmm, that’s a thing?”

“Uh-huh...”

According to Sheryl, it was a type of role-play where players acted like dying in the game meant dying in real life. It was common in games where players were unable to log out at will, such as the ones put out by the Second Life Project. Essentially, it meant forced removal from a party and cutting off contact if someone died.

“Huh? You guys were doing that?”

It wasn't that I intended to judge how others played, but my fairly positive opinion of Rosette and his party dropped a bit. Though perhaps it was precisely this role-play that gave them enough dedication to work hard enough to be frontliners...

If Tsumugi wanted to join our party, she could have just told me... But come to think of it, she did like surprising people.

All right, I understand the situation. Let's see if the others are on board with the idea.

"If you're all okay with it, I'd like to add Tsumugi to the party. Any objections?"

"Certainly not."

"I daresay I owe your sister for what she did in the Dimension Wave."

"Mhm."

"But weren't you just about to execute her?"

Everyone averted their eyes.

Even if you try to play it off, I'm not going to just forget about it... Something didn't sit right with me as I added Tsumugi.

Soon after, I received a message from Alto about the seajackers spreading rumors about us in the Second City. I explained the situation, and owing to their usual barbaric deeds and troublemaking, those rumors quickly died out. Ultimately, that was where it all began. Talking to Alto was the cause of all of this.

Chapter 1: Merchant of Death

“Stowaway, I daresay!”

Three days had passed since Tsumugi joined the party... We were working hard, shifting between land and sea in our quest to level up. Once again, an ill-timed shout came from below deck.

“Y-You have it all wrong!”

Stowaway A. Occupation: Merchant of Death. Age: Unknown.

As usual, our team of four was enacting the ritual of the death plank, having Stowaway A perform a balancing act on a narrow board while they prodded at him with sticks. As if on cue, those three sharks that appeared whenever we whipped the plank out were doing their usual rounds.

Is this really that fun for them? At least the sharks seem to be enjoying it. Maybe the developers expected players to do pirate role-play.

“Now, Mr. A... No, Mr. Altorese. What do you think you’re doing?”

“Why are you treating me like a stranger? Just help me already!”

“I’m busy fishing!”

“Heartless fiend! Please! We’re friends, aren’t we?”

“I’m kidding. It’s not like you’re actually going to die.”

Falling into the sea would just send him back to his previous save point with a death penalty. *Is this the fear that comes from how realistically things get recreated in VR games?* I recalled how a VR game that could accurately recreate murder cases became a social issue for a bit; perhaps this was a similar situation.

“Hmm, another acquaintance of yours? I daresay, you get around, milord...”

“Why are you acting so disappointed? This guy’s relatively famous.”

The plank seemed to be addicting to everyone apart from myself. Regardless, I tried questioning Alto.

“So why did you stow away?”

“Yes, well you said it, didn’t you, Kizuna? That you tossed some troublesome players into the sea? That got me curious about the sea, so I did some digging and found out that hardly anyone is building ships.”

“And so, you stowed away on the only one you could find?”

“I’ll do anything for money!”

No, don’t puff out your chest when you say that.

I resisted the urge to toss this money-crazed fiend into the sea and heard him out. Secretly figuring out that we were hunting at sea and hearing those quickly extinguished rumors from the seajackers, he suspected there might be some truth mixed in with the lies. He really did have a knack for sniffing out opportunities for profit.

“What do you plan to do if they turn out to be true?” Shouko asked with a serious look on her face.

Well, the others didn’t know Alto as well as I did. I knew exactly what he wanted.

“Give me a piece of the pie!”

That was just how Alto was. But why did he stow away? *If you call yourself a merchant, then negotiate. Don’t skimp out on the information fee.*

The Alto I knew was someone who would sidle up to rival parties, supplying both sides with weapons and items to make a profit off of their competition. He was a good ally when you had him on your side, but there was no guarantee as to whether he’d stay there. The moment he saw his profits dwindling, he’d probably sell the secrets of our efficient maritime hunting. His clientele would spread from the frontliners to the crafters, and even the players living peaceful lives. Rumors were known to spread like wildfire.

If this were reality, it would be easy enough to silence him. But that wouldn’t

work here. In the first place, it would be a crime. Our safest bet would be to negotiate and provide information so valuable he'd make more profit hoarding it than selling it.

"All right. But the sea only offers more types of fish and different monsters than the land."

"There's albacore tuna and sea bream. Also, you can get materials from Brave Birds and Blue Sharks, correct?"

I hadn't even said a word, and he nailed all the creatures inhabiting the area. He'd probably done a bit of background research before coming here. Alto placed a hand to his mouth, gesturing as though he was deep in thought.

"Dismantling weapons...an isolated location...experience points...the goods in circulation...and Spirits..."

Yamikage looked at me with concern. Unfortunately, that behavior was pretty much an answer in and of itself.

"Albeit, I knew from the start."

"Which means someone apart from me figured it out too?"

"As far as I'm aware, there are three of them, including you. There are probably quite a few more. A lot of people find themselves being excluded just for choosing dismantling weapons."

Alto would take them into the fold, forming a secret pact to buy their materials and sell them at a markup to whoever needed them. It was a typical move for the Merchant of Death. The fact he hadn't spread the word about dismantling weapons to raise their popularity was because he saw a secret gold mine in them. The moment the truth got out, one dismantling weapon user would become a staple in every party—naturally, to increase the drops of every monster defeated. It made no sense that this wasn't public knowledge yet. Unless...

I recalled the Cerberus Slaughter sitting in my inventory. Perhaps someone could dismantle a boss's corpse after everyone else had left... If I were to ever attempt it, I'd want to obtain a stealth skill first. I didn't mean a low-level one like the one I saw Yamikage using before—a far more refined one. *I see. The*

thought did occur to me when I first held Cerberus Slaughter in my hand... A simple thought: "This is why I can never give up on dismantling weapons."

"Sheryl, what do we do?"

"It's up to you, Kizuna."

I'd always wanted to discuss the possibilities of the sea.

"Alto, what I'm about to say might be true, and it might not be."

"So it's up to me to figure it out?"

"Yeah. The sea is probably a route to a new continent. Going off the strength of the enemies, you're probably supposed to clear the first continent before progressing here, but we got ahead by building a ship. The members of my party excelled in the Dimension Wave because the experience points here are better than on land. So I suspect we can obtain even better equipment if we cross the sea. There could be stuff we've never even seen before."

More than half of it was convenient lies. Nothing I said was certain, but nothing was provably false either. It all lay in the realm of possibilities. Of course, I suspected there had to be something out there.

My desire to cross the sea was driven by dreams and romance, and perhaps it would all end as nothing more than an entertaining detour. Still, if Alto was willing to invest, I knew I could trust him...even if he did have ulterior motives.

"Now then, Merchant Altorese. What say you about investing in this pipe dream?"

"Of course I will."

"That was easy."

"Please don't misunderstand. I believe in your insight, Kizuna—the same insight that turned empty cans into gold."

It looks like he's got quite a high opinion of me, but that was just a stroke of luck. But it was pointless to write it off now, so I wasn't going to say anything. Still... Has Alto become even greedier than before?

"Well, I'm glad to have the Merchant of Death's investment. What next?"

“Who are you calling Merchant of Death, World’s Biggest Damage Sponge?”

I have no idea what you’re talking about. I know absolutely nothing about the guy who topped the list of most damage received in the Dimension Wave!

“Don’t call me that!”

“You mustn’t fight! Why don’t we just continue as we usually do?”

Taking in Alto was all well and good. Rather, things were going quite well up to that point... Excluding the dark storm clouds creeping in from the eastern sky...

Chapter 2: The Sea of No Return

“Yeah, what now?!” I cried out.

It happened the next day. Drenched from head to toe, we somehow managed to keep ourselves afloat. We’d been caught in a vicious storm, barely escaping by the skin of our teeth.

As a result, we had no idea where the ship had taken us—the compass on the map was completely nonfunctional, and we couldn’t even use a Return Transcript to get back. The only thing the map indicated was that we were in an area labeled the “Sea of No Return.”

“What about dying to respawn back in town?”

“Alto, you do realize we’re Spirits, don’t you?”

“It’s better than being stranded,” he nonchalantly replied.

As a last resort, Sheryl, Tsumugi, and Alto could jump overboard to respawn. It wasn’t that easy for us Spirits.

“If we’re gonna die anyway, then onward ho! Rather than dying to move back, it’s better to die while moving forward!” Tsumugi chimed in with a smile.

She’d been in high spirits from the moment she joined the party. Her chipper personality led to her quickly bonding with Yamikage and Sheryl. The more we spoke, the more her adventurous spirit seemed to grow and before long, it was nothing but sea, sea, sea with her. She’d come to me every morning to pester me, eager to explore more.

Despite what it may look like, Tsumugi was never that fond of RPGs. However, when it came to MMOs—especially ones with VR elements—they tended to devolve into action games. It seemed to be a quirk of VR; regardless of genre, the developers seemed to feel a need to tack on action elements, and once that happened, Tsumugi would suddenly be a master.

With normal, household RPGs, though, she’d keep blitzing through at low

levels almost like she was trying to speedrun. It was interesting to watch, but...it was like she could never stay and grind in one spot—like her curiosity was always driving her to seek out something new.

“I don’t know which way is forward and which way is back...” noted Sheryl.

Altorese spoke up. “It’s got to be one of those things. Like the Lost Woods or the Endless Desert. It’s a staple of RPGs.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But this is a surprise,” he went on.

“Uh-huh.”

“Err, I haven’t said anything yet...”

“Uh-huh.”

“Don’t worry about Sheryl. So what’s surprising?”

“Well, Kizuna, I have to admit, I didn’t believe roughly half...let’s say seventy percent of what you said about the sea. But looking at our current predicament, I think you may be right.”

“And why’s that?”

“In old RPGs, places like the Desert and the Lost Woods were all over the place. And usually, once you finally get through them, you can access the next map or obtain a legendary sword or something of the like. Perhaps there’s a sliver of truth in what you said after all.”

I had to agree with him there. In the games I knew, difficult maps that disoriented the player like this often hid key items necessary to progress the story. A strategy guide would have made this a lot easier, but unfortunately, Dimension Wave didn’t come with one. This meant we had to blindly navigate this Sea of No Return. Either way, we’d have to get through if we ever wanted to cross the sea.

†

And so, we wandered the Sea of No Return.

“Tsumugi! Yamikage!” Shouko called out.

“Yep!”

“I daresay!”

We faced a coordinated attack from Blade Mermen and Sky Raiders—fish and bird monsters that seemed to come from completely different ecosystems. How were they working together? Who’s to say? We could only fight.

As for our forces... Shouko now dual wielded a fan in each hand. Tsumugi had specialized her scythe into a war scythe. And Yamikage was stuck up on Drain, as per usual. These three were our main combatants.

I thought we could have some peace of mind with the two heroes who did most of the heavy lifting during the Dimension Wave, but these were formidable foes. The currents had presumably taken us to a higher-level area, and we were facing enemies above our weight class.

At the very least, I didn’t have nearly enough Energy to fight them.

“Circle Dance First Formation: Spin-Strike!”

Spreading the fans in her hands, Shouko performed a graceful spin. Its range was short, but it was an attack that could hit enemies all around her. *As I recall, Circle Dance’s description said...in exchange for significantly increased charge time and lowered defenses, it boosts the power of skills and basic attacks.*

If her previous style had been the ultimate defense, her new style was the ultimate offense. As described, this newly implemented Circle Style differed from her previous Wild Style with its powerful attacks balanced by long charges. It hadn’t been long since she began using it, so I couldn’t say anything certain, but this style seemed to suit Shouko better. She seemed to have a better time evading than blocking—judging by those acrobatics she showed off while fighting Cerberus.

What’s more, just the other day—the same day I bought the Lure of Light—I’d discovered a new real-life skill that Shouko seemed to possess. Apparently, she was ambidextrous.

Come to think of it, dual wielding is common enough in games, but in a VR game, wouldn’t attacks with the dominant hand be more effective? I wondered. Of course, the system performed the actions for us when we used skills. But

basic attacks were another beast.

Since we tended to use our dominant hand instinctively, it likely had something to do with the brain. I wasn't very knowledgeable, so I could only make a guess, but if the brain was involved, then one's dominant hand would be important in-game as well.

I'd heard stories about southpaws having the advantage when battling with spinning tops. There were differences between right-and left-handed players in other sports as well. It was unknown whether this applied to VR games or not. But in a game as realistic as this one, perhaps ambidexterity was far more important than it seemed. By the way, I was a typical right-hander myself.

"She's quite different from my first impression of her."

"Alto? It's dangerous to stand around here."

"I'll be careful."

"So, what's different about Shouko?"

"Compared to my first impression, she's a lot more aggressive than I thought."

Indeed, when you were having a normal conversation with her, Shouko was polite and thoughtful, both with her words and actions. This matched up with her appearance. Yet she was far more violent than one might think—or than her appearance might suggest. During the Dimension Wave, she had proposed to go on the offensive rather than hold the line.

Maybe she was born into the wrong time and gender, I mused. Had she been born in the Warring States period or the days of the Three Kingdoms or perhaps in another world, she might have been a mighty general or hero.

"Oh, come to think of it, Kizuna, are you using those Intermediary Crystals you got before?"

"Mine are store-bought."

Intermediary Stones were a new form of equipment for Spirits unlocked during the last update. The Intermediary Stones sold by NPCs were all imbued with a special ability. They also had something called Shield Energy,

corresponding to what the other races would refer to as HP. And just like with HP, Shield Energy naturally restored itself over time. By equipping the stones, a Spirit could take a little bit of damage, and the Intermediary Stone would foot the bill rather than having it deplete their Energy.

However, Shield Energy itself wasn't very high. The lower stones had around 50, while the highest one in the shop had 1000. The ones with lower Shield Energy had more powerful bonus effects, while the higher ones had weaker effects to balance it out. It was largely up to personal preference. I could easily see Yamikage picking up a stone with Darkness Magic Damage % Up. Since my skill composition was quite half-baked, I used one that boosted my mastery level.

"You know," said Alto, "around the time we first met... It was about a month ago now. You told me about it when we were making it big in Empty Cans. You fished up an Intermediary Crystal."

Oh, right. That.

My inventory was stuffed with so many things I'd forgotten all about it. I navigated the menu, pulled up my inventory, and fished through it. And finally, it was there—a colorless, grayed-out Intermediary Stone... *So that's what it meant by unappraised.*

"Here, found it."

"You still haven't appraised it yet."

"I got the item before the system was even implemented."

Technically speaking, the system had been implemented since the start of the game; we just didn't have access to it yet. We'd probably continue to come across items we wouldn't be able to equip yet.

"Do you want me to appraise it for you? I'm a merchant, so I handle a lot of items. Not to toot my own horn, but my Appraisal skill is pretty high."

"I don't mind, but I don't have money."

I hadn't just bought the Lure of Light; I'd bought reels and ingredients used in cooking, and before I knew it, I'd run out.

“Do you see me as a complete money-grubber or something...?”

“Am I wrong?”

“Completely wrong! I can throw in a freebie here and there.”

“Well, sorry about that. Go ahead.”

I handed the unappraised Intermediary Crystal over to Alto, who took out a magnifying glass...a loupe? I think that was what it was called. Anyways, he muttered, “Item Appraisal” under his breath, causing the lens to let off a faint light. And then, the crystal took on a deep blue hue that was almost black.

“Yep. That sure looks like an Intermediary Stone picked up from fishing.”

“So what does it do?”

I took it from Alto and tried equipping it... Or maybe, it was more accurate to say I transferred my soul to it. As far as the lore was concerned, it was supposed to be a vessel to bind me to the mortal plane.

Elementary Intermediary Crystal *Shield Energy 700700*

Boosts the Rank of Fishing Mastery by 2 Stages.

Amplified aggro from fish that can be caught at night.

It had two special effects. The Shield Energy seemed to be on the higher side, but I wasn't entirely sure. That aside, the ones at the store were Intermediary Stones, so why was this an Intermediary Crystal? Perhaps the name changed based on the number of effects contained within.

“Anyways, thanks, Alto.”

“You always bring me nothing but profit. Feel free to ask for something like this anytime.”

We took these initial days of our voyage as they came, and we almost seemed to be enjoying them.

†

We were four days into being stranded in the Sea of No Return. The horizon

remained constant, unchanged from when we'd first arrived, but our experience points and items from dismantling had begun to pile up. That alone wasn't a bad thing, but there were several other problems we faced.

"We've run out of all cooking ingredients apart from my fish."

I was the one in charge of cooking. Given we were in a survival situation, I did my best to use things sparingly; unfortunately, we'd never expected to end up in this predicament and hadn't carried many food supplies with us.

"Uh...huh."

"Worse yet, I've run out of fishing bait."

"I-I daresay, what shall we do?!" exclaimed Yamikage.

"Yeah, it's rough to go on with an empty stomach," my sister added.

This was all because we hadn't prepared for a long journey when we set sail.

For what it's worth, you don't actually need bait to fish in this game...but you need quite a bit of fish to feed six people. This was compounded by my low Culinary Art Rank, which meant that dishes had a good chance of resulting in failure. We needed to secure enough ingredient items to make up for it.

"Well, the situation shouldn't be too dire."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Yes, well, we've gone for a few days without water, but we still seem all right."

"I see..."

"Yes, Mr. Alto does have a point."

If this were reality, we'd have encountered a hurdle much earlier thanks to our water shortage. Perhaps he was saying we wouldn't face dehydration or starvation because of the nature of the game.

"It's a game, after all. Sure, our stomachs might feel empty, but the most it will actually amount to is a debuff. We're not going to die. Worst case, we can carry on without food."

"But I don't want to feel hungry!" my sister piped up.

I sighed. “I’ll take care of the food, one way or another.”

And so, I was thrust into a life of fishing. Without premium bait, I had no way of catching large fish; the small fries were my limit. Yet this was where the Lure of Light proved invaluable.

Its constant glow served as a makeshift lantern, meaning I didn’t have to waste any resources on lighting when fishing at night. There weren’t any fish attracted to the lure during the daytime, but I found out that it attracted squid while the stars were out.

Coupling it with the Lurolona Bobber allowed me to repel other nighttime catches like inedible Bone Fish while targeting squid specifically.

According to Alto, the Lure of Light was...

“That’s an egi, no doubt about it.”

It was apparently a type of lure called an “egi.” Honestly, it looked no different from a normal lure...apart from the fact that it glowed. In any case, it was the Lure of Light that resolved our food problems. However, it was also the Lure of Light that trapped us in a cycle of squid. Rather, squid seemed to be the only thing I ever caught at night.

I got ahead of myself, catching close to five hundred of them in one night, putting squid on the menu for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. We had skewered squid, squid noodles, grilled squid, and the like. There were quite a few dishes that could be made with squid, squid, and nothing but squid, so I continued to cook away.

“I daresay you’re being a nuisance, milord!”

Thus...the complaint... It took quite a while before it came to that. Then, there was Sheryl who was using squid as ballista bolts out of frustration. Regardless, it was another day of squid fishing for me.

I’d already filled my inventory with over a thousand of them, but I wasn’t going to worry about that. The Lure of Light was our savior. If I could go back in time, I would have lauded myself for buying it even at the markup.

On another note, monsters only seemed to spawn in the Sea of No Return

during the day. Around the First City, at least, monsters would appear all around the clock.

Perhaps the Sea of No Return was expected to be a long-term conquest, so the devs opted not to have monsters spawn at night to provide a safe zone to players... But that didn't seem like a very convincing reason to me. At the least, I would have preferred a reasoning that had an explanation in the lore.

In standard RPGs, areas like the Lost Woods or Endless Desert were a tried-and-true classic. These were areas that could only be surmounted through a very specific method. Each would have its own gimmick, with the slightest difference sometimes changing the destination point.

Everyone's stress was building, and the squid-only diet did admittedly play a part. We needed a strategy. As for me, I continued to relish in my night fishing.

"Any luck?"

"Shouko?!"

As I was deep in thought, my line cast into the night waters, I found myself a little startled by her voice. Shouko sat next to me and gazed up at the moon.

The moon was out in all its glory...larger than the real world's moon and imparting a sort of elegance. Yet despite its size, the light it let off was feeble.

"Nature is incredible, don't you think?"

"What's gotten into you?"

"Well... I was just thinking. I understand that this world is a fabrication, but one storm was all it took to completely change our lives."

"Sure enough."

Getting caught up in the storm was unfortunate, but I never could have expected that the six of us would have ended up living out at sea. Up to that point, we'd spent all our nights at the inn in the First City. Though it felt a little inappropriate to say—given our predicament—it also felt fun, kinda like a field trip. And that was precisely why we needed to find a way to overcome this challenge. Games were designed in such a way that careful observation would always yield an answer. If we couldn't find the solution, it meant we were

overlooking something.

“Kizuna, you have a bite.”

“It’s all right. Squid aren’t too hard to fish up.”

I could feel a gentle tug at the tip... *No. This isn’t your normal, everyday squid. I’ve pulled in enough of them to tell.*

But therein lay the question. Something new after fishing up over a thousand squid? The in-game probability had to be considerably low. *Which means whatever is on the line is...*

“Here we go!”

Then, came a *twang*. I’d felt a tug like this before, clearly different from usual. The time frame I had for each successful pull was practically a millisecond. *It’s...The Lord. This was the same feeling I had from that giant herring.*

“No, it’s even stronger...!”

“Kizuna, it’s pulling the boat.”

Grr...the boat? You’re telling me I’m fighting something powerful enough to pull the whole boat with nothing but a fishing line?

“Kh...! Shouko, get Sheryl. If we use her harpoon skills, just maybe...”

“Understood!”

I couldn’t spare her any attention as she disappeared into the ship. Instead, I concentrated every nerve in my body on the tip of the rod. When I mentally connected my nervous system to the rod and the line that lay beyond it, it was like my equipment and I had been converted into one single thread. With honed senses, I searched out those near instantaneous periods where the tug was at its strongest, giving a strong pull...and reeling.

The reel was a new factor. What I had on the rod was a baitcasting reel; I’d bought it since it was supposedly good for ocean fishing and lure fishing. At first, it was a struggle to get used to it, but it had a strong hoisting power. The drawback was that it took some technique to cast. Apparently, this was also true in reality.

Anyhow, trusting my linked senses, I pulled up and reeled at each tug. Raising my fishing skills ensured that the line didn't break and that I wasn't thrown into the sea.

"Kizuna...I'm here."

"Sheryl, can you hit the spot I indicate with your harpoon?"

"I can."

"Please! I don't think I can fish it up on my own."

Harpoons were originally designed for spearfishing. They were ideal for capturing large, aquatic creatures. It could be said that Sheryl was the perfect choice for whittling down a fish's stamina while fishing.

"Where...?"

"Hold on..."

Continuing this cycle of offense and defense, I allotted roughly half my focus toward finding the enemy's location. With the pseudo-connection of my nerves to the line, it was likely possible to search them out... If I had to equate it to something, it was like sensing hostility.

I see, so this is what the Intermediary Crystal meant by amplifying aggro.

After fishing up more than a thousand squid, it wasn't a completely unfamiliar feeling to me. I could actually feel the hatred, the enemy's attention burning into my skin.

"There!"

"Bomber Lancer."

This was an intermediate harpoon skill—a mid-range attack where she threw the harpoon like a javelin. A pale blue thread kept her weapon connected to her hand as it shot forth and struck the ocean with an explosive effect. Through the line, the rod, and then my hands, I could feel the solid thud of Sheryl's harpoon striking whatever it was I had hooked.

In an instant, I felt the tug grow noticeably weaker, so I started to reel like crazy.

“Can you fire a few more off?”

“Okay.”

“I’m counting on you.”

My pride wasn’t going to let me rely on Sheryl too much, but now wasn’t the time for that. Even when my foe recovered from its moment of weakness, I continued to pull and reel. Periodically, the harpoon would fly on, stunning it...or perhaps it was inflicted with a stunned status effect. And each time it was stunned, I spun the reel as fast as I could.

“Keep at it!”

It was a cycle that seemed to go on for an eternity, an immense battle that seemed to shave my soul away. My foe’s stamina was most certainly being depleted. This was the natural outcome. There were two of us and only one of him. I saw no reason for us to lose.

“Sheryl, we’ll settle it with the next one!”

“Affirmative.”

With the thump of the next harpoon as my signal, I mustered all my strength and finally revealed the true face of our mysterious foe—

†



“I can’t say I didn’t see it coming...”

What I fished up—not that I could really pull it onto the deck—turned out to be a giant squid. It was clearly related to the giant herring, thank you very much.

It was too large to fit on our current ship, so we were forced to tow it along with the ship’s hook.

Interestingly, it wasn’t classified as a monster.

If it was called a Kraken or something, I’d have considered it a monster, but this is just a giant squid... No, even if it was a monster, it would have probably died after Sheryl harpooned it so many times.

The harpoon did have a good matchup against aquatic monsters, after all.

“Kizuna...”

“Hmm? What’s up?”

“You should dismantle it fast.”

“Why...? No, I get it.”

“Uh-huh.”

I got the feeling she wouldn’t tell me even if I asked her for the reason, but Sheryl’s eyes were strangely bright. Day after day, she ate her squid in silence. She was the one who consumed the most squid among us.

Does she like squid? I wondered. Regardless, I began to take it apart as instructed.

The items I obtained: Water God’s Tentacle, Water God’s Fin, Water God’s Head, Water God’s Arm, Water God’s Mantle, Water God’s Heart, Water God’s Eye, Water God’s Shell, Highest-Tier Squid Ink, Highest-Tier Squid Meat.

Much like what happened with the giant herring, I ended up with a surprisingly large quantity of items. It seemed like all Lord-like creatures would be like this. Still, Water God... It was just a squid, but Water God... I had to wonder what sort of weapon would come out from its materials.

“Sheryl. I think we’ll have to decide as a group what we’ll make from it, but

for now, hold on to the drops.”

“Uh...huh?”

“Why was that a question?”

“Uh-huh.”

“No, don’t worry about it. I just get the feeling something good will happen if you carry them around.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s just a hunch. Come to think of it... Didn’t you say something unusual just now?”

“Not really...”

Well, whatever. I was so desperate with the fishing I couldn’t even hear it properly.

In any case, I handed over all the dismantled items to Sheryl. Though we hadn’t decided anything yet, I just knew a good weapon would come out of them.

“Kizuna! Sheryl!”

As I basked in the sense of accomplishment from capturing the giant squid, Shouko called out, pale as a sheet. It was rare to see her so panicked. I’d only ever seen that face a few times, around the time we first met.

“Did something happen?”

“The ship is moving on its own again.”

“It’s a ship. Of course it’s going to move.”

“That’s not what I—”

“Kizuna.”

Interrupting Shouko, Sheryl pointed upward. She gestured toward the sails—which were furled, so there was no chance of them catching the wind. Scanning our surroundings, I noticed there wasn’t even any wind to begin with. It was a quiet night with few waves. It wasn’t that someone with Helmsman Skill was

moving it either. And yet...the ship was moving at an unnatural speed.

Chapter 3: Limited Dimension Wave

“What could it be at such an ungodly hour...?” Alto groaned, rubbing his sleepy eyes. He was joined by Yamikage and Tsumugi, both of whom had also been asleep just minutes ago.

Yamikage had been maintaining a healthy routine lately, and so she seemed quite sleepy. As for Tsumugi, she was practically half asleep.

“Something’s pulling the ship.”

“Not the currents, I daresay?”

“Are currents supposed to render the rudder useless?”

Even during the storm, we’d been able to maneuver the boat to avoid sinking. If, by some chance, our Helmsman Skill wasn’t functioning properly, that didn’t change the fact that we had no idea what was going on.

Initially, I thought it might have to do with me fishing up the giant squid, but that didn’t seem to be the case. After all, if the squid was the cause, then the fishing should have triggered it. Just thinking about it normally, such a specific condition that depended on someone having a very specific skill set seemed improbable.

All the battle with the giant squid did was shift the ship a little bit. Optimistically, we could assume that the new position we were pulled to triggered some event in the Sea of No Return...

“Anyway, be on high ale— What?”

Someone tapped me on the shoulder, prompting me to turn around.

But no one was there.

Of course not. I already had everyone in my field of view. Yamikage and Tsumugi were to the right of me, Alto and Sheryl to the left. And Shouko was right there in front of me. There wasn’t anyone else who could tap my shoulder from behind.

I patted myself off, reassuring myself it was some in-game attempt to startle me.

“Kizuna,” said Shouko, “what comes to mind when you think of ghosts at sea?”

“You could at least act a little afraid...”

Apparently Shouko, who had been looking straight at me, had seen something. It’s not like I wanted her to scream or anything. But still, for her to flat-out bring up ghosts with a straight face in the middle of a spooky event... I knew Dimension Wave was a game, but I did wish she would show some reaction.

“Shouko...you, me, and Yamikage, we’re all Spirits. We’re pretty much ghosts you can see in broad daylight.”

“That is true, but not exactly. I wanted to know what might be typical in a situation like this.”

Well then, let’s get back to her question. What comes to mind when I think of ghosts at sea?

“A ghost ship...”

“T-T-Truly, I daresay?”

“As far as I’m aware, a ghost ship would be quite plausible under these conditions.”

Sheryl and Alto said it before I had the chance. Those sorts of dungeons and events were standard fare in MMORPGs. In fact, it would be rarer for an RPG to feature the sea without there being any pirates involved.

“I see... That explains this strange chill I’m feeling. And the fog.”

A fog had set in, clouding our surroundings and making for poor visibility. It was a ghastly sort of fog... If it really was a ghost ship, I’d have to praise the game’s designers for the ambience. Even though Yamikage had been so drowsy moments ago, she was now trembling in her boots.

“Yamikage, I know it’d be really cliché for me to suddenly scream ‘boo!’ and startle you, but can I do it anyway? I mean, I was just tapped on the shoulder by

someone who isn't here."

"What are you talking about?! I daresay, you should be far more freaked out if someone tapped you on the shoulder!"

"Well, I felt like I should warn you in advance or you'd get mad at me. Also, I just thought it was the sort of thing that might happen in this sort of event and let it slide."

"I'm not so sure what to think about you being so calm about that, Kizuna."

"I daresay I'd be mad even with the warning!"

"I see... Then, Alto."

"Not me either! I've never been good with horror."

"Hey, I never said I was going to do it, but your reactions are too good to pass up."

When they were this against it, it was kinda fun to tease them. *Meanwhile, the other three...*

"What's with that look?"

"This is just a game..."

"You've gotta have at least one ghost heroine, right?!"

Approximately one of them was my blood-related sister, and I definitely didn't want to hear that from her. In a sense... I did get where she was coming from, but... But who says that when we're dealing with a ghost ship? She was really killing the atmosphere. Then again, I was the one who ignored the mysterious shoulder tap.

"A ghost ship, huh... I'm sure the enemies will be quite strong."

"Even the normal enemies during the day have been pretty tough."

Though it was thanks to this that our whole party was leveling up nicely. I'd pretty much restored most of the Energy I'd lost.

"I-I-I can see a ship! That surprised me, I daresay..."

"I'm more surprised you still have Night Vision."

Why do you even need it when you're soundly asleep every night? Even I recycled the skill to save on Energy ages ago.

Putting that aside, I gazed in the direction of Yamikage's outstretched finger.

There, letting off a ghostly pale light and a sense of presence that could only be replicated in VR, was a scene straight out of a horror movie. It was a massive ship.

Our own ship, which was around twenty meters in length, seemed minuscule in comparison. Just how many times—how many dozens of times longer was the massive, decaying craft adrift in the waters ahead of us? Its sails were tattered, the wood was crumbling—if it wasn't for the eerie glow, it would have been dismissed as a shipwreck.

It created the kind of atmosphere where I'd expect to hear a ghostly wailing wind in the background.

"Yamikage."

"Eeep!"

"Umm... I just said your name. You don't have to scream..."

I glanced at Alto, hoping for a fun reaction, and saw him trying his best not to look.

Is he trying to escape from reality? These two really have some nice reactions. It's great to have at least one person like that on the team! Even better with two.

"Kizuna," said Alto, "I think I'm going to lower my evaluation of you a little."

"That's a bit much over one measly ghost ship."

"You should be more aware of the look you have on your face right now."

"Ha ha!"

Well, whatever. Now, it was time for the oh-so-fun ghost ship. I couldn't deny how boring it had been, being sealed up in these seas. It was high time to put an end to the aimless drifting.

"For now, let's prepare for battle. There's no way we won't run into enemies

on that thing.”

“Understood.”

“Hm.”

“Mhm!”

I got three spirited responses. As for the other two...Alto and Yamikage still seemed terrified. *You're way too scared about this.*

Since Alto was mainly a merchant, I could understand why he'd have issues level-wise, but Yamikage had the highest specs out of all of us. Since Drain was her bread and butter, her stats were even higher than Shouko's. Granted, if it was just her natural fear of ghosts, there wasn't much we could do about it.

“If you're that afraid, do you want to stay behind?”

“Behind...? With Yamikage? Where some mysterious specter just tapped you on the shoulder?”

“I daresay, I'm coming along if it kills me!”

“It would be safe to wait on the ship.”

“There's no telling what might happen if we're left alone in a place like this!”

“Is that how it works? I've watched so much horror, it doesn't really faze me at this point.”

For some reason, every time my sisters wanted to watch a horror movie, they'd rope me into it. After watching so many horror and splatter flicks, I didn't find them scary anymore... Tests of courage just didn't do it for me.

“There should be a limit to being fearless!”

“Alto, my man...the scariest things are humans. People like you.”

“That's a compliment I didn't want to hear!”

And amid all this back-and-forth, our ship smashed straight into the ghost ship.

Crack!

Then came the sound of something fracturing...a sound I'd heard just two

weeks prior. It was...when the strong flash of light overtook us. When space distorted—

Limited Dimension Wave

Leader: 1. Kizuna†Exceed

Sub-Leader: 2. Hakoniwa Shouko

Members: 3. Yamikage, 4. SHERYL, 5. Tsumugi†Exceed, 6. Altorese

A screen appeared, displaying our names. Once my vision had cleared up, our boat was already docked right next to the ghost ship with boards connecting us. This was certainly the feeling of walking into a dungeon. The map only showed our current location with the rest of it slathered over in black. It was probably one of those things where more would be displayed the more we explored.

“Limited Dimension Wave?” I muttered.

And my comrades, who similarly had no grasp on the situation, reacted in various ways. Shouko already had her weapon at the ready. For her to immediately pull out her weapon at that flash of light—what a warrior she was. Sheryl simply glanced around expressionlessly with no particular reaction. Tsumugi pulled out her war scythe, holding it in both hands as her legs trembled and her animal ears twitched in excitement. Alto, as usual, was completely checked out. And...

“Noooo! I’m so scared! Save me!”

One person was so terrified they were weirding everyone out... Said person was so scared that they’d dropped their usual way of speaking. Yamikage was seriously freaking out.

“Yamikage, calm down!”

“Kizzy, help me...”

“Kiz...Kizzy?”

“M...Milord.”

I had mixed feelings as Yamikage corrected herself, but whatever. It didn't matter how she referred to me in her head. *Still, what sort of person is she in real life?*

Spend enough time talking to someone online and you can usually get a sense of their background, at least to some extent. Of course, it was bad manners to ask about it unless they brought it up themselves. That was simply common sense in online games.

This was just my arbitrary opinion, but Shouko seemed like a rich girl from an old established family. Sheryl...I didn't have enough information to say. Tsumugi was my real-life sister (no conjecture needed). As for Alto...he was probably older than me. That was about the extent of my understanding. I could learn more if we talked about it, but it felt uncouth to ponder such things in a game.

"Yamikage, this is a game. Even if there are ghosts, they're all just part of the game. They can't hurt you. You understand? The place where I first met you was dark too. It was the sort of place where ghosts might come out, right? You don't have to be afraid."

"I daresay...I understand."

I had to gaze up to look her in the eye... But after my earnest attempt to calm her down, Yamikage returned a meek nod. *All right, now that she's calmed down, let's get a grasp on the situation.* The Dark Shadow was tugging on the hem of my skirt, but I wasn't going to let that bother me.

"What's Limited supposed to mean here?"

"In this case...it would probably be finite, restricted," explained Sheryl.

"So if we look at it literally, it's a restricted wave?"

"Since it displayed our party members, perhaps there's a limit to the number of people we can take in?" suggested Shouko.

"That's possible..."

It was a system that wasn't all that uncommon, like with instance dungeons and party quests and whatnot. It was a type of scenario where all party members had to work together to clear an objective. Typically, this meant we'd

have to face a boss once we got to the end, and we'd have to defeat it to clear the dungeon. Quest rewards and boss drops awaited us. Sometimes there were limits, like only being able to enter once a day or once a week.

I see. Maybe that's why it's limited.

"Well, standing around's not going to get us anywhere. How about we try moving forward?"

And so, we reluctantly boarded the ghost ship.

†

"Yamikage, are you really okay?"

We'd started exploring and that was all well and good, but she was clearly terrified. *I mean, I kinda get it.*

The ship's interior, which we accessed through a flight of stairs, had poor visibility despite the pale light that emitted from the walls and floor. What's more, the wooden walls were cold and clammy to the touch. Honestly, it felt more like a haunted house than a ghost ship.

"I-I daresay, I'm fine."

"Just stick with us, okay? It's better than forcing yourself to fight and scaring yourself more."

"I cannot do that. I am this party's magician, I daresay."

Despite this and that, Yamikage maintained her sense of camaraderie. *I know it's not like me, but you're really moving my heart. Aight, Yamikage. I'll deal with all the ghosts that try to attack you.*

Determined, I looked ahead to Shouko, who was leading the way. She was as vigilant as could be. Meanwhile, Tsumugi took up the rear guard. The passages were narrow, meaning it would be difficult for us to spread out and fight. Splitting our main forces between our front and rear seemed like our best bet to prepare for any unexpected situations.

"Still, we've done a fair bit of walking, but we haven't run into anything."

"That's true," said Alto. "You'd usually expect far more enemies in a dungeon

like this.”

“The map is hardly filling in either.”

“It’s like a labyrinth.”

Now that Sheryl had brought it up, “labyrinth” felt like the perfect word to describe it. The oddly expansive ship interior was filled with these narrow corridors. Seeing as Shipboard Combat was still functioning, it was certainly a ship. But with such a wide map, had the floor been stone instead of wood, I could have easily mistaken it for an underground labyrinth. As we chatted and carried on, Shouko noticed a door ahead.

“Everyone, there’s a door. We don’t know what’s behind it, so be on your toes.”

We all nodded at her warning, pushing ourselves against the sides of the corridor as soon as she’d pushed the door open. It wasn’t like we were suddenly going to get shot at, so perhaps we were being too cautious. After a few seconds went by with no enemies or attacks, we poked our heads in to see what was beyond the door.

A dining hall?

I wasn’t familiar with the layout of ships, but there were enough chairs and long tables to seat a large number of people. Naturally, they were worn and rotten, giving off a sense of dread with how abandoned it looked.

We entered, first Shouko, then Sheryl, then Alto. Just as I was about to go next— Bang! The door suddenly slammed shut. I mustered my strength to wrench it open, but the door wouldn’t budge.

“Hey! Are you okay?!” I yelled at it and pounded on the wood.

“We’re fine! The enemy—”

Silence. Shouko’s voice faded out, and after that, I got no response, no matter how much I shouted. It was hard to imagine that Shouko or Sheryl would get done in by some monsters, but...this was probably a trap meant to split up the party. If a party got spread out in a large area like this, it would be difficult to maintain its fighting strength. It was probably based on the order we entered.

“Can’t you just send a chat?” Tsumugi suggested.

“Good thinking. But are they really just going to let us do that?”

It was worth a try. I brought up chat from the menu and sent a conversation request to Shouko.

Hmm...no response. Maybe this is a no-chat zone or something.

“Shouko’s with them. She said she’s fine, so let’s believe in her.”

We waited in front of the door for a few minutes hoping it would open, but it remained firmly shut. It was possible they weren’t even physically there anymore, that the door had warped them to some other part of the map. At this point, it wasn’t wise for us to wait around twiddling our thumbs.

I’ll trust Alto to explain the situation to Shouko and Sheryl.

“Anyway, let’s search for another route.”

“I-I daresay.”

“Okey dokey!”

Yamikage cowered, while Tsumugi rejoiced. I’d been left with quite the contrasting duo.

Honestly, it feels dangerous to mix these two. But so be it. For now, let’s focus on reuniting with the other three.

“There’s a path over there... I don’t know if it’s because we’ve got fewer people, but it’s gotten darker.”

“Looks like the lantern doesn’t work here.”

“I-I daresay, it’s the ghosts.”

“No, I’m sure they just set it up like that. Right...”

My eyes fell onto my fishing rod that still had the Lure of Light equipped. As a test run, I took it out of my inventory and gave the rod a swing to cast the lure forward.

“Oh, I can see.”

Well, it was only the lure portion that I could faintly see. It was kinda like a

glow stick.

That aside, it's really flying far...

Plink.

Along with the sound, I could feel the sensation passing down the line. The lure had struck something. It wasn't a wall; it was something more like bone. And, when it came to monsters on a ghost ship, it was obviously going to be one of those.

"Yamikage, Tsumugi! Something's there. Watch out."

"Mhm!"

"I-I'm fine, I daresay!"

Yeah...she doesn't really sound fine, but I'll believe it.

I reeled the lure back in before taking out my Silver Poultry Knife. It was a higher-rank weapon than my previous one, for what it was worth. It was...hopefully somewhat reliable. Being made of silver, it wasn't very strong, but its holy attribute would probably work well against ghosts or undead.

Ahead, I could hear a clattering noise like something tapping against wood. The source of that noise soon revealed itself. It was a skeleton with a bandana wrapped around its head...a Pirate Skeleton.

"Hmm...? Hey, don't its clothes seem a bit odd for a pirate?"

"I daresay, do they really?"

"No clue! Isn't that just the design they went with?"

That's one way to look at it.

The Pirate Skeleton was not dressed in the tattered rags of a ruffian, instead wearing the tattered rags of what was once a gentleman's attire. It carried a tad more dignity. Perhaps I was overthinking it, but I only really recognized it as a Pirate Skeleton by checking its monster name.

"Whoa!"

Lost in my own thoughts, I only barely managed to dodge as the Pirate Skeleton took a swing with its sword—its cutlass. I had to give thanks to

Shipboard Combat. But now wasn't the time to think about that. I needed to reunite with the rest of my party and to understand the layout of this dungeon.

"Sli-Swing!"

This was the second elementary dismantling skill I unlocked. If Cleaver was an attack that emphasized a single powerful strike, this one had more of an emphasis on tearing foes to pieces. Normally, it wouldn't be effective against skeletal enemies that were resistant to physical attacks, but it was better than nothing.

"Huh?"

As the Sli-Swing hit dead-on with a red flash, the Pirate Skeleton easily went down. I cast a doubtful look on its corpse, but it remained there, unmoving.

No, that can't be. Looking at it objectively, Alto's presence is the only thing saving me from being the absolute weakest member of the party.

Of course, it wasn't entirely fair to bring up Alto when he was a merchant first and foremost, but my place in the party hinged on dismantling, fishing, and cooking. I was the one who procured ingredients and resources.

Yet the enemy went down after just one hit from a dismantling weapon skill? Something was clearly wrong. *The enemies during the day were pretty tough.*

"All done over here!"

"I daresay, they weren't as scary as I thought."

"I see... Am I imagining it?"

The three of us continued our exploration of the ghost ship.

Chapter 4: Enter the Gimmick! An Enemy to Protect, An Enemy to Defeat

“What even is this place...”

It had already been a few hours since we started exploring. At most, we were getting a rough idea of what the map looked like; as for what was actually going on with the ship, that was still a mystery. Enemies came at us from both the front and back, their numbers increasing over time.

Another thing of note was that the Pirate Skeletons were resurrecting monsters. Even if you defeated them, they would get back up to attack the players after a set amount of time passed. Furthermore, they only gave experience and Energy on the first defeat. Everything after that was zilch. Due to that, our means of recovering after taking damage were limited.

I was still fighting within the range of my Shield Energy, which would recover over time. But as their numbers increased, the damage I received was increasing too. It was only a matter of time before they would start chipping away at my Energy.

“You look like you’re doing all right now, Yamikage.”

“I daresay, one grows accustomed after a few hours.”

“You really did your best, Yami!”

“Tsumugi...”

The bond between this strange duo grew deeper. If that was the case, then maybe—somewhere out there—Shouko and Sheryl were bonding with Alto as well...or not. I just couldn’t see that working out.

No, I shouldn’t dwell on it. With that said, we hadn’t encountered them even after wandering around for so long. Perhaps they were warped onto a route that made it impossible for our paths to intersect, but we had no means of communication either.

What's this supposed to mean?

It was true that RPGs and puzzle dungeons went hand in hand, but...

"Huh?"

"What's wrong, I daresay?"

"Something happen?"

I tried comparing our surroundings to where we were supposed to be on the map. And, on closer inspection, the map differed from the place's actual layout.

"The map is wrong..."

If it was, then our goal of filling it all in was completely pointless. Thinking back, we'd passed through several doors along the way. If—like the first one—those doors were all teleporters, then we wouldn't notice a thing even if we were going in circles the whole time. Was the map leading us on? Could we trust it at all?

No wonder the place felt so vast, I thought. This is a gimmick. As long as we can figure out what's causing it, we can get through it.

I did enjoy deciphering these sorts of gimmicks in RPGs. The reason I'd never been very enthusiastic about MMORPGs was partly because MMOs placed more of a focus on rearing characters rather than puzzle-solving.

"Tsumugi, I want to do some thinking. Can you keep the enemies away?"

"Got it!"

I mentally retraced our footpath from our starting point. If I factored in the number of doors we'd entered, the turns we'd taken, and back-calculated the length of the path...there were roughly eight branches we hadn't checked yet. Assuming our current location was correct, the closest of those eight spots was...

"I've got it. This way," I announced just as Tsumugi had finished intercepting the Pirate Skeletons that didn't give any EXP.

There was a strange sparkle of excitement in her eyes. *This girl's always loved watching from behind while other people solve puzzles... Rather, Tsumugi loves*

all aspects of gaming.

“What have you figured out, if I may dare ask?”

“Well if the map’s wrong, we’ve just got to trust our own heads, right? So I retraced the path we took from start to end.”

“I daresay, is that possible?”

“That used to be par for the course, you know. If I had a pen and paper, I’d use it, but I don’t have any right now.”

It would have been easier with a walkthrough site or something like that, but that wasn’t my style. Because of that, I often got stuck in puzzle dungeons for hours on end. As I drew out the shape of the dungeons and their entrances and exits on paper, I eventually learned to memorize them.

I’d never thought that skill would come in handy in a place like this, though.

“My brother’s well-versed in the old-school way of doing things. He can be reliable when it counts.”

“Here we are. From what I can see...it’s a ballroom?”

As we turned down the first of those eight branches, we found ourselves in a large room. A chandelier dangled from the ceiling, only serving to elevate the fear factor of the spacious room that glowed in a pale blue light.

Huh? Isn’t that strange?

“Hey, this is a ghost ship now, but what did it used to be?”

“Is it not a pirate ship, I daresay?”

“Definitely not. Do you think you’d find such an extravagant place on a pirate ship? In the first place, this ship hardly has any pirate-like decorations.”

Surely there should have been skeletons or flags, or something of the sort. But this room gave a very different impression.

“Still, the monsters are called pirates.”

“Yeah, that’s the thing...”

Perhaps there was just a real ship they modeled this one after. It could also be

a clue—or a red herring.

“Anyways, let’s get searching...”

Then all of a sudden, the room rattled and shook, raising a loud din all throughout. I gazed up just in time to see the chandelier give one last violent swing before falling.

“Dodge!” I called out while jumping to one side. If I took on a trap like that head-on, I didn’t know if my Shield Energy would be enough to cover for it.

With an explosive boom, the chandelier shattered. A few of the sharp fragments collided with me, but each hit only took off ten or twenty points. It was within my level of tolerance. But it was hard to see anything with all the shards of wood and dust that filled the air.

“Yamikage, Tsumugi, you all right?”

No response...did it get them? No, even if it did hit, Yamikage can’t be one-shot. It’s impossible. She had more Energy—more HP—than anyone in the party.

“Tsk! Another scattering trap.”

What had previously been that grand ballroom had turned into a similar yet different room, and Yamikage and Tsumugi were gone.

Is this the feeling called fear? I guess it’s scary to be separated from the comrades you’ve been with for so long. No...this is probably loneliness.

It reminded me of a time when I was a kid, waiting alone at the department store. It was probably a big sale, in hindsight. My big sis and my little sister had things to do and couldn’t tag along, so it was just me and mom at the store. Mom just told me to wait on the bench, so wait I did.

At first, I was proud that an adult was trusting me with so much responsibility, but as time passed, my heart grew fainter and fainter. There were only strangers around, and soon the fear started to set in. I started imagining the impossible, wondering if I had been abandoned.

I see. So being alone is scary. I always had Shouko, Yamikage, and Sheryl around, and before I knew it, I’d forgotten all about the feeling.

“I need to solve this puzzle fast.”

Smacking my hands against my cheeks twice, I started walking with renewed determination. I could tell where I was from the surrounding terrain. From there, the places we hadn't checked yet were...

“This way.”

Troublingly, I ran into a band of Pirate Skeletons along the way.

I've been relying on Shouko and Tsumugi too much. Maybe it's time I learned how to fight and polished up my player skills. I've already got such strong allies around me, so I could ask them to teach me too.

“I'm going to find you, just you wait.”

As I raced forth, I already had an idea of what to do. I was going to clear away this loneliness.

†

“This is the last one...!”

Now on my own, I dashed through the unexplored areas with a clear destination in mind.

Not all of the warp points had completely fixed destinations, and this made me lose my way a few times. We were in a series of similar-looking rooms and corridors and—unbeknownst to us—we were being teleported between them. Frustratingly, that was not reflected on the map. But there were also blocked-off areas that these warps made accessible. Through careful study and navigation, I finally made it to the captain's quarters.

My weapon at the ready, I kicked down the door as Shouko had done before me, ready for any attack the enemy might throw at me. When Shouko did it, I'd just sat back and watched, but it proved a surprisingly effective way of opening doors. First, I poked my head in to see if there were any enemies. Everything seemed clear... Cautiously, I took my first step in.

“It really *feels* like a captain's room.”

Inside was a large, rotting work table and chair. There was a bookshelf against the far wall and beside that, some sort of map.

I hadn't found any keys or special key items on the way here. Of course, there was a chance one of my party members had gotten to it before me, but there was no point in worrying about that when I hadn't even found anything that might require a special item.

Still, books, huh... None of the other rooms in the ghost ship had any books.

Growing a little curious, I began to rummage through the bookshelf. Most of the hefty volumes crumbled the moment I touched them—all but the last one. I pulled it out and began flipping through the pages.

"This isn't Japanese... Or is it?"

At first, I wasn't sure if it was English or some other similar language, but before long, the text changed to Japanese. It was presumably designed for ambience but made to automatically translate for the player's sake.

A...diary?

The pages were so old they seemed like they might crumble if I handled them too roughly. The author was...Miephifana Habenburg, a rather noble-sounding name. Presumably that was the name of the captain.

—Date: the × of ○

I am Miephifana, a man graced with the title Earl of Habenburg. I set forth as a certain noble personage has entrusted that island to me. That island is essential for our diplomatic relations with several nations—it is an island we must never lose.

This is a record I shall write to remind myself of my duty.

To my future self, I ask you to reflect on these words each time you read them.

—Date: the ○ of ×

It has been several months since I have begun living on the island. I have become well-acquainted with the good-natured islanders and have forged a strong relationship. But as the days pass by peacefully, I have heard some

unsettling rumors.

Lately, pirates have been appearing one after another.

This island is a key stronghold for our nation. I must act quickly.

—Date: the \triangle of \times

I have established a private military at my own expense. These fine men have lived and breathed the sea since birth. They are seasoned warriors who are well-versed in facing monsters and have even fought pirates on numerous occasions.

We will surely defeat these scoundrels.

—Date: the \odot of ∇

The lone survivor of my navy washed ashore. I took him in and cared for his wounds. Once he was well enough, I asked him what happened.

To my shock, he claimed the entire armed force had been annihilated not by pirates, but by monsters.

Yet there was one thing I could not understand. I could not understand why a man of honest upbringing continued to repeat the words, “I be a pirate” under his breath.

—Date: the \bullet of \diamond

I set sail to uncover the identity of the monsters. Although those around me strongly opposed the idea, this island is my life and this sea is my blood. I must do something for those who have fallen within my reach.

—Date: the \blacksquare of \blacktriangle

I encountered these monsters and realized their true identity.

They were no pirates. These were the very men I had hired. However, their flesh and blood had rotted from the bone, leaving naught but mindless

monsters. To be used as slaves in such a state... I see no greater humiliation.

After I finish this entry, I shall put that soul-devouring fiend to the blade—

Hmm...an overly explanatory diary, almost like it's meant for a player to read.

It reminded me of that famous game with all the zombies and biohazards where journals like these were all over the place. But, having so many people who liked to diligently document things was practically the norm at this point. In any case, this diary had to be the key item to clear the dungeon. I moved on to the next entry.

“Hmm? What... The next one is... Whoa?!”

All of a sudden, the book's pages were stamped in red, bloody handprints, rendering them unreadable.

That one got me.

It was common enough in horror stories, but I'd been genuinely invested in reading, so that caught me off guard.

That aside, they're not pirates, but there's some kind of soul-devouring fiend? The closer we get to the truth, the more it feels like there's something to it... Or like someone is trying to cover it up.

As I thought over it, the area behind me suddenly lit up. I turned to see red ghastly wisps gathering near the propped-up map. Though I initially braced myself for an enemy attack, I didn't feel any hostility from them. Not that I had a sense for malice or anything like that. It was just a vague hunch.

“You want me to look at the map?”

For some reason, it felt like the will-o'-the-wisps were trying to convey that message to me. I looked and found a schematic of a large ship.

Is this the actual map of the place? It's completely different from the one I can pull up from the menu. There were numbers on the map that were moving separately all across it.

Number two was wildly flitting around on deck, three was aimlessly roaming the lower levels, four was pacing the upper parts, while five and six were close

to crossing paths around the center... However, six seemed to be veering off in another direction.

Numbers...? As I recall...

Leader: 1. Kizuna†Exceed

Sub-Leader: 2. Hakoniwa Shouko

Members: 3. Yamikage, 4. SHERYL, 5. Tsumugi†Exceed, 6. Altorese

Yeah, that was the order. Assuming those numbers correspond to my party members, this map shows where everyone is right now!

Which meant that everyone had been split up. The ones who would be in the most trouble if left alone were Yamikage and Alto. Yamikage because she was terrified, and Alto because he lacked combat ability.

If I want to go help them...

“Chat window?”

When I touched the map, a menu was forcefully pulled up. *But I haven't been able to send chats up to now. Maybe I can send them from here?*

I immediately selected number two...Shouko. She was the one whose situation I knew the least about.

I heard the ringing of an outgoing call before the chat connected.

“Kizuna? Where are you right...? No, more importantly, are you okay?”

“I'm fine. What are you doing up on deck?”

“Why do you know where...? Erk!”

I heard a pained groan in the middle of our conversation. She was presumably fighting something.

“Sorry. You caught me in the middle of battle.”

“Then I should be the one asking if you're okay.”

“I’m fine for now, but it might not stay that way for long. I am facing a boss monster, and it will be difficult alone.”

“A boss... Got it. I’ll send everyone your way.”

“Thank you. Honestly, I was growing discouraged.”

“Yeah, I promise we’ll be there to help. Hang in there.”

“Yes. I will most certainly hold the line until then!”

After cutting off the chat, I then connected with six—Alto. If I let this chance slip by, Alto would be unable to meet up with Tsumugi.

“Kizuna? How are you sending out chats? Wasn’t that feature disabled?”

“Forget about that, and return to that fork you just turned at!”

“What do you mean? I already went that way.”

“Yeah, but Tsumugi’s there right now. You can still make it.”

“I don’t know the situation, but I’ll trust you. I had no idea what I’d do on my own.”

“After you meet up with Tsumugi—”

I provided Alto with directions to get to the deck before ending the call. And next was Yamikage. Personally speaking, she was the one I’d wanted to contact first, but the situation forced me to get to her third.

“Yamikage.”

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

“Shut it! Keep it down! It’s me!”

“Waaaaaaah! Kizzy’s ghost is haunting meeeeeeeeeee!”

“Stop calling me Kizzy!”

It took quite a while to calm her down, but I eventually managed to give her directions to get back to the deck. Next up was Sheryl. I looked at number four on the map; she also happened to be closest to the deck.

“...”

As soon as the chat connected, I was met with silence. She'd been like that since the moment we first met, but she was making me anxious. I had no way of knowing whether I actually got through to her or not.

"It's Kizuna. I'll guide you. Please head to the deck."

"Uh-huh..."

"Are you doing okay, Sheryl?"

"Uh-huh..."

"I see, so you've been holding out."

"Mm..."

"Now about the path..."

To my chagrin, I'd gotten quite accustomed to Sheryl's short replies, and I'd lately begun to understand exactly what she wanted to say just from a single "uh-huh." I wasn't sure if I was supposed to be happy about that or not. At this rate, I might end up stuck as her personal translator.

Regardless, our entire party was heading toward the deck. Whenever someone took a wrong turn, I'd send them a chat to get them back on track, staying until I was sure everyone had made it there safely.

"Aight, I better get up there too."

I took one last look at the map, memorizing it as best I could. As I stood and turned to leave the captain's quarters, the red wisps went out like a snuffed candle. Surely they were nothing more than assistance from the game system, but they'd still helped me out.

Thank you for the help, I whispered in my heart.

†

Racing through the ship like it was my own backyard, I burst onto deck and cried out, "Shouko!"

But she wasn't the only one there. Everyone had made it. The ship was illuminated by a red moon, providing this boss arena with much-needed ambience.

“Kizuna, are you all right?”

“Yeah, how about you guys?”

“We’ve managed thanks to everyone’s help.”

As for the boss monster... It was a large skeleton with the name “Earl Habenburg” displayed over its head.

No, that’s wrong!

If the diary was to be believed, then there was no way Habenburg could be the boss. If not just the boss but every Pirate Skeleton on this ship was a hapless victim whose corpse was being controlled, then attacking what became of the Earl of Habenburg would be completely pointless.

Presumably, the soul-eating fiend was elsewhere. But where? Where could it be?

Shouko, Tsumugi, Yamikage, and Sheryl were locked in combat with Earl Habenburg, while Alto was taking command from behind. The five of them seemed to be holding their ground, so I split off to track down the true enemy.

Earl Habenburg... He had apparently been a noble figure in life, but now he was just a worn-down corpse dressed in a tattered military uniform and wielding a massive cutlass, acting no different from a pirate. According to the game’s lore, he had lost his climactic battle.

I see it... For a moment, Earl Habenburg’s shadow just rippled.

It was such a minor detail, I would have missed it without a hint to go off of. Holding Cerberus Slaughter in my left hand, I drew the Energy Blade in my right.

“Shouko, Tsumugi, that’s not the real enemy!” I shouted while stabbing Cerberus Slaughter into Earl Habenburg’s shadow.

There was a crackling and then—the familiar sound of a hole opening through dimensions.

“Kizuna? What is that...?”

“This is the real enemy: a soul-devouring fiend. Looks like Soul Eater is its name!”

To ensure it couldn't get away, I kept Cerberus Slaughter embedded in the shadow while charging ten thousand points into the Energy Blade, causing a beaming blade to erupt from the hilt. Then, mustering my strength, I plunged it into the shadow.

With a sound like evaporating water, the beam disappeared into the deck.

There was a clattering sound as the corpse of the late Earl Habenburg swayed. And at the same time, I leaped back.

Something burst from the shadow... It was the real boss monster: Soul Eater.

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

The hideous creature had a fiendish white face, red eyes, and a massive mouth lined with sharp fangs.

"You're going down."

The Soul Eater was presumably using Earl Habenburg as a decoy, fighting without taking any damage itself—one of those bosses where its real body was elsewhere. This type of boss was rare nowadays, but they popped up here and there in older RPGs.

There was a famous time-travel RPG where the final boss wasn't the eerie central life-form that looked like the main body but was actually the one on the left in charge of recovery. I'd only ever played the remake, but since I don't use walkthroughs, I was stunned when I first encountered it. After all, when I finally defeated what I thought was the main body, what I had dismissed as a heal-bot just revived it immediately. TL;DR, the Soul Eater was a similar case, and no matter how much we fought against Earl Habenburg, it was completely pointless.

"But once you know the trick, it's no big deal. Everyone, the boss is over there."

"I see...understood."

"I was watching the shadow, but I didn't notice a thing. Good going, bro."

"I'm...good at throwing my harpoon downward."

Now that we understood how we were supposed to fight, we shared an

understanding nod and took our formations. As for the other two...

“Gyaaaaah! It’s a real ghost!”

“Haven’t we had enough of that already?”

“I-I’ll focus on c-c-carefully tracking the enemy’s movements, okay?”

“Why are you stuttering?!”

C’mon...how long will it take for them to realize it’s just a game? I can see them getting freaked out by a haunted house at an amusement park.

Well, their reactions were interesting in their own way—certainly more so than the other three who were facing the hideous and bloodcurdling Soul Eater like it was just any other monster. Theirs was an important role to fill.

“A-Anyway! We’re taking it down!”

“On it!”

With Shouko’s reply as the trigger, our fierce assault on the Soul Eater began.

Chapter 5: Limited Dimension Wave Clear

“Two bosses at once is pretty rough...”

We split into two groups to face Earl Habenburg and the Soul Eater simultaneously. Both boasted strength befitting their titles as Boss Monsters, making this far from an easy battle. To start with, Earl Habenburg was a reviving monster who would get back up no matter how much we attacked him. His large cutlass packed a punch, and it was difficult to avoid his swift, wide-ranging attacks. Out of our current party members, Shouko and Tsumugi were the only ones who could challenge him effectively.

But the Earl was no more than a decoy. The foe we actually needed to defeat was the Soul Eater and not Earl Habenburg. And the Soul Eater was no slouch either. Unlike the Earl, it moved like a ravenous beast and fighting it like we would a humanoid monster would only cause our damage to rack up. In other words, we had to deal with two completely different types of bosses at the same time.

To make matters worse, the Soul Eater would hide in a dimensional rift the moment it saw its opportunity. When it hid, Alto would focus his honed merchant eyes, scanning for its location to drag it back to our reality, but Earl Habenburg’s fierce attacks carried on all throughout. It was an irritatingly effective combination.

“Kizuna!”

Thanks to Shouko’s warning, I noticed the Soul Eater moving through a dimensional hole right behind me... *There’s no way I’m dodging that.*

And if dodging wasn’t an option, I wasn’t just going to thoughtlessly take the attack.

“Hrah!”

I swung Cerberus Slaughter at the Soul Eater. Our attacks crossed paths in midair.

In the end, it was one of those “tit for tat” situations with both of us inflicting damage on one another. A moderate 670 points of damage—not bad compared to the havoc Cerberus wreaked on me. For what it was worth, it was still barely within the bounds of my Shield Energy, meaning I didn’t actually lose anything.

“Circle Dance Second Formation: Blizzard!”

Timing her attack with mine, Shouko used a skill. A flurry of Sakura petals swirled in the air like a powerful blizzard as she tore through the Soul Eater with her twin fans.



“How are your injuries?”

“Not too bad. From what I can tell...the wounds are light. I can still keep it up!” Pointing my weapon at the Soul Eater, I gave her a quick status update.

“Tsumugi and Yamikage are handling the other one, but do you think they will be all right?”

“Tsumugi’s best at fighting other humans. As for Yamikage, a skeleton’s probably less scary than this freak.”

“I guess so. Kizuna?”

“What?”

“Thank you for coming to save me.”

She’d said it earlier already, but Shouko was very firm when it came to these things. She never forgot to say her thanks, and she always apologized whenever she thought she did something wrong.

I should be saying thank you a lot more, but...well, that’s how guys are. We tend to find those things embarrassing.

“It meant a lot to me.”

“Same here. Once we defeat this thing, there’s something I wanna tell you. Is that all right?”

“Yes, of course!”

It felt a bit like I was triggering a death flag, but it was probably just my imagination. I followed closely behind as Shouko leaped at the Soul Eater, letting out an attack as she staggered it... *Seriously, once this is over, I really need to ask her to teach me the basics of fighting.*

“Sheryl, can you do it?”

“Mm... Bomber Lancer.”

Having essentially been turned into fixed artillery at this point, Sheryl nodded while shielding Alto.

“Wh-Whoa! Battle really isn’t my strong suit.”

Yeah, he's a merchant through and through. We can't count on him here...

Taking on Sheryl's harpoon staggered the Soul Eater yet again, and using that opportunity, I continued my coordinated assault with Shouko. As expected of a Limited Dimension Wave, the Soul Eater wasn't as powerful as Cerberus. I glanced over at the two members holding back Earl Habenburg.

"Holy Burst!"

"Huuuuuuuh?!"

I couldn't contain my voice. *Yamikage just used light magic!*

You're breaking character. Aren't you supposed to be a Drain addict?! W-Well, maybe she's so scared of the skeleton captain that she isn't even thinking about it. But this is the first time I'm hearing about her being able to use light magic...

I returned my eyes to the Soul Eater. What about Tsumugi? The shock of that bit with Yamikage had made me completely forget about her. She wasn't one to make mistakes, and I trusted her. When I looked back, I saw Shouko staring at me with a conflicted expression.

"Kizuna... Could you lend me the sword you were just using?"

"The Energy Blade? What are you planning on doing with it?"

"Our attacks aren't doing much damage. I think it might be an attribute issue."

Sure enough, we'd been hitting it over and over, and it didn't look like it was taking much damage. The name "Soul Eater" did suggest it might have a resistance against non-elemental attacks. But that first hit did seem oddly effective. It had clearly been in pain as it writhed out of the shadow.

We might deal more damage if we switched out with Yamikage and had her fire off a Holy Burst. But if Shouko has something in mind, I can count on her.

"Got it. But be careful. Miss, and it's over."

"I understand. I will hit no matter what."

I tossed her the Energy Blade—a hilt without a blade—which she effortlessly caught. Promptly, she slid one of her fans into the sash around her waist,

wielding fan and blade like a swordsman who fought with sword and dagger. She glared at the Soul Eater.

As if to calm herself, she muttered, "Charge fifty thousand."

"Hey now, isn't that a bit much?"

"It's all right. I will hit no matter what...gh!"

As soon as she pointed the sword at it, the Soul Eater shifted to evasive actions; it was almost like it could read her intentions. Presumably, the AI was programmed to react to high-power attacks.

What an annoying pattern.

"Shouko, I'll lure it. Don't swing recklessly. Wait for the perfect opportunity to land the perfect strike."

"Okay! I trust you."

Picking up what was going on, Sheryl tried to strike the Soul Eater's shadow with her Bomber Lancer, but now on the defensive, the Soul Eater moved its dimensional hole as though it were freely swimming through the sea. Meanwhile, Tsumugi and Yamikage were locked in a life-or-death struggle just behind us.

We need to do something fast...

"Aah, dangit! It's swimming around like a fish...?"

Using the dimensional hole, the Soul Eater seemed to swim across every surface as it lurked in a black shadow; it seemed like an apt comparison. And now that I thought about it, while it had some beastly qualities, it could also come across as a large sea creature.

Don't tell me...

Even if I was wrong, Hate & Lure II would still let me draw aggro from normal enemies. Once the enemy was focused on targeting me, there was no way a player with Shouko's skill level would miss the mark.

Now ain't that exciting?

I pulled up my skill menu, preparing for my next move.

Name: Kizuna†Exceed / Race: Spirit

Energy: 57630 / Mana: 12070

Acquired Skills: Energy Production XII, Mana Production IX, Fishing Mastery VIII, Hate & Lure II, Dismantling Mastery V, Cleaver V, Sli-Swing II, Fast Dismantle IV, Shipboard Combat V, Elemental Conversion I

Unacquired Skills: Energy Production XIII, Mana Production X, Fishing Mastery IX, Helmsman Skill I, Night Vision I, Pole Fishing I, City Walk I, Culinary Art III

Pole Fishing I

A support skill for fishing rods.

Used to reel in fish and monsters.

300 Energy consumed upon use.

Required Mana to Acquire: 1000

Unlock condition: Fish up 1000 or more monsters with a fishing rod.

Upgrade condition: Fish up 5000 or more monsters with a fishing rod.

And conveniently, I just so happened to have the skill I needed among the unacquired ones. Judging by its description, it seemed to help reel in large catches like the giant herring and giant squid. As for the unlock conditions, I had to fish up monsters...probably like the Killer Fish.

I've done my fair share of fishing. I don't remember how many fish I've caught. With this, I might not even need help like I did with the giant squid. But for now, it's your turn, Soul Eater. I'll be reeling you in.

"Hate & Lure!"

There was a blue flash as I cast the Lure of Light into the Soul Eater's shadow. I fell behind Shouko, Tsumugi, and Sheryl in combat, but this was the one thing I was confident in. *Witness the power of the Fishing Mastery I grinded with all the squid fishing.*

It's Rank VIII, you hear! VIII!

What's more, my Intermediary Stone raised the rank of Fishing Mastery by an additional two stages. In actuality, it was at Rank X. The control I had over my line could rival the protagonist of a fishing manga.

"All right! It's hooked!"

Fishing Mastery was a skill that enhanced every action involving a fishing rod. I knew it was unrealistic, but I could even curve the lure mid-cast if I wanted. Again, like a fishing manga.

Whether or not that was actually useful in fishing...was a mystery. Anyways, with the Soul Eater aggroed, I shouted, "Pole Fishing!"

I spun the reel, a blue glow enveloping the whole rod as I pulled up in a fixed motion. The Soul Eater burst from the dimensional hole like a tuna caught on a line, flopping onto the deck in a stunned state.

"What?! You can draw a monster in and stun them? That's like a hunting game!"

"Unbelievable, I daresay!"

Tsumugi and Yamikage exclaimed as they looked at the reeled-in Soul Eater. Just as I suspected, it was a ghostly aquatic monster after all. But more importantly...!

"Shouko! Now!"

"That's very like you, Kizuna. Here I go!"

Smiling wryly at the boss's now defenseless state, Shouko approached so fast that she left afterimages, lifting its lower jaw with the fan before shoving the strong glow of the Energy Blade into its mouth. It almost looked like she was being devoured as her arm plunged deeper and deeper, with the powerful hum of the blade being the only sound that filled the air.

After what felt like minutes...finally, the hum was joined by the sound of Earl Habenburg's bones clattering to the deck. The Soul Eater followed shortly after, disintegrating into dust and blowing away in the wind.

"Did we...win?"

I couldn't shake the feeling that it was a bit of a gimmicky way of fighting. But regardless, from the dust cloud emerged Shouko, carefully cradling the Energy Blade that had lost its beam and returned to being nothing more than a hilt.

How should I put it? She's always so cool. Like a battle heroine straight out of a light novel.

Hmm? Then does that put me in the unremarkable protagonist position? No...with my cute looks right now, I'm the heroine. Or worse, a guy character that no one relates to.

That aside, it doesn't look like I can dismantle the Soul Eater... I was really looking forward to it. Based on the name, I'd thought we might be able to make a cool scythe out of it. I'd been hoping for a huge boost to our fighting strength with Tsumugi wielding a Soul Eater weapon, but unfortunately, it left nothing to dismantle.

Limited Dimension Wave has been Cleared!

The window we'd seen only a few weeks ago appeared once more. Though unlike last time, this one only displayed the six members of my party.

Total Contributions

Rank 1: Kizuna†Exceed

Rank 2: Hakoniwa Shouko

Rank 3: Tsumugi†Exceed

Rank 4: SHERYL

Rank 5: Yamikage

Rank 6: Altorese

That was a shocker. I never thought I'd end up as Rank 1. Though looking at the criteria displayed, I somewhat understood. The breakdown was as follows: dungeon completion rate, damage dealt, damage taken, enemies defeated, boss damage, map analysis rate, and facility usage rate.

Going off those standards, it made sense that I was in first. In most online games, boss damage usually carried the most weight, but I wasn't experienced enough to calculate the exact weighting, and there had to be a reason it turned out like this.

Oh? There's an acquired item section. Unlike with the normal Dimension Wave, this one isn't a lottery.

Acquired Cal Mira Island

"What? An island?"

The popup had just listed something far too grandiose to be considered an item. I stared at my inventory, and there was certainly no island inside.

Is it that island mentioned in Earl Habenburg's journal...? He did mention it being important for diplomacy... My thoughts were interrupted as the ground beneath me began to shake.

"Wh-What could it be?"

"I-I have a bad feeling about this, Kizuna!"

"I daresay, what now...?"

You're too freaked out, Yamikage, I thought. With that said, startling us out of our victory cheer was a classic.

"Cliché..."

"Everyone, run to the...ship?"

I turned around to see the ghost ship visibly turning to ash right before my

eyes. *Is this one of those patterns where the dungeon falls apart after the boss is defeated?*

In short, the wood beneath us turned to ash before we had the chance to run.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Waaaaaaaaaaah, I daresay!”

And naturally, with nothing beneath us, we began falling straight toward the ocean.

Huh? That wasn't the right number of voices, was it? There should be another two people screaming “Waaaaaaaaah.”

“Kizuna!”

As we fell, Shouko reached out her hand to me.

“Shouko!”

I immediately grabbed it...watching as the moon in the sky turned from red to blue. Watching the cold seawater spread out so heartlessly beneath us... I felt the sensation of her tightly held hand and the sound of bubbles that never seemed to fade.

We went deeper and deeper. Almost like it was inviting me into the darkness, the seawater slowly stole my consciousness away.

Chapter 6: Seven Tools of the Pioneer

“Hmm...?”

As I was slowly pulled from my slumber by the sunlight piercing through my eyelids, I felt a cold sensation on my lower body. The source of the cold was evident enough—I was soaked in seawater.

I was lying on a sandy beach, around half of my body being lapped at by the waves. The fact that this was a game was likely the only thing preventing me from succumbing to hypothermia. For starters, I stood up to assess the situation.

Name: Kizuna†Exceed / Race: Spirit

Energy: 61630 / Mana: 14070

Acquired Skills: Energy Production XII, Mana Production IX, Fishing Mastery VIII, Hate & Lure II, Pole Fishing I, Dismantling Mastery V, Cleaver V, Sli-Swing II, Fast Dismantle IV, Shipboard Combat V, Elemental Conversion I

Seeing as my Energy had increased rather than decreased, it seemed the losses from almost drowning were minimal. *But still, where am I?*

I was on a coast, from what I could see... Glancing up, I could see a forest dense with vegetation that reminded me of the South Seas. The unfamiliar beach and forest did bring a few things to mind, but before any of that, I tried opening up the menu and bringing up the chat.

Let's see... Party window... Shouko...

“Huh?”

My party was empty.

Outside of special circumstances, it was possible to leave a party whenever

you wanted. But I didn't remember ever leaving the party, and it was hard to imagine so many members leaving all at once.

More than anything, the party contained Shouko and Tsumugi. Shouko would never leave without a word, and Tsumugi was my blood-related sister. *And it's not like I can picture any of the others arbitrarily leaving either... For now, let's send a voice chat.*

This time, I pulled up Shouko's name from my friend list.

Error. Your device has either been powered off, or you are in an area without reception.

Powered off?! What is this, a cell phone...?! No, complaining to the system isn't going to get me anywhere.

I tried contacting everyone on my friend list. Not just Shouko and the other members of my party, but Romina as well. Each time, I got the same incomprehensible system message... Clearly, something had happened that was preventing me from contacting anyone.

Is this some sort of event? I wondered. *I know I'm not the only one who fell from the ghost ship. Maybe the others drifted ashore like me.*

I looked around, but I couldn't see anyone nearby. Then, I brought up the map from the menu. I was currently on the southern side of a relatively large island. The map said its name was...Cal Mira Island.

That was a name I'd heard before. It was the same island I'd gotten as a reward for defeating the Soul Eater. I wasn't one hundred percent certain, but there was a high chance it was the island Earl Habenburg was trying to protect (though it could just as well have been an unrelated reward from the Limited Dimension Wave).

Anyway, I need to find everyone, I decided. I started walking down the beach with no clear direction in mind.

To sum it all up, I found no traces of anyone else being washed ashore. I regularly tried sending out chats, but it was like the feature was busted and I'd

just keep getting those strange system messages. The situation wasn't improving.

Perhaps it's time to seriously consider my situation. I might be...stranded.

I hadn't explored the island's inner parts yet, so it was too soon to jump to conclusions, but Cal Mira seemed uninhabited. I alone might have been caught up in some sort of special event.

After all, I was the only one who completed the book and wisp event on the ship. But if being stranded was the result of my fulfilling those conditions, then what exactly did this deserted island want from me?

In stories where the protagonist falls off a ship and ends up on a deserted island, they generally have to survive in the wilderness while struggling to find a way back home. It was the classic shipwreck plot, but I never thought I'd be the one living it... Fortunately, unlike those protagonists, I was far better equipped.

For instance, just look at my items. When it came to food, I had more squid than I knew what to do with; my stock would probably hold for a long while. Better yet, I had all the equipment needed for my Culinary Art skill to work its magic. And since I was right next to the sea, maybe I could supplement whatever I lacked with more fishing.

The important question was how long I'd be stuck out here.

Oh! Now that I'm looking at my item slots, I've got a Return Transcript right here.

I couldn't help myself from getting swept up in the situation, but this is a game—I can just use a return item. So, I used the Return Transcript...

The sound of the waves. The cries of seagulls. The white sandy beach.

Once the teleportation particle effects dissipated, I was standing on the Cal Mira beach, exactly where I'd first drifted ashore.

I-It automatically set my respawn point...

"L-Let me ooouuttt!" I shouted at the sea.

Only the seagulls answered with their caws... *It looks like I'll be living here for*

a while. No, I might have to consider using the Wooden Boat in my inventory to escape.

In any case, I ought to start by exploring the island. It'll be nice if I can be a little useful once I reunite with the others.

With that in mind, I began walking inward, past the beach and into the trees. I clutched Cerberus Slaughter in my right hand. My Energy Blade was sadly not with me—I'd left it with Shouko. Not that I'd really use it outside of boss battles anyway.

At first glance, Cal Mira Island appeared to be a tropical paradise. The sound of insects and the sight of exotic birds from the South Seas made it so immersive I nearly forgot I was in a game at all. That was impressive in its own right.

Still, an island... I wonder what I can fish up here. Wait. What am I even thinking at this point? What's important is that I get a grasp on my situation.

As I basked in the same sunlight that greeted me in the First City, it brought back some memories. *Those were fun times... Not that adventuring with my party wasn't fun. Of course it was.*

I was lost in thought as I came upon what looked like a farming village...or rather, the ruins of one. A crumbling barn, overgrown plants—it looked like it had been decades since anyone last lived there.

"What is...that...?"

In the center of all the wreckage was a floating object that clearly didn't belong: a large chest adorned with jewels. Thoughts of mimics and other trap monsters immediately crossed my mind.

Should I open it or ignore it? If it is a monster, can I even handle it alone?

Being alone at a time like this was truly troublesome. If I had my comrades around, we'd probably end up throwing it open with little hesitation. On my own, I couldn't afford to take risks, and my doubts started creeping in. *Still...I'll open it.*

After approaching the treasure chest and making sure there wasn't anything

off about it, I timidly tossed it open. Of course, I jumped back as soon as I could; arrows and poison gas were a cliché I wanted to avoid if possible. And... Nothing happened.

Peering into the now-open chest, I saw an item. It was a...smaller box. There was a smaller box nesting within the bigger one like a matryoshka doll. To my relief, there wasn't an even smaller box inside that one. The box was indeed the item, and it was listed as the Seven Tools of the Pioneer.

I have a...very bad feeling about this. It's like the system knew I'd be here alone. Perhaps it played a hand in it.

I tried discarding it, but to my surprise, it automatically returned to my inventory.

A cursed item, huh?

I wasn't in any position to kick back and enjoy the pioneer life. And...alone? Why were my party members excluded? In an online game, wouldn't a pioneering event typically involve the whole party or even the entire player base...? I had a few thoughts on the matter but decided to hold back.

For now, I tried using the Seven Tools of the Pioneer or whatever it was called. It seemed to be a shape-shifting item with a list of appearances it could take on.

Hoe Sickie Axe Hammer Drill Rope Fishing Rod

Drill! There's a drill!

"Drill!"

Just one of them seemed quite different from the others. Was a pickaxe not good enough?

"Drill!"

Oh no. I'm seriously getting excited. I can't let Shouko see me like this. Although...I get the feeling that Tsumugi's seen this side of me every day IRL...

I was the man who played a kingdom-building game—that Tsumugi and

Kanade got bored of after five in-game years—for over a thousand years of in-game time. For similar reasons, I once managed to pass two hundred years in a farming sim after it entered endless mode... I got a bit too into it.

“Drill!”

I tried out the drill first; a hand drill with a spiral-shaped tip. As I situated my hands on the handles and pulled the trigger, I heard the whirring of a motor. Just as I’d expected.

“Drill!”

I knew it. It’s gotta be drills for me. I mean, I get that you don’t even see them in super robot stuff anymore, but... A-Anyway, let’s try it out at once.

Momentarily forgetting about my party members, I succumbed to the momentary thrill and ran off with the drill in hand. Perhaps I was just feeling desperate.

It took me a full ten minutes to regain my composure...

Chapter 7: Enter Development

“Aight, I’ve got it...”

Some time had passed since I drifted ashore on Cal Mira. At first, I ignored the Seven Tools of the Pioneer—the supposed lifeline the game had thrown at me—outside of briefly indulging in the drill. Instead, I searched for a way off the island.

I started by picking up Helmsman Skill and setting off from the southern beach on my Wooden Boat...only to find myself in the sea north of the island. It was like one of those old RPGs where the map wrapped around from top to bottom—heading south just brought me north. Whether it was because the boat was too small, or it was just the nature of the island, I couldn’t say. At least the currents weren’t holding me back...

I tried various approaches but ultimately could never escape the island. So here I was, stuck on Cal Mira. But I had trustworthy comrades to rely on. I kept banking on my party members coming to find me...which led to an entire week passing by.

Of course, I hadn’t lost trust in them. I’d only known Shouko for around a month, but she wasn’t the sort to betray anyone. She was probably still searching for me, but I could see no signs of her coming anytime soon. The simple fact was that a week had already passed by.

I spent my days in an endless fishing loop, grinding out my fishing and cooking skills. While I was at it, I was also using Elemental Conversion to turn the excess squid and fish I caught into Energy. And, once my rescue seemed stalled for more than a week, I made a decision.

Name: Kizuna†Exceed / Race: Spirit

Energy: 78630 / Mana: 27070

Acquired Skills: Energy Production XII, Mana Production

IX, Fishing Mastery IX, Hate & Lure II, Pole Fishing I, Dismantling Mastery V, Cleaver V, Sli-Swing II, Fast Dismantle IV, Culinary Art IV, Elemental Conversion II

That decision...was to recycle any skills unnecessary for life on the island and refund the mana on them. That increased the range of skills I could pick up and increased my Energy production rate... *Though I get the feeling I only really got rid of Shipboard Combat.*

It was somewhat fortunate that my base skill set consisted of dismantling and fishing, both skills that helped out with survival. The Shipboard Combat skill was at Rank V, which freed up a considerable amount of Energy for other things.

Until help arrives, I need to survive... No, I need to embrace this pioneering life.

Luckily I—I love this sort of thing! Look, I’m sorry, guys, but you ran past the time limit. You’re in my realm now. Heh heh heh... I’ll suck this island down to the bone.

With that decision made, the first tool I grabbed was the sickle. This wasn’t the sort of weaponized scythe that Tsumugi used; like my fishing rod, it was classified as a tool meant for daily life. Its purpose was to clear away the weeds that got in the way.

The sickle’s performance was what you’d expect of a baseline item provided just to ensure my survival—it toed the line between good and bad. Though perhaps it would change with the “Level” entry on its description. Apparently, the Seven Tools of the Pioneer could only be used on this island. The item could be leveled up, but these effects would only be apparent within the confines of Cal Mira.

This is getting me fired up.

Will I max out these tools first, or will they save me first? The race is on. These idiotic thoughts crossed my mind as I used the sickle to slice through the weeds.

“I remember having the same thought in another game, but... Of course the weeds are going to grow back if you’re just slicing them like this.”

But uprooting them by hand was less efficient, and the roots did seem to disappear when I cut them, for what it was worth. I just had to accept it as one of those inexplicable game things.

I got roped into helping with the yard weeding every year, but it was nice that my in-game body didn't feel fatigue. I didn't tire out no matter how many times I swung the sickle, allowing me to cut through weeds at a far faster pace than I could in reality.

With that said, it wasn't a good idea to focus too much on the weeds.

I only had twenty-four hours a day to work with. Add in sleep, and realistically I could only allot eighteen hours a day to farmwork. That put a hard limit on the actions I could take.

For now, I'll stick to developing the areas I can see; once I find a more efficient method, I can shift to that.

Next came the hoe. Its effects were very limited, only allowing me to till the small patches of land that I had already cleared with the sickle. While I didn't get tired, I lacked any mastery skills, so it took time to till the land. I didn't know how much the system reproduced, but my nose did pick up the smell of dirt. When using the sickle, it was grass I smelled, so perhaps the system was reusing some scent assets.

"I don't have any seeds..."

I only realized after I'd finished tilling. What a ridiculous oversight on my part. *Come on, me...*

"Oh?"

I noticed a menu that I could bring up with the hoe equipped that had a tab for seeds. There was only one option, but... *I might as well plant them.*

I divided the seeds into moderate plots, planted them, and used a pail to fetch water from a well near the wreckage. Now, I just needed to clear weeds with the sickle each day while waiting for them to bear fruit.

I hadn't the slightest idea how many days it would take to harvest, but it probably wouldn't be a whole month. I wanted to believe I wouldn't have to

spend my entire in-game life on this island. What a waste it would be.

All right, my first task ended after only four hours. The next task...

The axe wasn't a combat one, but one meant for felling trees. The island was covered in so many trees I could even go so far as to call it a dense jungle, but was it really all right to recklessly chop them down? It was classified as a demolition weapon.

The hammer fell under the same classification. It existed to break down monster materials, destroy breakable parts to create weak points, and clear away obstructions. Since it was included among the Seven Tools of the Pioneer, I'd likely run into a scenario where I'd need to rely on it. The last demolition weapon in my possession was the drill.

A week ago, I'd gotten a bit too excited and even unlocked a skill...though I couldn't acquire it. The skill menu displayed the words "Demolition Weapon" with a red line running through them; presumably, it was a weapon type that would be made available after the Second Dimension Wave, or perhaps the one after that. I could use the tools, but couldn't learn any skills related to them.

I remember spewing some nonsense about the sea to Alto... But maybe I hit the mark? Earl Habenburg's diary said something about diplomacy.

There wasn't much investigating work I could do while stranded, but I just knew that the island was hiding some sort of clue. The drill could dig holes as well as destroy walls and stone. There were locales all across Cal Mira where a drill was necessary to carve a path. If I had to wager a guess, we were supposed to visit this island after drills had been fully added to the game.

For now, I set the axe, hammer, and drill aside. I needed to establish a stable life, or rather a situation where I could operate effectively. *Meaning my life is going to revolve around weeding with the sickle, tilling with the hoe, and planting as many seeds as possible.*

As for the fishing rod and rope, I hadn't found a use for them yet. *The rope is probably meant to access certain locations, but what about the fishing rod? Is it to acquire food? But you should be able to make it once the crops grow. Plus, I can catch fish with my own skills.*

There were wild animals in the forest that seemed like they could be a good source of meat, seeing as their only notable features were how quickly they could flee. That was also an option. So why was the fishing rod considered an essential tool? Not that I was complaining.

Its performance fell short of my current rod, but it could produce an unlimited supply of cheap bait. Unfortunately, said bait could only be used with the rod from the Seven Tools of the Pioneer. But it was thanks to this blessing that I never struggled to bring in a catch.

Well... I guess I'll figure it out if I keep at it. For now, I'll till all available land, then I'll start using the axe to remove trees. Just within a designated area. Once that's done, I'll use the drill to open up any place that looks essential.

I gazed up at the elevated central parts of the island where a large building—perhaps the abandoned wreckage of an estate—still remained.

†

Two days went by. Having transformed half of the available land into fields, I stood before a massive boulder with drill in hand.

The boulder was—summed up in a single word—enormous. It blocked the path, towering at around three times my height. Its placement was rather unnatural, but perhaps lore-wise, it rolled down due to the shock waves caused by the Dimension Wave. Or something like that. Regardless, breaking this one with a hammer seemed like a bit of a reach.

“Dri...”

I felt like I was going to start that mindless chanting again, so I cut myself off and pushed down the trigger. The sound of the whirring motor comforted my ears as the head began to spin. Simultaneously, my Shield Energy dropped from 700 to 699. The drill expended Energy to run.

Using up too much Energy in the farmwork was a risk I didn't want to take, so I mostly used it here, methodically chipping away at the rocky surface. The problem was that the amount I could chip away each day was limited; after a certain point, it would just let off sparks without yielding any progress.

Basically, I had to press the drill against the boulder every day to slowly rack

up damage. Bit by bit, cracks had started to appear. Just one more push.

“If I could just use the skill...”

It was probably a mastery skill, but it was frustratingly impossible to learn. *Maybe it's my fault for running to the sea when everyone else was trying to find a new city.*

Oh? The drill is giving me the same feedback as when it's breaking through a small stone.

There was a series of loud snaps before the boulder split clean in two, leaving behind usable stone material. I'd thought I would have to destroy a small part of it and clear that away before progressing a little further, but...this worked too.

I passed through, the boulder halves sandwiching the path serving as gateposts. Beyond was a slight incline leading me toward the literal center of the island. The manor rested just before the mountain, so it wouldn't take too long to reach.

All right, I can already see it. That's not too bad.

Like the village, the manor had clearly seen better days, indicating just how long it had been since Earl Habenburg had last set foot on the property—according to lore, at least.

Could this be a red herring too?

The fact that the Soul Eater had existed decades ago suggested that the Dimension Waves themselves weren't something that had just recently appeared out of nowhere.

No, if you really get down to it, the Dimension Waves aren't numbered. We're just labeling them for convenience's sake. Who's to say if the one where we faced Cerberus was the first one or the thirtieth one? This story might be about the players gradually uncovering the mysteries of the world.

Anyway, standing around wasn't going to accomplish much. I opened the door to the weathered mansion.

“Huh?”

There wasn't a speck of dust on the handrails. The floor was perfectly intact. I couldn't feel even a hint of decay. To my shock, the inside of the manor remained pristine.

What does this mean? I wondered. Moments later, a half-transparent substance descended from on high.

That's clearly a ghost, thank you very much.

Two ghosts, to be more specific. One was a man dressed in a military uniform—presumably Earl Habenburg. The other, a woman... The countess, perhaps? Earl Habenburg's ghost smiled the moment he noticed me.

"You did well to defeat that monster," he said. "Now, I can finally rest. My benefactor, I leave this island in your hands..."

"Huh?"

As I stood there, utterly stunned, the two ghosts found their peace as they ascended into the heavens and vanished.

Like a lifting fog, the scene around me began to change. The manor I'd seen only moments before was gone with only the scant remnants of its supporting pillars.

At the center of where it had been, a large box had appeared.

As I approached, I noticed the box had four buttons labeled "meat," "nut," "fish," and "carrot."

Food supplies? Is this one of those things where the contents of the box are going to change to match the item I choose?

I carefully examined the box, making sure it wasn't dangerous, and checked to see if I could open it. I could not. Those buttons were clearly the key.

"Well if these are the choices, you're really only giving me one option."

It's probably a lure, a high-quality fishing rod, or maybe even a hook.

Given the situation, it had to be a gift from Earl Habenburg. My hopes were high. Without hesitation, I pushed the "fish" button.

"Peeeen!"

“Whoa?!”

The moment I hit the button, something emerged screaming from within.

Don't surprise me like that. Earl, is this what you leave behind for me? A trap?

The entity that emerged was a monster that looked like a plushified penguin. It wore what appeared to be a Santa hat on its head, and it was about as tall as my chest.

Isn't that a bit large...? I wondered, before remembering I was a little girl. I quickly faced off against it, Cerberus Slaughter at the ready.

“Pekkle is not a monster, pen.”

“It spoke?!”

None of the monsters I'd defeated had ever spoken human words. And that was a good thing. How was I supposed to beat it up like this?

“P-Pekkle?”

“When a penguin and a korpokkur put their strength together, you get Pekkle, pen.”

I hadn't even asked, yet Pekkle was explaining away in a pompous tone.

Korpokkur. That's an old Ainu legend. So, a penguin and a korpokkur make Pekkle? That's a pretty dicey portmanteau. It just looks like a penguin with a hat. I'm not seeing any korpokkur.

Two more Pekkles appeared from the mountain, seeming to regard the one with the Santa hat as their leader. One wore a straw hat, and the other a cowboy hat.

Oh, I see. So the hat is how you distinguish them.

“Pekkle is going to reclaim this island, pen.”

“I-I see... Good luck with that.”

“So please give the order, penster.”

“Who are you calling penster?”

“Who else but you, pen? You can take this.”

Before I could say yes or no, I was handed a strange item. It looked like a smartphone from a few generations ago and was called the Pekkles-o-meter. The Pekkles-o-meter displayed three Pekkles, each marked with the status of “Standby.” When I pressed the standby button, I could select a task for each to perform.

And each individual Pekkles seemed to have a “Motivation” meter. The one in the Santa hat was full while the other two were at seventy percent.

Is it like a hunger gauge? Well, they’re penguins. I’m sure I can get it up if I give them some fish. Come to think of it, I did hit the “fish” button.

“So I was choosing their food supply...”

Then what would have happened if I chose a different button? Presumably, a different sort of animal would have appeared.

“You two.”

I called forth the straw hat and cowboy hat Pekkles and tried handing them some squid from my inventory. The two of them grabbed the squid and scarfed them down. As they ate, the motivation gauges on the Pekkles-o-meter filled in with that remaining thirty percent.

That’s a hundred percent all around... So what do I do? This has got to be a support system.

Now that I’d cleared the condition of reaching Earl Habenburg’s estate, I’d unlocked their aid in the pioneering efforts.

If you were going to throw in help like this, you should have just let my party members drift here with me... Regardless, if they’re part of the system, I might as well use them.

If this worked the same as it usually did, each Pekkles would probably have different abilities. Then the straw hat was definitely the farmer, and the cowboy hat one was the hunter. As for the Santa hat... *What would this guy be good at?*

I searched out an entry that might fit. There were eight options in total: farming, hunting, livestock, fishing, logging, construction, pioneering, and commanding.

Commanding? He seems like the leader. It might be just right for him. Right? I mean, Santa commands the reindeer that pull his sled and the elves. But I get the feeling I'm already giving orders here.

Anyway, I had no idea what Pioneering entailed, so I assigned it to the Santa hat.

"Let's get to work, pen!"

With that, the Pekkles ran off. *I guess they'll start working on the jobs I assigned them. For now, let's return to the ruined village.*

†

I was left speechless by what I saw on my return: the Pekkles with the Santa hat was gripping a hammer between his wings, vigorously smashing what remained of the village houses. Work had only just begun, seeing as the buildings hadn't completely collapsed yet, but they looked ready to fall at any moment.

"What are you doing?!"

"Oh, penster. Pekkles is pioneering, pen."

"That's what we call destroying! Why are you tearing down houses?"

"To build new ones, pen."

I honestly didn't know how to respond to that. I understood the logic, but...if these ruins were taken down, I'd be left without a place to sleep. He mentioned a new house, which was likely what the "construction" command was for. But what was I supposed to do until then?

Well...having inflexible support characters is the norm.

"Got it. Starting now, you're on construction."

"Yes, pen!"

With that, the Pekkles tucked the hammer into his Santa hat, pulled out a saw, and wandered off.

How does that work? Does it follow the same principle as my inventory?

Curious, I followed the Santa Hat Pekkles as he carried the saw over to the

ruins of Earl Habenburg's manor. There, he began to pull lumber from the hat and got to work with the saw.

Where is the wood coming from?

With a sinking suspicion, I pulled up my inventory—and sure enough, my wood supply had mysteriously decreased. *So his hat is connected to my stuff? No, I never had a saw...but whatever. It's not worth stressing over. What are the others doing?*

I took a peek at the Pekkles-o-meter. The counter displayed a simplified map of the island, showing the three Pekkles as cartoonish markers moving around on it. One was near the field I'd raised, while the other was in the forest. That was pretty much what I'd expected. There didn't seem to be any need to keep tabs on them. In any case, having these convenient support characters around was sure to lighten my workload.

"Might as well get on with this pioneering thing..."

That day, from evening 'til nightfall, I went around with the hammer demolishing the abandoned buildings of the village and leaving only my shelter for the night.

Destroying the houses was...oddly satisfying.

Chapter 8: Pekkles Life

The sun had set. While I could continue working at night by picking up Night Vision, my mental fatigue had me calling it a day.

I promptly pulled out my fishing rod—the one from the Seven Tools of the Pioneer. The Pekkles needed feeding, for one, and fishing was my way of relaxing. It was all part of my soul (slow) life.

I headed to the rocky reef where I'd fished while I had waited for Shouko and the others for a week. Though I was catching a decent amount with my Fishing Mastery, the pioneering rod's level was still low.

Each level would increase the variety of fish I could catch, and at first, I was stuck with nothing but small fries like herring. I wanted to hurry up and catch something better, but with these sorts of tools that leveled over time, it was all about the daily grind. No matter how busy my days became, I swore I'd find at least an hour a day to fish.

"Oh, I already got a bite."

I wanted to get more accustomed to using a reel, but the Seven Tools's rod didn't have one; there wasn't much I could do about that. With that in mind, I pulled up the rod as I usually did.

"Pen!"

"..."

I fished up a Pekkles. An indescribable rage welled up inside me as the words naturally came out.

"Don't slack off! Wait... Who are you?"

"I'm Pekkles, pen!"

"I know that."

This Pekkles distinguished itself from the other three with the bandana it had wrapped around its head. Of course, there was a possibility that one of the ones

I already knew had just decided to change up its wardrobe, but from a game design perspective, this was likely a different Pekkles.

Looking at the Pekkles-o-meter, I saw the other three were all working in different places, and an additional fourth entry had been added. This one was on standby—naturally. Its motivation was at thirty percent.

I tossed over some squid from my inventory, and it readily picked up two of them.

I want that house finished soon. I guess I'll set this one to construction.

I assigned the new, bandana-wearing Pekkles to construction, just like the one in the Santa hat. After eating its squid, the Pekkles pulled a saw from its bandana and headed off toward the ruins of the Habenburg manor.

“What was that...?”

They multiplied? What are the conditions to get extra Pekkles?

This time, I'd managed to get a new Pekkles by fishing. Sure, they were cartoonish, but they were still penguins. It wasn't strange to find one in the ocean.

W-well, whatever. Fishing is my soul life.

Regardless of what the world threw at me, I was going to fish at least an hour a day. That was what I told myself as I got back to it.

The next morning, around the time when a faint light colored the eastern sky, I was still fishing. Honestly, I was sleepy. But I had my reasons. And they were very good reasons to change up my plans like that.

Ever since then, I'd fish up Pekkles at regular intervals. Including the Bandana Pekkles, I managed to add five of them to the roster that night, meaning I now had eight Pekkles working under me.

Of the eight of them, six were engaging in construction. After all, it was good to have a safe place to sleep. Concerningly, the lumber I'd gathered over the last two days wasn't going to last.

Let's stop harvesting new Pekkles and go to sleep. Once I'm back up, I'll use the axe to turn some trees into timber. And then, the new house will be

complete. I don't want to live in this battered old building forever.

In any case, I returned to my ruins and lay on the floor.

“Penster, rise and shine, pen.”

How long have I been asleep?

Judging by the sluggish feeling all over my body, it couldn't have been more than six hours. Confirming the clock in the menu, I saw it was 08:26. That meant I'd slept around three hours.

“Mmm, Santa Hat? What's up?”

Santa Hat was the very first Pekkles that came out of the box Earl Habenburg left behind and seemed to be the leader of the bunch. He had a rather troubled look on his face.

“Out of lumber, pen. We can't work like this, pen.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

It wasn't like I had that much lumber to begin with, and they couldn't really work if they had nothing to work with. Without much choice in the matter, I put the construction on a temporary hold and put the six Pekkles on logging before going back to sleep.

After another four hours of blissful unconsciousness—the sun was hanging directly overhead by then—I sat up and made some breakfast. Today's menu was herring and squid, both grilled whole.

Should I start trying to spice it up a bit? I think spice production was part of the Compounding Art skill. Yeah, I think Alto has it.

While the Pekkles worked, I got up at my own pace and headed off to see their progress in the forest. Along the way, I checked the Pekkles-o-meter, noting that each was at around seventy percent motivation level.

It seems that working one full day shaves away around half.

Eventually, I came upon the six Pekkles engaging in logging work. They used massive tree-felling saws, each saw requiring a Pekkles at both ends. The logging wasn't going as fast as I'd expected; all six of them together were producing

about a tenth of what I could do alone.

“Yeah, that’s about what you’d expect from helper characters,” I muttered.

Santa Hat turned and replied, “Pekkle’s proficiency level is too low, pen.”

The timing of that response was too perfect, almost like he was making an excuse for my complaint.

Do they even have proficiency level? I wondered. *Rather, if this is how fast they work, I can’t count on them to do too much in the field either.* With logging next on the docket, I fetched a pail of water and set off for the field.

The Pekkle that had been left to work alone in the field was making progress notably slower than the ones doing the logging. The Straw Hat Pekkle, who’d likely been working since morning, still hadn’t finished watering the crops. I spread the water in my pail around to the dry areas. It had been two days since I first planted, and the sprouts were starting to fatten up. They grew quickly, unlike in the real world. *At this rate, I should be able to harvest tomorrow.*

To see if the Cowboy Hat Pekkle had been successful in his hunt, I checked my inventory and saw that I had two of an item labeled “Animal Meat” inside. I had no idea what kind of meat it was, but at least he seemed to be doing his job.

That’s not exactly an impressive amount, seeing as he’s been at it since yesterday, but I shouldn’t expect too much if his proficiency level is low. I need to remember to keep these two on their respective tasks.

After finishing up the daily farm tasks, I returned to the forest. There, the Pekkles were still working at the same trees they were on before. I made sure to feed each Pekkle a herring, restoring their motivation, but their speed remained slow. And so, I took up the work with every intention of handling it all myself.

This lifestyle continued for around another three days until finally a house—rather a facility labeled “base”—was completed on the plot where the old manor once stood.

The base was a small log hut, perfectly ordinary as far as huts went, save for the fact it was furnished with a device that worked just like the Pekkle-o-meter. When I checked the map of the island from that device, it indicated that the

base was at Level 1. It was possible to expand it, but for now, having a place to sleep was enough for me.

On another note, after four hours of night fishing a day, the number of Pekkles had increased to fifteen. They moved slowly compared to me, but their increased numbers—and perhaps a rise in proficiency levels—meant they were proving to be somewhat capable.

Each individual Pekkles seemed to have an area of expertise that seemed to influence how fast their proficiency grew in certain areas. Most of their specialties could be roughly estimated from their hats. At times, one of them would even come to me and say, “I want to do _____ work, pen,” and I’d put them on the task.

The Santa Hat Pekkles, as the leader, seemed to be adept at everything. He had the highest proficiency levels of all his kin. However, I could see his endgame abilities falling short of the specialists in any given field.

And speak of the devil. Just as I was thinking about him, the Santa Hat Pekkles approached with some business or another.

“What are we building next, pen? A warehouse, pen? Got it, pen.”

“Wait...I didn’t say...anything...”

The Pekkles abruptly reached its own conclusion, did a U-turn, and left.

What do you mean, “Got it, pen”? If you’ve already decided something, why even bother asking me in the first place?

It was likely something to do with the game’s system, where facilities had a predetermined build priority or something like that. Gradually, the Pekkles added a warehouse, a ranch, and a water canal, expanding the base’s facilities.

The number of Pekkles tending to the fields had grown to five, while another five were sent out to hunt. As the ranch reached completion, animals captured during their hunts would be let loose within, where they’d be tended to by five Pekkles tasked with livestock. We’d reached the point where Pekkles were the ones fishing up their own food.

Eventually, a separate food storage was built in addition to the warehouse. If I

registered the fish I wanted to feed the Pekkles in advance, this facility would automatically restore their motivation.

Meanwhile, the Pekkles assigned to logging and pioneering continued to expand our civilization. By that point, the number of Pekkles had surpassed fifty. Their abilities varied, but as their skill proficiencies increased, their work pace went up alongside it.

It was around the time that a steady system was in place that the Santa Hat Pekkles came to me and said, “A large monster in the forest is preventing expansion, pen.”

Chapter 9: Second Dimension Wave Complete

The Santa Hat Pekkles's words brought me to a part of the forest under development. The other Pekkles had already evacuated, leaving the woods with an eerie silence.

As I scouted to see what we were dealing with, I saw it. It was what appeared to be a massive penguin with a menacing face. It was purple; its flippers had evolved into wings, allowing it to perch atop a tree.

I wasn't going to ask how it flew when it was so large or how the tree branch didn't break under its weight. This was a game. It was pointless to think about.

"I guess I have to take it down."

It had been a long while since I'd held Cerberus Slaughter like this. I took my battle stance. This was an event monster, by the look of it. Surely it couldn't be too strong.

Heh heh heh...those who dare disturb my paradise shall face heaven's wrath.

†

"How am I supposed to beat that?!"

Five minutes later, I was fleeing for my life from the monster known as the Karma Pengu.

What's up with that thing? Just one hit did a whole 2000 damage. In attack power alone, it's up there with Cerberus.

But once I stopped to think about it, I remembered that the island was probably supposed to be visited much later in the game. The existence of the drill seemed to support that, but I'd completely forgotten due to the lack of monsters on the island. Honestly, I couldn't defeat something like that on my own.

"If only Shouko was here..."

She was the strongest member of the party. Side by side, we'd dispatched so

many formidable foes, with her coming out unscathed more often than not. But...what was the use in counting on someone who wasn't there?

For now, I'll just have to stockpile enough Energy to defeat it later. Somehow or other. We'll focus on logging and construction for the time being to get our facilities in order.

I am not being a sore loser.

In any case, it seemed like it wasn't going to leave the forest, so the Karma Pengu was put on hold. With little choice in the matter, I assigned the Pekkles I'd put on pioneering to other tasks.

Lately, I've just been throwing around orders. There isn't much for me to actually do. But food is an issue—we've got over fifty mouths to feed, after all. The Pekkles themselves are contributing to the fishing business, for what it's worth, but they haven't reached the point where they can sustain themselves.

With that being the case, I'd recently devoted my life to nonstop fishing.

I mean, it helps... I sometimes fish up more Pekkles.

"Fishing... That's my soul life..."

It sounded like a shoddy excuse at this point, but so what?

I gave them fish, and they returned the favor with meat, fruit, vegetables, eggs, and milk. These creatures only ate seafood... Their fish consumption was so high that I'd finally run out of squid. If we wanted to support the lives we were living, I had to fish. There was no way around it.

Ha ha! This is the life... I thought. Thanks to this lifestyle, the fishing rod had reached Level 7. Since my arrival on Cal Mira, my fishing spot had always been the reef. I'd dangle my line into the sea and take it easy, waiting for a tug.

The fish I could catch now were...rockfish, scorpionfish, greenling, and grouper. They were all fish I didn't eat too much in real life, but they were mostly whitefish. Taste-wise, they turned out to be surprisingly delicious, so I'd been keeping some aside for myself every morning, instead of just using them for Pekkles feed. The grouper, despite its appearance, was especially tasty. I didn't know how it compared to the real thing, but if it really tasted like this, I

knew I had to try some once I got back to the real world. Honestly, they ranked higher than fatty tuna belly for me.

I don't hear about these fish often, but I should look into them sometime.

"Hmm...I wonder if I'll catch a grouper today..."

Thinking about grouper made me want some on my plate.

Sashimi? Hotpot? I weighed my options. Those two were the most delicious methods I'd found so far, so I usually stuck to them. They turned out even better when combined with ingredients from the Pekkles farm and the Pekkles ranch.

The only downside was that grouper was particularly difficult to catch, and they would sometimes escape me even with my complete focus on grinding out Fishing Mastery. It was hard to describe, but each time I hooked one, it was almost like I was battling with The Lord. At first, I was only able to pull them up one out of ten times.

"Hmm...?"

A powerful gust blew over me. It was quite common to feel a strong breeze by the ocean, but there was something different about this one. Not that it was that severe; no, there was something nostalgic about it.

This is taking me back to the first time I experienced a Dimension Wave; that was a tough one.

Come to think of it, what are my party members doing around now...? It's been quite a while, and I'm still not seeing any signs of them. I hadn't given it much thought, with how busy each day was on Cal Mira Island, but I was still curious.

"Huh...?"

As my gaze shifted from the sea to the eastern sky, I saw it had turned a vivid red. It was the same wine red that had overtaken the world as I fought in the Dimension Wave alongside my comrades.

Now that you mention it... I've been too focused on surviving to keep track, but it's been just about two months since the game kicked off... Isn't that the

Second Dimension Wave...?

“D-Don’t tell me...”

Despite the trouble that came with it, the first wave had been pretty fun. Sure, I’d ended up losing a good bit of Energy, but I got the ever-useful Energy Blade as a reward, and I’d decided I’d be there in the second wave too...

“You’re telling me I can’t participate...?”

That’s absurd. I’m sealed away here, and they won’t even let me join the titular main event of this game? Maybe my being here was completely outside of the developer’s predictions.

I’d brought it upon myself. But being barred from participation...

“Let me out! I want to join in!” I howled at the sea.

I had faint hopes that I’d be able to leave during the event, but my Wooden Boat simply looped back to the island. Just as it had so many times before. Resigning myself to my fate, I crouched down on the sandy beach, hugging my knees as I stared at the waves. Before long, the Santa Hat Pekkles approached me.

“The pioneering has made some good progress, pen.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Is there anyone you want to see, pen?”

“Well...I’d really like to see Shouko.”

“The person’s name is ‘Shouko,’ pen?”

“Huh?”

That was quite the unnatural line coming from the Pekkles. Why was the support character so keen on knowing Shouko’s name? Suspicious yet curious, I decided to go along with it.

“Her name is Hakoniwa Shouko.”

“Please write out the exact name, pen.”

With that, the Pekkles opened a system window with a box that let me enter in

characters. With a sliver of hope, I put in “Hakoniwa Shouko.”



“Understood, pen. I pray that you meet them soon, pen,” the Santa Hat Pekkles said before turning and returning to his work.

What was that all about?

I didn’t really get it, but regardless, it didn’t seem like I was going to get to play the second wave. I spent the rest of the day fishing—catching Pekkles food and some grouper for myself—as the sun dipped beyond the watery horizon.

†

“Something has washed ashore, pen.”

I awoke to a Pekkles’s voice early the next morning. With all the hints he’d been throwing at me, I wasn’t exactly surprised. But still, I felt groggy. After all, I’d spent most of last night fishing out my frustrations at not being able to take part in the second Dimension Wave.

I headed to the beach where I’d first washed up. There, lying face down in the sand, was a person.

“How do you fall like that?”

The figure lay in a perfectly straight line, their arms held up above their head, tapering to a point at their fingers. Like a perfect swan dive, or perhaps a pencil. It was amusing enough that I decided to take a screenshot.

Miming holding a camera in both hands, I snapped several shots of this passed-out individual. *Can I get any closer...?*

I closed in and took a shot up close. With her pose, you might think she would suffocate on sand or seawater, but it was probably fine. This was a game.

Okay, one more...or so I thought. But the moment I got too close, my leg was grabbed.

“Eep! A sea witch?!”

“Who are you calling a sea witch?! Wait...Kizuna?”

The sea witch who’d apprehended me—Shouko—let out a bewildered cry. As I’d suspected, yesterday’s Pekkles dialogue was an event to call an additional comrade.

“Kizuna! What have you been doing all this time?! I was worried about you...”
Shouko exclaimed while embracing my tiny body.

Just as I had no idea what Shouko or any of the other members of my party had been doing in my absence, they too had no way of knowing anything about me. I hadn’t heard her voice ever since I’d been stranded; the sound strangely seemed to put me at ease.

Why is that? No, I mean, Shouko’s reliable and someone I trust, but still...

“I don’t even know where to start... To put it simply, I’ve been developing this deserted island.”

“Developing an island...you say?”

“Yeah. I can’t leave.”

I spoke at length about all that had happened to me: of how I waited for a week for everyone to find me; of how I couldn’t leave the island no matter how hard I tried; of how I used the Seven Tools of the Pioneer to start developing the land; of how the helpers called Pekkles aided me in my effort; of how the development had progressed to the point where my life was relatively stable; and of how one of the Pekkles had asked for Shouko’s name just yesterday.

Shouko listened intently as I droned on and on; my words were flowing far more freely than usual, likely due to the nearly two weeks I’d spent in isolation.

“I see. So that’s what happened... Kizuna?”

“Hm?”

“You’ve been working hard.”

“Yeah...”

Did I work hard or not? Personally, I felt like I had. I had the Pekkles with me, but they were still NPCs. Being alone without any humans was undeniably lonely.

I’d thrown myself into pioneering, busying myself every day in an effort to distance my mind from my isolation. It helped that I liked development games, but still, it felt good to be with Shouko again.

“What about you, Shouko? What have you guys been up to?”

“Yes, well, after that, we awoke in the First City, and...”

After the battle on the ghost ship, the rest of my party had all washed up unscathed on the sandy beaches of Lurolona, the First City.

That’s good. I’d actually been pretty worried about whether Shouko or Yamikage lost any Energy.

Worst case, I feared that they had ended up scattered, stranded on different islands just as I had been. But it seemed they’d avoided that fate.

Shouko was quickly reunited with the others, but she realized she was unable to contact me. When she tried to send a chat, she was met with “Error. The person you are trying to contact has either turned off their device or is in an area without reception.” It was a slight variation of the message I kept getting. Alarmed by this peculiar situation, they began to search for me, but their efforts were in vain and time continued to slip away.

Before the ghost ship vanished, Alto had heard me muttering something about an island and suggested that I’d been wrapped up in an event of sorts. He’d pretty much hit the bull’s-eye. Thus, the party attempted to search at sea, but the results spoke for themselves. I was still stranded. Their experience points continued to grow with their search. Time passed, and finally...the Second Dimension Wave broke out. The big event wasn’t far off.

Just as Shouko had begun to feel a touch of anxiety about it, she was suddenly attacked by a hand-shaped mass of liquid that appeared in her room at the inn. Despite her best efforts, she was overwhelmed and was here by the time she opened her eyes.

“I see. I should have realized when I saw the second wave. Sorry for dragging you here at such an inconvenient time.”

“Oh, no, as long as you’re safe, Kizuna, that’s enough for me.”

“But not having you on the battlefield’s gonna be a huge loss, right?”

“That is not an issue. I never planned on participating in the first place...”

“What do you mean...?”

Shouko gently closed her eyes as she reached into her inventory and carefully pulled out the Energy Blade I'd lent her. It was only after she'd delivered it to me that she continued the conversation.

"Because I wanted to fight alongside you."

"Shouko... Yep, you never change."

"Certainly not! It won't be so easy to change me."

At least she seemed cheerful about it. Since arriving on Cal Mira, my only regret had been leaving everyone behind. For now, I'd at least managed to reunite with Shouko. That was something to be thankful for. *Let's use the grouper I pulled in yesterday to liven up the breakfast table.*

As we hastily made our way to the base I slept in, Shouko suddenly tensed up at the sight of a group of Pekkles.

"Monsters!"

Instantaneously, her twin fans had shifted from her sash to her hands as she took distance.

"Pekkle is not a monster, pen."

"It spoke!"

Oh wow, she's having the same reaction as me. Yeah, that's normal. These things definitely look like monsters at a glance. Especially with their numbers and goofy speech patterns.

"Err, these guys are the helpers I told you about."

"O-Oh, really. There are just so many of them. It caught me off guard."

Now that I'm thinking about it, the sights I've grown accustomed to are definitely abnormal... If I was in her position, I'm confident I would have said the same thing.

"But that's incredible. There's even a large one on top of the building."

"Umm... Can you run that by me again?"

"As I said, there is a massive, purple penguin on top of that building with the fish symbol..."

I gazed in the direction she pointed. It was the food storage, where the Pekkles food was kept. As Shouko said, it was emblazoned with a large fish symbol, and it was a facility that automatically restored Pekkles motivation as long as I kept it supplied with fish.

“The facility is being attacked, pen.”

“Santa Hat... Why are you so calm about this...?”

The report came from the Santa Hat Pekkles, something of a leader among the other Pekkles. Personally, I was hoping for a little more urgency in his report.

But I thought the Karma Pengu couldn't set foot outside the forest...

My eyes turned to Shouko, who was looking at the scene like it was simply a curious spectacle.

Is it because the number of players on the island increased?

It was common in games for the difficulty level to rise with an increased player count, and perhaps the Karma Pengu was following the same pattern.

“Well, at least we have the mighty Master Shouko with us now. We're definitely taking down that fatso!”

“Master? Why do I feel some malicious intent in that nickname?”

“You're definitely the master among us.”

“I'm...going to bring this up later.”

“A-Anyways, can you help me defeat that thing? Please? I can't do it alone.”

“Understood. The strangest things always seem to happen around you, Kizuna,” Shouko said with a bemused smile.

It wasn't like I was running into these things out of choice. But that wasn't important—for now, we ran to the food storage to challenge the invading Karma Pengu.

“Here I come!”

Shouko—who had kept her fans out the whole time—began charging a skill as we ran. Her kimono and fans had both been upgraded since the last time I'd seen her on the ghost ship, both looking notably more expensive. Evidently, a

lot had gone on while I wasn't there. She'd mentioned earning a good amount of experience while searching for me, so surely she'd gotten much stronger.

As for me, I'd done nothing but develop Cal Mira, and it felt like I'd been left in the dust.

"Aight, I can't afford to slack off."

I hadn't gotten the chance since we'd been separated, but I'd planned to ask Shouko for tips on getting stronger. It wasn't like I was just living carefree on the island—I was living a life I was proud of.

Name: Kizuna†Exceed / Race: Spirit

Energy: 138,630 / Mana: 49,070

Acquired Skills: Energy Production XIV, Mana Production XI, Fishing Mastery X, Hate & Lure II, Pole Fishing I, Dismantling Mastery VII, Cleaver V, Sli-Swing II, Fast Dismantle IV, Demolition Mastery III, Farming Mastery I, Culinary Art IV, Elemental Conversion II

My life...was focused on production. That wasn't news to anyone.

I gripped the Cerberus Slaughter and the Energy Blade that Shouko had returned to me. *I finally feel fully equipped. No, is this really how I want to continue? Can I honestly puff out my chest and face Shouko—the woman who said I worked hard—while fighting like this?*

Can I really be satisfied with the Energy Blade, a last resort, being my only effective weapon?

No...I can't. What I want is to become stronger, to defeat enemies in smarter ways.

I get the feeling I'm barking up the wrong tree, but there should be a different way for me to fight.

That was when the Seven Tools of the Pioneer in my inventory caught my eye.

Th-That's it!

“Circle Dance Third Formation: Haze!”

A mist-like effect surrounded the Karma Pengu as Shouko landed a four-hit combo. And seeing my chance, I charged in.

“Drill!”

The sharp sound of the motor cut through the air as the drill pierced the Karma Pengu’s flank.

Oh, it’s only Level 4! It should pack a punch. And the drill hasn’t even been added to the game yet. It has more firepower than anything else I have on hand.

Oh, the Karma Pengu flinched a bit.

Leveraging that opportunity, Shouko used her two fans to pummel it from every direction. She’d grown even stronger than before, her attacks staggering it back and giving me the chance to drill it again. This felt a little unfair, but I couldn’t shake the feeling my fights had always been unfair. This was probably for the best.

As expected of a weapon classified as a demolition weapon, the drill tangled the feathers of the Karma Pengu’s flippers, tearing them out as it spun. *I think it’s safe to say I’m doing some damage.*

And after a long chain of similar harassment—I mean, sharp attacks—the Karma Pengu went down surprisingly easily. It let out one final, loud squawk, and collapsed.

“Its attacks were heavy, but we managed better than I thought,” said Shouko.

“Right. I didn’t get hit thanks to you keeping it distracted.”

In reality, all I’d done was press a drill into its side whenever I saw an opening. Shouko was the one skillfully dodging all of its attacks. Even though I knew I wasn’t fast enough to dodge, the Karma Pengu was still a monster that traded speed for attack power. Despite how powerful each and every attack was, it was slower than Shouko. In that sense, our victory had been inevitable.

“All right, big guy. It’s dismantling time. I’ll have you pay the price for disturbing my village.”

It looked to be a bird-type monster, so I dismantled it with my Silver Poultry

Knife. Meat, wings, beak, plumage, it all came off. However, once I'd mostly finished up...

"Hmm? What?"

The Karma Pengu's corpse began to wriggle.

"Pen!"

I stared in silence.

"Umm..."

An awkward silence loomed over us, but to put it bluntly...three Pekkles burst out of the Karma Pengu's body.

I'd had my suspicions that something like this might happen, but the sight of penguins emerging from another penguin's belly was a little... What's the word...surreal. *Did it eat them?*

The first new Pekkles came with a warrior helmet, the second had a feathered headdress, and the third had a scarf wrapped around its mouth area. Unlike the other Pekkles, the helmet one had a sword, the war bonnet one a bow, and the scarfed one a dagger.

What's with them?

"Pekkles turn delinquent if they build up too much stress, pen."

I turned around to the Santa Hat Pekkles' explanation.

I always knew the Karma Pengu was penguin-esque, but was that a mutated Pekkles? Rather, that's far beyond what I'd call delinquent. I'd go as far as to say it's evolution at its finest.

"Take a peek at the Pekkles-o-meter, pen."

Alongside Shouko, I stared at the Pekkles-o-meter. Stress, an entry that hadn't been there before, had been added.

"A Pekkles becomes a Karma Pengu when its stress reaches one hundred percent, pen. Please watch out for that, pen."

"Oof...!"

What do you mean “watch out for that”? If we had a system like that, you should’ve told me from the start.

What’s more, the fact that I’d kept them working day and night meant that they had all reached levels over ninety percent. Only the Santa Hat—perhaps due to being special—remained stress-free. Well, the three new additions were also low. They’d likely let it all out with their rampage.

“Huh?”

“What’s wrong?”

“There’s more stuff that’s been added.”

“Dungeon” and “mining” had been added to the tasks I could assign to Pekkles.

Mining I understood. There was a Pekkles with a mining hat, and that was probably what that one specialized in. As for the dungeon option... It likely had to do with the three new ones.

It could wait, though. Everyone’s stress was equally high, so I put them all on standby. Work had mostly wrapped up anyway.

I’ll implement a work rotation starting tomorrow to manage their motivation and stress levels.

Having successfully defended the food storage from the Karma Pengu, I fed the Pekkles to cap their motivation before assigning the three new recruits to “dungeon.”

Then, the three Pekkles began to climb the mountain, stopping at a point halfway up from the base. The pass had been blocked with rock up until we’d defeated the Karma Pengu. Now, there was a small passage just big enough for a single Pekkles to pass through. As the three of them entered it in single file, their status on the Pekkles-o-meter changed to “exploring.” Whatever lay beyond was only for Pekkles eyes.

“W-Well then, how about we head home, Shouko?”

“Understood.”

And so, thanks to the sea witch—no, I mean Shouko, we made some more

progress in Cal Mira’s development.

Chapter 10: Master and Disciple

“Well then, Kizuna. Come at me however you wish.”

I was currently facing off against Shouko. We weren’t fighting for real—this was to raise my player skill, as I’d previously sworn to do.

We’d agreed to train three times a day at morning, noon, and night. As for why we were doing three daily sessions, Shouko explained—while it was important for my body to grow accustomed to the movements, relying solely on muscle memory would potentially cause bad habits to develop. As she put it, a form was only truly mastered when mind and body were moving in unison.

So, we needed to space out the training in order to keep my mind sharp. I had to think and move accordingly. It was only after I could pull off these simple yet complicated motions that I could finally become like her.

This isn’t the first time it’s crossed my mind, but Shouko definitely practices some martial arts in real life.

“You don’t care how I fight, right?”

“Yes. This is not a contest with rules; all that matters is that you come out on top.”

“Got it.”

Dimension Wave didn’t really have any rules on how to fight. You could jump around, use projectiles—it didn’t matter. Though I hadn’t learned it yet, there was a wide array of magic as well. It was essentially a free-for-all.

Keeping my distance, I pointed my fishing rod at Shouko. Of all my weapons, the rod was the only one that let me attack at range. Given my skill composition, using the rod until she got closer seemed like my best bet.

“Hate & Lure!”

I cast the lure to the right, sending it on a curving trajectory. With that, Shouko would be restricted by the line and lure, giving her no choice but to

dodge left.

Of course, I considered the possibility of her simply jumping over it, but my control over the lure let me change its direction mid-flight (albeit only once per cast). In other words, I could still pursue her even if she dodged.

“Kizuna, please be more conscious of your own positioning.”

“Erk!”

Shouko quickly saw through the lure’s curving path, and with a *whap* like a ball on a bat, she had usurped my control over it. In short, the lure I’d tried to hit her with was shooting right back at me. Even if I wanted to avoid it, Shouko was closing in at the same speed as the lure.

I threw the fishing rod aside and switched to the hammer from the Seven Tools of the Pioneer, meeting her with an upward swing.

“That’s the spirit,” Shouko praised me as she dodged with a graceful back step.

I didn’t expect to win, but I wanted to make her feel tense, if only for a moment.

After she’d dodged the hammer, Shouko was immediately on the offensive. In which case, my heavy weapon put me at a disadvantage. I reverted the weapon to its box state, taking a stance with Cerberus Slaughter in my dominant right hand. And, in the next instant, just as Shouko rushed at me, I slashed.

Naturally, I was set to be parried by one of her twin fans. That was well within my expectations. Turning the Seven Tools of the Pioneer in my left hand to its drill form, I stabbed forth.

Shouko parried with the fan in her other hand, yet a crunching, twisting sound filled the air nonetheless. Then, with the sound of something dragging along the ground, Shouko disappeared from my field of view.

For the record, even if a skill hit either of us, neither I nor Shouko would take any damage. Dimension Wave didn’t have PVP content at the moment, so all we got were visual effects.

“You’ve improved a bit, Kizuna.”

Yet not a moment after claiming that, she effortlessly aimed a fan at me from behind.

“Praising your opponent while winning? Sounds like sarcasm to me.”

“That’s what being a teacher is like.”

“Well, I guess that ‘the student easily surpasses their master’ schtick only ever happens in manga.”

“Essentially. But Kizuna, you’re following along well. Once you master the ability to think and act in tandem, I think you’ll be able to reach my level. The rest is just repetition.”

At least half of it was likely just flattery, but I sure hoped she was right. Regardless, to think that Shouko was always concentrating so hard while fighting... Sure, it would be amazing to master the skill, but it was mentally exhausting. Not that there was any way of fighting that wasn’t exhausting. But, while I could do it three times a day, there was no way I could keep it up any longer than that.

“I get the feeling Tsumugi would pick it up in no time, but it’s a struggle for me.”

“I can’t deny that it has more to do with personality than talent. But if you give up now, you might not be able to keep up in our future battles.”

“Yeah... To be honest, I’m fine as long as I can fish, but I’ll have more options if I learn to fight.”

If I’d been better at fighting, I would have been able to defeat the Karma Pengu alone. It was naive of me to think that fishing was everything. Sure, it wasn’t a terrible move to rely on Shouko, but there was no guarantee that she or the rest of my party would always be around.

“If I had to give some advice, Kizuna, it’s to always observe your opponent carefully.”

“I am watching.”

“Indeed. But when I say observe, I mean to see everything.”

“Everything?”

“Yes, everything. From the tips of their fingers to each single strand of hair, to even the flow of blood in their body. If you can see it all...”

“If I could?”

“Now that’s the question, isn’t it?”

Hey... It was very rare for Shouko to joke around, so I was caught off guard.

“Of course, I wasn’t just messing with you. I haven’t reached that level myself, but there are apparently masters who can pull it off.”

“Hmm...”

I couldn’t even imagine what kind of human could do that, but if Shouko said so, it had to be true. She wasn’t one to lie.

That’s morning training done. I should probably give the Pekkles some instructions.

Ever since the stress gauge appeared, I’d had to start giving them breaks, and that slowed down the development progress.

“Come to think of it, did you ever find a new continent while you were out searching for me?”

“No, we did not.”

“I see... It’s not easy, I take it.”

“Not exactly. No matter which direction we steer the ship, we will always get caught in a storm after making a certain amount of headway. Every time, we end up in the Sea of No Return.”

“Did you get trapped there again?”

“Not anymore, no. After a few hours of wandering, we inevitably end up back at the waters near the First City.”

It was hard to imagine no one had tried to take measures in my absence. With Alto around, they would have thought up all the classic RPG clichés. And, if they still hadn’t found anything...perhaps it was like the Pekkles. They hadn’t met the right condition yet to progress... In short, that content was still locked.

Perhaps apart from the players who first reached this area, the rest of the

player base would have to wait until a certain number of Dimension Waves were completed. Maybe it was something like that.

Meanwhile, we—the players who cleared the Limited Dimension Wave—obtained Cal Mira Island, a sort of bonus stage we could play around with until the conditions were met. This was possibly a reward for those who went against the grain, or in this case, for those who set their sights on the sea.

That could even explain why Shouko was sent here right around the time the second wave was supposed to take place. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to defeat the Karma Pengu, and it wouldn't have been a balanced event. If I'd called Alto, the Karma Pengu might have stuck to the forest.

This was just my wild speculation, but perhaps certain events triggered as the players on the island met cumulative level milestones. If I was right, then Shouko had to be pretty at a pretty high Level... Or rather, she had a lot of Energy. She was, after all, second only to Yamikage, and her equipment was great to boot.

I'm glad I didn't pick Yamikage, I concluded. There was a high chance the game system would have turned its fangs against us. Calling a back-line member like Yamikage wouldn't have helped too much, seeing as I wasn't exactly a frontline fighter myself. Yes, perhaps it would have mutated into an even stronger Neo Karma Pengu or something like that.

“All right, now what's going on with the Pekkles Dungeon?”

Currently, five Pekkles were exploring the dungeon in question. The initial three I sent out had returned with two new comrades in tow. The first wore a pointed hat, and the second a nun's veil. Those Pekkles had an even more RPG-esque party than we did.

The one with the helmet was a warrior; the one in the feather headdress an archer; the scarf one was a thief; the pointy hat one a magician; and the nun a healer... What a balanced party they had going on. If only we had that sort of party comp... With that said, I felt like I was the one with the strangest build, so I kept it all to myself.

“Umm, the rewards this time...”

The Pekkles Dungeon built up stress and chipped away at motivation more than the other activities. Once every member reached zero motivation, they would automatically return, and they'd return on their own if they made some discovery too.

Up to a point, we were only finding new Pekkles in the Pekkles dungeon. However, after we built a storehouse for them, the items the Pekkles found on their travels began to pile up. The massive amounts of vegetables, meat, and fish contributed to the operations of the other facilities.

Since the goods were piling in, I decided to part ways with Shouko and go take a look at the storehouse. Meanwhile, Shouko went off to explore the island. I'd already told her the results of my explorations, but she insisted she wanted to see everything with her own eyes.

"This is...a blueprint?"

The design looked like a cartoony simplification of a hospital.

You can now construct a Pekkles Hospital.

I looked at the simple explanation of the facility's effects.

Pekkles Hospital.

This facility allows you to nurse injured Pekkles and stressed-out Pekkles back to full health.

Additionally, it reduces stress gains of the general Pekkles population. This reduction increases with each facility level. A boost to motivation is provided every 2 levels.

The main ingredients for its medication are...a secret.

What? What's with that last line? I had no idea what the developers had in mind when they put that in. Was it supposed to be dark humor?

In any case, building a Pekkles Hospital would help contain stress levels. After checking the work rotation, I assigned some idle Pekkles to begin work on it.

I never knew they'd pick up new blueprints in the dungeon like that, I thought. Apparently, building the hospital required ores, which no facility before it had required. The ores had been piling up in the storehouse from the Pekkles on mining duty.

Most of the ores we gathered weren't copper or iron or anything like that. They were ores exclusive to Cal Mira Island. If they actually gave general materials that could be used elsewhere, the player who obtained the island would have way too much of an advantage.

Incidentally, when I—a player—used the drill to mine by hand, I did occasionally come across iron. It was only about once every hundred attempts, though.

Now then, is it time to fish? I wondered when a chat came in from Shouko.

“What’s wrong?”

“I thought it might be unfair that I’m the only one teaching. There was something I wanted to learn from you.”

“What? If it’s anything I know, I’d be happy to teach you.”

“Then could you please teach me how to fish?”

And like that, my lonesome life gradually turned into a life shared by two.

†

As for what Tsumugi and the rest of my party were doing around then...

“There we...go!”

With a mighty swing of her massive scythe, Tsumugi mowed down a group of zombies wearing chest plates—monsters the game labeled as Dimension Rot Soldiers.

“Bloody Rain, I daresay!”

Acting as Tsumugi’s support, Yamikage summoned a rain of red liquid that lowered the defenses of the foes it drenched.

“Looking good. We’re cutting through them like butter thanks to you, Yammy.”

As the battle raged on, Yamikage fretfully scanned her surroundings.

“Are you looking for Shouko?”

“Tsumugi...” Yamikage muttered with a nod.

Shortly after they’d received a notice about the second Dimension Wave...Shouko, who had been searching for Kizuna, suddenly vanished without a trace, and it became impossible to contact her.

“I mean, I get that it would’ve been even easier to fight if she was around, but...”

“Bomber Lancer...”

Sheryl unleashed a skill from behind Tsumugi, tearing the approaching enemies to pieces in an explosive burst.

“Good job, Sheryl! Even if you’re not suited for combat, you’re fighting just as well as the frontliners.”

“Uh-huh...” Sheryl grunted, holding up her harpoon to show it to Tsumugi.

“It’s all thanks to my brother. Hmm... Were events without him always this dull? It felt more challenging last time,” Tsumugi thought aloud. But she knew why this event felt so much easier than the last one.

It was all because she’d continued fighting endless battles on the high seas alongside the party as they searched for Kizuna. The seas had indeed hidden a decent experience yield, allowing them to grow to levels that matched players who fought on the front lines.

She’d come to appreciate the fun of trial and error, experimenting to find solutions with everyone. And now...with two of her companions missing from the Dimension Wave, Tsumugi couldn’t help but feel a pang of loneliness.

“We have the right flank covered!” boomed a commanding voice over the map-wide chat. It was a familiar voice by now. “Everyone confident in their skill, head to the center to take care of the hordes of mobs and the boss.”

“I thought we might finally meet up with bro and Shouko in the second wave, but they’re not here. Let’s wrap this up quickly and get back to searching.”

I need those two if I want to escape this empty sensation... Tsumugi thought as she called out to Yamikage.

“I daresay you’re right... The ease of the battle made me complacent! Let us be off!”

Yamikage raised her head, her eyes locking onto the central battlefront as the map-wide chat had instructed.

“Lady Tsumugi, Lady Sheryl! Don’t fall behind!”

“Of course not! I’m not losing in speed.”

“Uh-huh...”

Yamikage took the lead as the party of three made a dash for the frontmost line. Protruding from the rift that loomed over the depths of the enemy formation were two giant heads—one a lion, the other a dragon... It wouldn’t be long before the body of the fearsome boss revealed itself.

“Bloody Rain, I daresay! Now everyone, their defenses are down!”

A vicious battle had begun for Yamikage, Tsumugi, and Sheryl.

“Milord, milady... I daresay, I’ll bring you tales of this battle. Just wait for us!”

Chapter 11: New Land

The circle was completed; though I had once been the student, I was now the master teaching Shouko how to fish. It was in the middle of our lesson that it finally happened. The red-streaked sky looming over the eastern sea flashed with light before the rift closed and the sky returned to its original blue. Then, a system window forcefully popped up.

The Second Dimension Wave has been Cleared!

I hadn't taken part this time, and so I wasn't expecting much. But I checked the contribution rankings regardless.

Provisional Overall Rank 100: Kizuna†Exceed (Exempt from Second Wave).

Provisional Overall Rank 100: Hakoniwa Shouko (Exempt from Second Wave).

“What does the ‘provisional’ here mean?”

I looked into it further, and apparently, my role in the Limited Dimension Wave had secured me a guaranteed place in the second wave, exempting me of service. I wasn't sure whether to be happy or sad about my situation. With that said...my anxiety about dragging Shouko here did soften somewhat.

Now then, on to how my comrades are doing.

Spirit Rank 1: Yamikage.

As per usual, she still had more Energy than anyone else. She was a Drain addict after all—though she'd been breaking character lately.

Alto and Romina were up there in the logistical support rankings, just like last time. Looking at all the names closely, most of them were the same ones from the last wave. It seemed the merchants had pretty much established themselves.

Next, my eyes turned to the combat rankings. This time, Tsumugi's name wasn't in the top five. I was sure she'd be near the top if she took part, so I scoured through the DPS category.

Total Damage Dealt Rank 27: Tsumugi†Exceed.

Her ranking had fallen since the last one. Since we'd spent so much time stuck at sea, perhaps she was under-leveled compared to the frontliners. Or maybe she had a bad matchup against the enemies this time around. In the first wave, enemies swarmed us in massive hordes, which paired very well with her scythe's huge AOE's.

Monthly Livelihood Rank 1: Kizuna†Exceed.

"Wait, me?!"

Well...my life on Cal Mira's mostly been about survival...but there were Pekkles, and destruction, and drills, and fishing, and fishing, and fishing.

I had no idea what criteria they were using, but it made sense. I'd been doing a bit of everything ever since I'd been stranded on the island—fishing, demolishing buildings, cooking, chopping down trees, mining, tilling fields, harvesting crops, the list goes on. I couldn't even remember all I'd done.

Perhaps my ranking was inevitable. Even when we were stuck in the Sea of No Return, I'd been living a life of endless fishing. Thinking back, it'd been a whole month focused on side content.

Well...fine, whatever. Let's just be happy that I topped the charts on something. On to the new content.

Additional Skills and Items have been Implemented.

Most of the added equipment was to help out with day-to-day life, without much focus on combat. As expected, drills were included. There were a few other mechanical marvels thrown in too, like chainsaws for felling trees... Was that really all right with the setting? The patch notes explained it away as a huge technological boom from advances in culture, but...seriously?

Not that it mattered. Drills were added, and I could now pick up drill skills. *I'll pick it up later. At least I'll be able to use it on this island...and it might not be so bad in battle either. Once I escape, I'll ask Romina to craft one for me.*

I took my time skimming through the notes before finally getting to my reward. Just like last time, a box popped up with the text “Would you like to receive your reward?” and I naturally pressed “Yes.”

A familiar slot machine popped up, though the drawings on this one were very slightly different. *Ah! There's a fishing rod on the wheels this time. Hit! Hit! Please hit! Make me proud!*

“Ahh...”

Just as the three slots seemed to be slowing to a sluggish stop on the three fishing rods, like some work of divine intervention—the sort that makes one shout “rigged” at a pachinko machine—the wheels dropped down just one more position and landed on a line of three sword hilts.

No, you almost had it!

Before I could even react, my prize was displayed.

Energy Blade Attachment acquired

I had mixed feelings... It wasn't a bad payout, but I couldn't help but feel disappointed that I'd missed the jackpot. *An attachment, huh...? Something like an accessory, then.*

I seemed to have a strange connection to the item. Maybe owning the Energy

Blade was a prerequisite to rolling it? Anyway, I decided to see if it could be attached.

The new item took the form of a small, spherical gem, just large enough to stick into the top of the hilt—the area from which the blade protruded... I tried sticking it in, and it fit with a nice, satisfying click.

Energy Blade II acquired

Two...how much better is it than the first one? Unlike last time, I wasn't given a description, though surely it had to be better than it was before the upgrade.

I'll use it when I'm in a real pinch.

"Man...I wanted to take part in the second wave..."

Just what sort of enemies had appeared, and what was the boss like? I wasn't built for battle, so perhaps it would've been a bit reckless for me to take part. But the first one had been pretty fun and exciting, making it all the more frustrating that I'd been barred from this one.

All right, I'm definitely joining the Third Wave. Definitely. I mean, I'm getting Shouko to train me, and what better place to show my results?

Going off the pattern so far, the next Dimension Wave was sure to happen in a month.

"That's great, isn't it, Kizuna?"

"Pardon?"

Wasn't I just complaining about not getting to join in?

There seemed to be some deeper meaning to Shouko's words, so I waited for her to go on.

"Well, the fact that you are at the top of the livelihood ranking will ultimately report to the others that you are safe and sound. And if they look at my entries, they'll surmise that I'm here with you."

"I...see."

Sure enough, if a missing person like me was number one in livelihood, they'd know I was doing all right for myself. So long as there was no way of contacting the outside world from this island, that was the best we could do.

"Come to think of it, I've been curious about something. Is the woman named Kanade the big sister you mentioned before?"

"Yeah, that's right. Now that you mention it, I haven't seen her in a while..."

I'd kinda forgotten about her after Tsumugi joined the party. But, come to think of it, I didn't actually know what my sister was doing these days. I vaguely recalled her saying something about picking up combat skills in the early days of the game. However, I didn't remember seeing her name in any noteworthy spots during the previous Dimension Wave.

Growing curious, I searched up her name on the leaderboard...

Overall Rank 64: Kanade†Exceed

She was relatively high. It came as a bit of a surprise to me, seeing as I hadn't even seen her name during the previous wave. *So I would have been able to see big sis at work if I participated in this one, huh.* She was a gamer at heart, and considering her ranking, perhaps I could have seen her true potential on display.

Kanade was the type who got stronger as she meta-gamed, researching hard into the strongest possible equipment, skills, and strategy for her level. *I should praise her the next time I see her.*

"The real issue...is whether or not we'll have to keep up this lifestyle forever..."

I'd previously predicted we might be able to leave once the Dimension Wave passed, but that was clearly off the mark. Now, I could only pray we'd be released after the island's development reached a certain level. I was doing my best with the Pekkles, but there was no end in sight.

Even looking at the Pekkles-o-meter, nothing had... *Hm? There's a Pekkles waddling our way.*

This Pekkles was distinguished by a triangular cloth hat with a white pom-pom at the tip. *I've been wondering...why is it always Santa Hat delivering the reports?*

After he briskly made his way over, he reported, "New land discovered, pen."

"How convenient... It has to be because of the second wave, right?"

"Do you want to have a look?"

"Yeah, we should."

We headed for the new land displayed on the Pekkles-o-meter.

It was located near the island's center, where the path along a mountainside came to a sudden and abrupt stop. Whatever road was there before had collapsed, leaving a stretch of emptiness before the path returned farther down. It would have been a different story if I'd had a knack for rock climbing, but unfortunately, I did not possess such skills. And so, I'd put exploration on hold.

"A cliff?"

This apparent "new land" was inaccessible thanks to the cutoff. Yet I could see a handful of Pekkles at work on the other side of the void.

How did they get over there?

"Kizuna, have a look at that."

"Hmm?"

Following Shouko's outstretched index finger, I saw a Pekkles standing on a slightly higher ledge. Just as I was wondering what it was doing there, the Pekkles suddenly jumped toward the opposite cliff.

It's dead, I thought. No, wait, Pekkles don't die no matter how harsh their labor conditions are. But still...I'd appreciate it if you didn't needlessly increase your stress levels...

"Hmm?!"

The free-falling Pekkles used some sort of string to latch on to a point overhead and gracefully swing to the other side. I was dumbfounded as I

watched the next Pekkles do the same.

“Huh? That’s the intended route?”

“Kizuna. I remember you mentioning that there was a rope included in the Seven Tools of the Pioneer.”

“Oh, I see...”

But...we’re really doing this?

It was a common gimmick in action games, but honestly, I found it a bit of a stretch to swing like Tarzan with my levels of athleticism. It was a long, long way down; the strong river below meant I probably wouldn’t die, but it was still terrifying.

After I’d shown my reluctance for long enough, Shouko kindly offered, “Kizuna, if you don’t mind, I could borrow the Seven Tools and have a look for you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I have been doing this sort of thing since I was a small child. It is not an issue.”

Are you a ninja? No, our ninja is Yamikage... But rather than a traditional ninja, Yamikage’s a ninja spellcaster straight out of Japanimation. There’s no way she could pull off something this acrobatic.

Well, if Shouko says she can do it, I’ll leave it to her.

“Can I count on you?”

“Of course. Leave it to me.”

“Got it. Please go ahead. Feel free to take action however you see fit. Just please be sure to report to me later.”

“Understood.”

And then, like the Pekkles had done, Shouko dexterously used the rope to cross the uncrossable pit. She was so adept, I had to double check: *Are you seriously not a ninja?* I really couldn’t imagine the sort of person she was in real life.

She waved at me from the other side. I waved back, and then she was off exploring. I knew she'd be fine even if she met a monster. Soon enough, the good news came in.

"I found a pond with clear, clean water."

Shouko had found a pond—a new plot of land up for development. The moment I heard that, there was only one thing I could do.

"I'm your Tarzan, baby!"

When fishing was concerned, I tended to lose a bit of reason. I jumped straight into action. After Shouko returned the Seven Tools of the Pioneer, I used the rope and...

I hooked it just fine. That was all well and good. But then came the next issue—I hadn't jumped with enough forward momentum.

"Waaaaaaaaaah!"

The point being, I failed and fell. An indescribable feeling of weightlessness spread over me up until the point I made contact with the cold water of the river below the pit.

This current wasn't on the level of anything that could be overcome with swimming technique. The flow was so fast, it stole my consciousness away. And when I came to, I'd washed up near the mouth where the island's river met the ocean.

It was at times like these that I lamented my lack of player skill. Additionally, I'd taken 1000 points of damage. Energy-wise, it was far from killing me, but it had eaten up all of my Shield Energy.

"One more time!"

I challenged it around ten times, yet I never managed to make it to the cliff on the other side. Unfortunately, I'd never managed to raise the level of the rope. After all, I'd never found a use for it; how troublesome it was when it suddenly became the one thing I needed.

"Kizuna. Why don't I carry you to the other side?"

"You'd do that for me?!"

“You really do love fishing, don’t you. I can’t make any guarantees, but I will do the best I can.”

I handed the tools back to Shouko as we faced the cliffs one last time.

Shouko had said it too. Whether the two of us could cross together or not—well, it was still up in the air. But maybe, just maybe, Shouko would be able to do it.

“All right, I’m going to do it. Please hold on tight.”

“You got it!”

I wrapped my arms tightly around Shouko. Due to my small stature, I found myself clinging to her waist. The game’s system was so detailed that I could feel the texture of the kimono she wore, and I could make out her slender frame beneath it.

If I could have had my way, I would have preferred it if I was just a little bit bigger, big enough to give her a proper hug. But this wasn’t about that. In any case, it was a game, and while I didn’t know what it did with weight and whatnot, perhaps my being a loli character helped lighten the load.

Now onward.

“Here I come!”

Shouko leaped off the cliff...

Unlike me, she expertly hooked the rope and swung us toward the other side. With the snag as our pivot point, our rotational force sent us flying across.

We’re flying! Or so I thought. But suddenly, the rope let out a creaking, grating sound. Unable to withstand the weight, it made one very distinct snap, and we were launched in a different direction than initially intended. The sight closing in on us was no longer the opposite cliff, but a solid rock wall.

“Hah!”

Just as it looked like we were about to take damage for nothing, Shouko pulled out a fan mid-flight, thrusting it out at the wall while simultaneously pressing her foot against it to soften the impact.

While we didn't end up smashing straight into the wall, we still fell into the river. We washed up, just two pencils sticking upside down into the sand by the mouth of the river.

"Gwaaah!"

"I'm sorry."

"N-No... It's not your fault, Shouko. It just wasn't meant to be."

"That seems to be the case. I would imagine the rope's level is too low."

"Yeah, that's what I'm thinking too... Hey, Shouko, could you spend some time swinging back and forth Tarzan-style to grind it up?"

"Understood... I-I'll do my best."

Despite our little misadventure, the Pekkles continued their development plan. I couldn't see their progress firsthand, but I entrusted it to Shouko, who reported that work beyond the cliffs was progressing steadily.

Eventually, the rope reached Level 3, and just when it seemed like we might finally be able to cross...the dungeon exploration team discovered the "bridge" blueprint.

"The rope has completely lost its purpose."

"Hey, I'm sure we'll find a use for it somewhere."

I immediately assigned the Pekkles team to construct the bridge to the new plot. I wanted to fish in that pond as soon as possible—of course—and ultimately, rather than using the rope, it was faster for me to wait for the Pekkles to finish up.

"The bridge is done, pen."

The instant Santa Hat's report reached my ears, I took Shouko and crossed to the other side.

I'd only managed to see it from afar, but the forest grew thicker beyond the cliffs. The smell of rotting foliage and the muggy moistness of the air gave it the impression of a jungle. Meanwhile, the background track of ambient noises consisted of the endless chirping of bugs and birds, making it hard to feel at

ease.

The trees here hadn't been cleared yet. But it was only a matter of time. Hopefully, the completed bridge would decrease any time loss the Pekkles were facing coming over to this side.

From what I can see...the trees here are a different breed from the ones on the other lot. Come to think of it, I've got a few facilities I can't make because I haven't discovered the right materials. Was I missing the right type of wood?

Even if it could all be summed up as logging, surely different trees would yield different materials. Barring bad game design, the skills tied to the logging axe made it hard to imagine you would only ever get the same stuff no matter what trees you cut down.

"Over here, Kizuna."

Shouko—having already explored the area several times—showed me the way. She knew how badly I wanted to see the pond, and led me down a straight line with no detour. It wasn't long before it came into sight.

If it were any bigger, I would have called it a lake, but it wasn't that vast... It was very deep, however. I'd hardly fished in real life, so I couldn't even begin to guess what I could catch in there. *Koi, maybe?*

"Very good, my disciple. Starting today, we are going to fish here."

"Yes, I understand, my master."

I couldn't shake the feeling that I was lacking in far too many fields compared to my "disciple," but when it came to fishing, I was the master. In battle, Shouko was the master. I couldn't really act so high and mighty about it.

Honestly, I just saw it as a bit of role-play. *Maybe I should call her master next time she trains me.*

Anyway, fishing. I'd so far had to make do with nothing but the ocean, so my excitement was through the roof. I lent Shouko the Seven Tools of the Pioneer, while I pulled out my own trusty rod. This meant I had no bait and would have to rely on a lure. But if I kept at it long enough, surely I'd catch something.

I quickly swung my rod, casting the Lure of Light into the pond. Thanks to my

Fishing Mastery, my release was flawless—perfectly silent. It was like the lure was barely skimming the water’s surface as it entered with the faintest ripple. Now, I just had to reel it in right to hook a fish.

“Oh?”

Moments after the Lure of Light had begun to swim, a massive fish was on its tail.

At this rate, it was going to be a straight shot to its stomach, and hooking it would be difficult. I carefully maneuvered the Lure of Light, aiming to catch it on the lip just before the fish could devour it.

It was probably another giant—a legendary Lord on the level of the giant herring and squid. Too bad my luck brought it in on the first cast.

Then there was a *snap!*

“What?”

The moment after the massive fish was hooked, the line snapped. Just like that—with me only feeling a light tug...I was left with nothing but the rod and what was left of the thread dangling from it limply.

“Lure of Liiiiiggghhhht!”

My lament echoed across the pond, filled with far more emotion than was necessary.

†

“Is there anyone you want to see, pen?”

After losing the Lure of Light, I spent a good deal more time fishing by the pond. There wasn’t much else I could do after I’d given Shouko the Seven Tools of the Pioneer.

For the time being, the pioneering was progressing smoothly, and logging had begun around the pond. But that didn’t matter to me. Now, all I could think about was snuffing the life out of that fish—the one that stole my beloved Lure of Light from me. Why was I so fixated on it? Because whenever night fell, I could see the faint glow of my lure emanating from the pond’s depths.

It was infuriating, like it was taunting me. Like it was whispering, “You’re the loser” to me.

“Sheryl.”

“You decided on Sheryl with no hesitation,” said Shouko.

“Sheryl can swim. And more importantly, she can ba-boom fish with her harpoon skills!”

“I should have guessed... That’s your main concern.”

Ignoring Shouko’s tired eyes, I entered “SHERYL” into the window the Pekkles brought up. Just to make certain the spelling was right, I copied and pasted it from my friend list.

Regardless, Sheryl was the person I needed right now. I couldn’t think of anyone else. I needed her.

It had been a few days since the Dimension Wave passed by. By now, the players would have stocked up on the items and equipment that had been added by the update. Summoning her out of the blue wouldn’t be too much of an issue—well, not as much as it had been for me or Shouko. Forcing her to come here would still be a major inconvenience in and of itself.

“But anyway, everything will work out once we get Sheryl!”

The next day, I found her. I made my way to the beach, and there she was, face down in the sand. Without a word...I captured a screenshot.

“You definitely did that for me too, didn’t you...”

Oh, I can feel Shouko’s opinion of me dropping, I thought. Though it was questionable whether or not I’d ever done anything to get in her good books. Anyway, I took a few for Shouko, so I should take a few more for Sheryl too. Since we’re at it, I might as well take a few snaps of everyone who drifts here. For posterity, and all that.

With that in mind, I drew a little closer.

“Whoa!”

Just like Shouko, she reached out to grab my leg. Unfortunately for her, I managed to dodge it this time. She seemed to come to just as her hand swung through the empty air... Or maybe she was awake the whole time. She was always a quiet one, so I didn't see too much change.

"Kizuna...and Shouko."

"You got that right. The fate of my Lure of Light is in your hands."

"Kizuna, I understand how you feel, but you must explain first."

"Uh...huh."

"Hey, looks like she got it."

"No, that 'uh-huh' was most certainly an 'I don't get it' sort of 'uh-huh.'"

"Oh, was it?"

"Uh-huh."

I figured. I'd ask what's going on if I was in her situation.

In any case, now that I'd reunited with Sheryl, I explained everything just as I'd done with Shouko. The only difference was that I added what had happened since Shouko had arrived.

"Uh...huh," Sheryl replied.

"How were things on your end? Like, how was the second wave?"

"Uh-huh."

"I get that it turned out all right, but I don't know any of the details."

"Uh-huh."

I'd impulsively chosen Sheryl, but perhaps this was the worst possible option if I wanted to get information on the outside world. Then again, it wasn't like I particularly needed anyone else.

It wasn't like we were on a time crunch or anything; we just had to do whatever we could. Luckily, Sheryl had a semi-crafter build. She likely understood a few aspects of the pioneering work.

"For now, let me show you around. Like the pond, the pond, and...the pond, I

guess.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Kizuna, you’re being very transparent.”

I kept repeating “the pond” as I showed her around. This was, perhaps, the worst possible date route ever. But, once I stopped talking about the pond and showed her around Cal Mira in earnest, Sheryl reacted more positively than expected.

Perhaps I was just imagining it—I couldn’t actually tell. But I trusted in my ability to read her intentions. Sheryl was particularly interested in the logging and mining operations. It made sense, given that those yielded the materials most applicable to shipbuilding.

“Come to think of it, who has the ship right now?”

“Yami...and Al.”

“Al...Alto, huh? Why does Alto have it?”

“Made a new one.”

“New?”

“Mm... It’s popular now. Al had me make some. Big bucks.”

Umm...piecing it all together...

Yamikage was in possession of the ship we’d been using, and meanwhile, shipbuilding had become popular in the First City. Seeing the profit in it, Alto placed a big order with Sheryl and made a killing off of it.

That seems to be the gist of it... So Alto finally let the cat out of the bag, eh...

That meant the frontliners would also be aiming for the sea now. I didn’t know what was happening on their end, but the sea had become another focus for the game.

“Well, if you want to build a ship, go right ahead. There’s plenty of wood and ore to go around.”

“I won’t know until I see them.”

“I see. I’ll show you later, then. Worst case, you can go out and collect any materials you need.”

“Mmm...”

I went ahead and explained all of the buildings and Pekkles to her. Lately, many of the building types I’d obtained were only useful to Pekkles, but they were pretty interesting in their own way.

For instance, the hospital had a Nurse Pekkles and a Doctor Pekkles—denoted by their nurse cap and head mirror, of course. These Pekkles were brought back by the five-member party exploring the Pekkles Dungeon...the adventurer team that had gotten even more versatile lately.

Whether the new Pekkles actually increased effectiveness was debatable, but they were stationed in the hospital for now.

“And finally, the pond’s this way.”

“Fishing another Lord?”

“You bet.”

“I’ll go.”

“That’s my Sheryl. You’re quick on the uptake.”

“Mm...”

With a somewhat satisfied-looking Sheryl in tow, we headed for the pond.

Since a few days had passed, the logging had cleared some of the land, making the path a fair bit easier to walk. The once-overgrown road was replaced with packed dirt, while the slope was replaced with reinforced terraces to ensure it wouldn’t crumble away. It was, however, still unfinished, turning back into slope before we were halfway to the pond.

And there it was—the pond I detested so. On another note, most of the fish I caught there were freshwater fish like koi.

“All right, Sheryl. Go harpoon that massive fish you can see down there.”

“You’re not fishing for it?”

“My line snaps whenever I try it...”

“Understood.”

Sheryl’s harpoon was more ornate than the one she’d used before. Its shaft somewhat reminded me of the Isana no Tachi, but...perhaps it was just my imagination. *Oh, come to think of it, I did give her the massive squid’s materials a while back.*

“Ahab Spear. Romina.”

“Pardon?”

“The harpoon’s name. I thought I should thank you for the materials.”

“I see.”

So it’s a harpoon made from the squid boss I fished up...but what’s this about Ahab? Is it a made-up word, or does it mean something?

As for Romina... She probably meant that Romina made it.

“White whale,” Sheryl added.

“White whale?”

“From a novel.”

The name was vaguely familiar, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. Regardless, why were all the weapons crafted from fishing Lord materials geared toward fighting whales? Neither the herring nor the squid had anything to do with whales. Did the game’s creator have some sort of personal vendetta?

“It’s an ominous name,” said Sheryl.

“It is?”

“Ahab is not the winner in the book.”

“Hmm...”

But still, it seemed to be the strongest weapon in Sheryl’s possession.

Well, if I didn’t have Cerberus Slaughter, I’d probably still be using the Isana no Tachi. Its high specs are balanced out by how difficult it is to obtain.

In any case, having a powerful harpoon on our side meant that massive fish was going to be easy picking.

Unlike all my other fishing spots, the pond was small enough that you could catch glimpses of the Lord if you watched closely. Once I directed her to it, Sheryl gave a slight nod and readied her harpoon.

“Bomber Lancer.”

The skill had evidently ranked up since the last time I saw her using it. The color radiated by her glowing weapon was stronger. And as it shot forth, the explosive effect was much larger too.

The loosed harpoon sank deep into the pond...and yet.

“Didn’t reach.”

“Is it out of range...? Aight, Sheryl. Dive in and finish the job.”

“You’re sounding like a mob boss.”

Hey, we’re a small-scale operation here.

“At least call me yakuza... No, I mean, I’m perfectly normal.”

“Your eyes say otherwise, Kizuna,” Shouko chimed in from behind.

But despite all her complaints, Sheryl dived into the pond with her harpoon poised to attack. *Oh? She’s back already.*

“I hit it, but no response,” Sheryl explained as she lifted her drenched self out of the water.

Harpoons were supposed to be effective against aquatic monsters, and I’d been sure it’d do something—given how effective it had been against the giant squid. But it seemed it wouldn’t be that easy.

Meaning I have to fish it up the good old-fashioned way... I’ll do my best.

“A shame. Then how about we go and see the wood and ores?”

“Mm...”

And so, Sheryl joined the Cal Mira Castaway Crew, and the island became a little bit livelier. If I wanted to run into her, I’d have a good chance if I hit up the logging area, the mine, the sea, or the base.

Not that this was a dating sim or anything. There was no need to prioritize any

of those spots.

She was already a diver and a woman of the sea; she adapted to island life in no time at all. By the next day, it was as if she'd always been there.

Chapter 12: Mistake

“Is there anyone you want to see, pen?”

Despite it being less than a week since Sheryl washed ashore on Cal Mira, the Santa Hat Pekkles came to me with the usual line.

I couldn't think of anyone in particular at the moment. I considered Tsumugi, but it felt unnecessary. We hadn't run into any battles we couldn't win, so extra fighting strength wasn't going to do much for us.

For information, Alto was the safest bet.

Yamikage... Well, if I called her at the wrong time, I felt like it would lead to some major incident. If my suspicions were right, the island's difficulty would skyrocket.

By the way, I was only realizing this the third time around, but I didn't have to copy and paste from my friend list after all. So long as the person was registered in my friend list, I had the option of selecting them directly. *That simplifies things.*

That did mean I had to choose someone from my friend list, though.

I'll decide after talking with Shouko and Sheryl.

With that in mind, I walked off to find them. But right behind me...

“Peeeeen!”

“Whoa?!”

The Pekkles expedition team sprang up out of nowhere. Santa Hat had stopped me at the worst possible spot—right in front of the tiny hole that served as the entrance to the Pekkles Dungeon.

“Understood, pen. I pray that you meet them soon, pen,” Santa Hat said, acting as though I'd already made my decision.

“Huh...?”

And the Pekkles was off on his way. The name selection screen had disappeared, and it was like I'd already chosen someone to summon.

"Wait! Wait!"

"I pray that you meet them soon, pen."

"Don't repeat it!"

"Pekkles is not a monster, pen."

"Why are you bringing that up now?"

Ignoring my dazed stupor, Santa Hat heartlessly returned to his work.

Wh-Who did I call up?

They had to be on my friend list, so surely it couldn't be too much of a problem. I just prayed it wasn't Yamikage.

"Meh, it'll be fine."

That nonchalance was my first mistake.

The next morning, I headed to the beach with Shouko and Sheryl, feeling little to no urgency. Sure enough, we found the individual in question face down like the others.

By now, taking screenshots was my way of life. Even if I was dealing with someone who didn't forgive easily, I couldn't resist.

"Kizuna..." Shouko said forebodingly.

Meanwhile, Sheryl simply stared at me silently.

"Yeah, I know. You don't need to tell me..."

It was, in a sense, a form of escapism on my part.

After closing in and taking a photo, I dodged the hand that reached out at me and immediately got down on my hands and knees.

"Hmm... Where am I? And if it isn't Kizuna. Why are you kneeling?"



I'd registered her as a friend a long time ago—one of the few people outside of my party. Unfortunately, she was the person I'd drawn by complete accident.

Yes, it was none other than the crafter who made weapons on the front lines...Romina.

At least it wasn't L'Arc or Therese. Who knows what would have happened if I separated that lovey-dovey couple for too long.

"Hold on, weren't you... Weren't all of you supposed to be missing? Last I heard..."

"I'm so sorry! It wasn't intentional! Promise! These guys didn't do anything wrong!"

"Pekkle is not a monster, pen."

Why are you saying that now?

"Hmm...I'll consider your apology after I hear the situation. We can talk after that."

I gave a rough outline of what I'd been through and told about the mistake I'd made yesterday. Essentially, everything from the Limited Dimension Wave to the cultivation of Cal Mira Island.

"Fwa ha ha! This isn't the first time it's occurred to me, but you sure are an interesting one. So, you accidentally summoned me, huh? Pfft... Truly interesting. I'm not mad—I'm grateful, even."

"Umm..."

"Right. Let me explain my situation too. Truth be told, I've been taking a break from blacksmithing. I heard some bits and pieces from Yamikage."

"Like what?"

According to Romina, Yamikage had been traveling with Sheryl for some time. But Sheryl disappeared, and Yamikage apparently claimed it was the work of a ghost. Alto, for reasons unknown, decided to push Yamikage onto his business partner Romina; and Romina—being naturally good at looking after people—took her in.

Soon after, thanks to my mistake, Romina found herself washed up on Cal Mira.

“I’m truly sorry!”

“Hmm. It wasn’t on purpose, right? Then I won’t blame you for it.”

“No, but you can’t leave this place.”

“That’s not an issue. To be honest with you, I’ve gotten sick and tired of the whole weapon production business.”

She did say that... Is she looking for something new to do, then?

“Lately, more and more people have started mistaking me for an NPC. A number of times, I considered punching someone when they said, ‘Huh? Why isn’t my Trade Skill giving me a discount with this wench?’ After that, I figured it was time to take a break.”

Wow... That’s awful. Sure, there are NPCs everywhere, but none of them respond quite like Romina.

“My life with Yamikage was an extension of that. But this works out too. This island has those...Pekkles, was it? I’ll be making use of their facilities.”

“I-I can arrange for that.”

“Good. I’ll look for something that catches my interest. And don’t worry about what happened—just treat me normally.”

And so, Romina became part of the Cal Mira development team... *Err, I don’t know how to put it, but...I can see why she was a frontline craftsman.*

For starters, Romina immediately showed interest in the workshop. It was originally a facility where Pekkles made tools, but it was functional enough for humans to use as well. Since I promised to accommodate her, I prioritized upgrading the workshop over all else, and Romina began to make tools out of the materials obtained on Cal Mira Island.

Whenever materials ran short, she would go out to log or mine them herself and seemed to be having the time of her life.

“It’s inconvenient to have only the Seven Tools to rely on, right? I decided to

pick up tool making,” she said, obtaining Skills in various categories... By the time I realized it, the workshop became a place that could produce anything.

Apparently, she was fine with making things other than weapons.

I had her make a new fishing rod for me. Though I initially hesitated to ask her, she told me, “This island is the best. It feels like I’m playing a completely different game than everyone else. The materials are nice and plentiful. Next, I’m thinking of taking up armor crafting. What kind of equipment would you like, Kizuna?”

She was still as dedicated to crafting as ever. Perhaps she’d simply been longing for a place that let her make whatever she wanted.

No...well, I get that...

Though I initially felt guilty for dragging in someone completely unrelated, Romina’s sociable personality quickly made that guilt disappear. We were back on good terms in no time at all.

Perhaps it was because her crafting lifestyle was a bit similar to my fishing life. We could understand one another to a degree. She showed some interest in Sheryl’s shipbuilding too, and she would discuss weapons with Shouko. Romina was more of a leader than anyone else here.

“Kizuna, I’ve been curious about something. Why don’t you send some noncombatants on a Pekkles expedition?”

“Oh... Do you think that’ll change up the items they bring back?”

“It’s a possibility.”

“I’ll try it out!”

“All right. I’m not knowledgeable on the individual Pekkles, so I’ll be counting on you.”

She also had a keen interest in Cal Mira’s mechanics. In a sense, I’d summoned someone far better for the island than Yamikage, Alto, or Tsumugi.

She seemed to be enjoying herself, which was all well and good, but I couldn’t help but think—what would have happened if she’d been upset about it? That would have been a huge issue.

I'll be careful from now on, I thought. Still, it was nice to have another reliable ally around... I decided not to think too much about how I'd pulled such a valuable craftsman off the front lines.

Chapter 13: Impromptu Dungeon Diving

Heeding Romina's advice, I mixed a noncombat Pekkles into the Pekkles party and sent them on an expedition. For now, I threw in the Santa Hat Pekkles—he seemed like an all-rounder capable of most things.

"I'll be back, pen!" he said as he took the lead and disappeared with the rest of the group.

Come to think of it...their command proficiency increases in the dungeon too. Maybe it has to do with taking command in battle. Higher proficiency seems to make it so they accurately sense my intent and act accordingly.

After that, I went about my usual routine: fishing.

Shouko went off to hunt, while Romina crafted away in the workshop. Sheryl was also in the workshop building a ship. We were looking to come out with an even better one, now that she was cooperating with Romina.

However, according to Sheryl, it still seemed difficult to leave the island. That meant the ship would be mainly for large-scale fishing to keep up with the fish requirements of a growing Pekkles population.

Are we going to start using nets? I wondered.

And as I sat around killing time, the Pekkles returned.

"Pen!"

"Reporting in, pen!"

I checked through the goods they'd brought back.

The combat Pekkles had become seasoned veterans in their craft, and they had come back with multiple blueprints under their wings. *Oh? Looks like we've got more variations in the houses the Pekkles can make. They even found a few new Pekkles.*

Now, fountains and fences were on the table, as well as a barn for the livestock.

“Nice.”

The ranch had previously just been surrounded by random objects placed to serve the role as fences. Perhaps they’d finally begin to look the part.

As it turned out, Romina was right. The types of items brought back seemed to depend on the Pekkles sent. The loot from dungeon exploration had been getting repetitive lately, and this was sure to spice it up. With that being the case, I put together a rotation and continued to send out Pekkles teams. As a result...

“We discovered a new dungeon, pen. Come with me, pen.”

“You did?”

I gathered up the others and followed behind the Pekkles. And there, right beside the hole that the expedition Pekkles regularly entered, a large door had formed.

“Everyone can go in now, pen. Let’s work together to clear it and continue pioneering, pen.”

“Does that mean we can now challenge the dungeon as well?”

“Probably. That’s what it sounds like.”

“Uh-huh.”

Truth be told... With the Pekkles multiplying and raising their proficiency, there was noticeably less for us to do. That was what allowed Romina and Sheryl to focus on crafting.

In the first place, this island was meant to facilitate a certain number of people, and some, like Shouko, were sure to be more combat-oriented. Seeing as there was something preventing us from leaving, it only made sense that there would be a facility to entertain such people.

A window popped up as I tried to enter.

Instance Dungeon: Cal Mira Island.

“I didn’t think they would have an instance dungeon here,” Romina said with a sigh.

“What sort of dungeon was that again?” Shouko asked her.

“To put it simply, it’s a dungeon where you don’t compete with other people.”

“Uh-huh...”

“Once you decide on who you’re going in with, you’re stuck with that same lineup until you leave. A new *instance* of the dungeon is created for every party, so you don’t meet anyone else in there. It’s a pretty common setup as far as online games are concerned.”

“I-I see.”

“We’re the only ones on this island. Is there any point in preventing competition?” I asked.

Was there any reason for an instance dungeon to exist when we were stranded alone here...? Was this island eventually going to be attracting far more people? Well, even if this was a VR game, it was unfair to have features accessible to only a select few. It was likely that something would happen later.

“Still, a dungeon, huh...”

Romina crossed her arms and looked at us. *Yeah, I get it. I know what you want to say.*

“Apart from Shouko, the rest of us aren’t really fighters, per se. Want to give it a try?”

Yeah... She has a point.

I was in charge of fishing and dismantling, Sheryl was into swimming and shipbuilding, and Romina was a versatile everything-smith. Shouko was the only one here who was skilled in combat. If I had to pick someone else, Sheryl probably had the most potential in battle.

I didn’t know much about Romina on that front. But it certainly wouldn’t be easy with her build.

“Are you any good at fighting, Romina?”

“Unfortunately, I’ve focused on crafting and nothing else. I wouldn’t call it my

strong suit. I've only leveled up a bit thanks to my friends and Yamikage."

Well, it was a given. Given her crafting specialization, and all.

"I can only fight a little bit myself... It's a bit rough that we don't know what to expect from this dungeon."

"An unknown dungeon... Doesn't that sound a little exciting? Why don't we give it a go, everyone?"

"Uh-huh."

Shouko was one thing, but Sheryl seemed motivated as well. It didn't seem like a terrible move from my perspective, but this was an area that was supposed to be accessed a little further into the game.

"Will we be okay with this party comp?"

"Sorry. I'm a bit busy, so I'll have to sit this one out."

Romina declined.

She was probably the busiest among us, and there wasn't a real need to bring her along. It was best to let everyone focus on what they were good at.

"Got it. Then the rest of us will take it on. There's a lot we could be doing, but it's gotten a little stale."

And so, we formed a party and ventured into the dungeon.

†

The dungeon was a cave—somewhat dim, but not so bad that we couldn't see. It was a pretty damp place, overall, and I felt every last drop of it. I had to give my props to this cutting-edge application of VR technology.

"Huh? Kizuna, how long have you been holding that lantern?"

"Huh? You're right! When did I get this?!"

As the leader of the party, I was holding a lantern before I'd even realized it.

Tool: Lamp of Return (Pioneering)

Description: A tool exclusive to the pioneering dungeon;

a lamp to ensure you don't lose your way. Extinguishing its flame will allow you to exit the dungeon.

"Looks like it's an escape item. We can leave by snuffing out the flame."

"That is quite the convenient tool."

"Softlock stopper."

Shouko took the lead, with Sheryl at the center and me at the rear.

"I'm interested to see what monsters will pop out."

"Yeah, same. They might be stronger than the ones at sea."

And so we chatted and walked until we came across a flock of enemies named Citrus Jellies.

"Here I come."

Is it just me, or has it been ages since I've been in actual combat? I thought, a wave of emotion rolling over me. And then...

Wah?! A Citrus Jelly just shot at me...! Hmm? It splattered straight into me, but I don't feel a thing. It doesn't hurt or itch... Maybe my stats are too high for it to do anything?

Within minutes, we'd wiped out the whole flock.

"Are you going to dismantle them?"

"I'll try... But is there a point to dissecting jellies?"

I lifted up one of the gelatinous bodies littering the area. It had the texture of a jellyfish... *Well, I might as well try my Iron Poultry Knife. Even though it's meant for birds.*

Hmm... It's really transparent, but it looks like they have internal organs.

This was my first time dissecting a jelly, or rather, a slime-like creature. But everything was an experience.

The result: Jelly Meat, Jelly Organs, and Jelly Core. I managed to break it down into three bonus items. Some of them had rocks and other scrap drops lodged

in their organs. I sometimes came across moss as well.

Perhaps I'd eventually find something useful if I kept diligently dismantling them.

The cores sure are pretty. I'll have to ask Romina if they can be used for anything later. If this was an alchemy game, I'd imagine you could make a living item out of them.

"So that's what it's like to cut up jelly, huh."

It was quite difficult, and I messed up quite often. Still, this was a skill I'd probably find a use for later.

We kept pressing forward, encountering more Citrus Jellies and a new monster too—Slate Green Bats. Thanks to Shouko and Sheryl, we were making decent progress.

Here and there, we'd come across spots in the walls that looked like they could be drilled through.

"How deep does it go?"

"I couldn't tell you..."

"Ah, I can see some stairs."

"Let's go down."

We found ourselves descending a flight of stairs. *Maybe it's narrow but deep?* I thought as we went down the first one. By the seventh floor, however...we were beginning to struggle against the enemies.

Shouko raised a fan and unleashed a skill.

"Wild Dance First Formation: Rapid Strike."

Her preemptive strike hit a flock of Citrus Jellies straight on, but they didn't even flinch.

"They seem quite sturdy!" she shouted out while parrying the flurry of fierce blows that came in response.

"Bomber Lancer."

Undaunted, Sheryl stabbed at them with her exploding harpoon.

I can't fall behind, I thought while crying out "Cleaver!"

We each unleashed our moves and somehow managed to fend off our foe. With a series of coordinated attacks, we continued to fight our way through... Once we made it to the tenth floor, those same Citrus Jelly monsters began charging at us.

Oww! That's some mean attack power! They're slow, but they hurt way more than the ones on the first floor.

A few minutes later, after we'd defeated these Citrus Jellies, we exchanged a rather exhausted look.

"They look the same, but they are certainly tougher. It's nice to have a challenge," Shouko said, satisfied.

"I guess so. They're giving good Energy, but they're a bit much for me."

The Citrus Jellies on the tenth floor were sluggish—at least, their basic movement speed was. Lucky me... Unfortunately, they had an annoying habit of catapulting themselves forward when attacking. Their speed during these brief moments was too fast for me to react in time.

If I watched their movements closely, I could predict and dodge to some degree, but there were still times when I had no choice but to endure the attacks. Shouko seemed to be making some Energy gains, but I was slowly but surely losing my reserves.

I haven't been in any actual battles lately. I guess practice is different from the real thing.

"It's lucrative."

Sheryl, too, was earning decent EXP.

"This might be the furthest point anyone has advanced in this game," said Shouko.

"Yeah, you think so too?"

"I do. The proficiency we're gaining beyond simple Energy is substantial."

If Shouko says so, it must be true. Proficiency was an entry that only showed up for us after we'd raised our skills past a certain point. It was impossible to unlock more advanced skills without accumulating a certain amount of it.

"We've run into a few random treasure chests scattered about, haven't we?"

"Yeah."

They'd usually contain more blueprints. Mostly for buildings, but there were designs for Pekkles-exclusive accessories too. Apart from that, we'd occasionally get materials and ores that could only be used to develop the island.

In most MMOs, treasure chests didn't behave as they did in traditional RPGs. Some games had monsters that mimicked treasure chests and could drop items on defeat. And other games—like *Dimension Wave*—restricted their chests to instance dungeons like this.

"I'm scared we might start running into traps if we go any deeper."

"We managed to make it straight to the tenth floor, but...this might still be the beginning."

"Dunno. It's hard to know when it ends without clearing it... I highly doubt they're going to throw in endgame content this early in the game, though."

Endgame content typically consisted of endless challenges and quests designed to keep players engaged long after they'd beaten the game. It was doubtful that *Dimension Wave* would need those complexities just yet. Especially given its limited playtime...

But I wouldn't be surprised if they introduced something here to give players a place to train up until the Third Wave hit.

With this and that, we managed to make it to the fifteenth floor. We stumbled upon a treasure chest in what looked like a rest area. And inside...

"Peeeen!"

Yet another Pekkles. This one came equipped with glasses, giving it a somewhat intellectual vibe. I gave it some quick instructions and moved on.

"Hey..." Sheryl called out to us, a somewhat troubled look on her face.

“Hmm?”

“It’s hard already.”

“So you’re saying you don’t think we can go any farther?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I can still fight...”

“Honestly, I’m struggling too...”

I’d managed to save up quite a bit of Energy since I’d arrived on the island, but my losses were leaving me ragged. As for Sheryl, it looked like her supply of healing items was running dangerously low.

“In that case, it might be best to leave before we proceed too far and find ourselves in a real predicament.”

“I’ll bring more healing next time.”

“Hmm... Apart from Shouko, we’re not made for combat...”

I was supposed to be a laid-back fisherman, while Sheryl was a diver and shipbuilder. Shouko was our fighter. But that didn’t mean dragging Romina along would change much.

We managed to hold our own up to floor ten.

Beyond that, we were going to need either a better team composition or someone with a better sense for battle. And it wasn’t like Shouko was built for long, drawn-out fights either. Spirits like us were more suited for quick skirmishes.

Perhaps we’d get a little farther if we stocked up on healing items. But that would only increase the burden on Shouko, and things would get hairy if we ran into a boss or some other species of monster.

Hmm... There are hardly any monsters outside this cave. It’s hard to imagine that they’re going to force us into combat too often on the island. Then again...if it’s beyond our hands, I could always summon someone... It depends on the situation, but I doubt this game will include scenarios that can lead to a complete dead end.

The Karma Pengu was weak enough for Shouko to win on her own. It was probably a foe that could have been overwhelmed with numbers. But this dungeon? Shouko alone wouldn't be enough to handle it.

In all likelihood, this was bonus content unrelated to the island's development. With enough time, the Pekkles would clear it with or without our input. Perhaps sending players in would simply speed up the progress, or maybe it was just meant to be a good place to grind out experience points.

"Whatever it is, we ought to head back for now. What we've learned about the dungeon is enough. We'll need to seriously prepare if we want to clear it."

"Understood. Let's discuss it with Romina first."

We put out the lantern light and exited the dungeon.

†

"I see... If we can upgrade our gear with the materials on this island, we might be able to make some good headway," Romina suggested once I brought the matter of dungeon progression to her.

This wasn't a hack and slash, but leveling up and upgrading equipment was the bread and butter of an RPG. Though in Shouko's and my case, it was Energy and not Level that we needed to increase.

That said, Romina assured us that—with the materials available—she could quite easily make gear that surpassed what was being used on the front line. *This must be the new baseline for the game going forward...*

"Crafting something revolutionary's going to be tough, though... Also, can you tell me how long you've been in that dungeon?"

"Huh?"

"We were in there for quite a while," Shouko spoke up. "It has been around three hours."

"Hmm... Well, as a matter of fact, it's been a whole day since you went in there," Romina gave a troubled reply.

"What?!"

No, no, that can't be right. The timeline isn't adding up.

"I'm guessing your perception of time is altered while exploring. No matter how long you spend, it'll treat it like you've been out for one day."

Come to think of it, Dimension Wave was a game that used cutting-edge technology to make one day feel like several years. There was a standardization calibration performed right before the game kicked off in earnest, and if a player was desynced from the standard system clock, then perhaps it was possible to alter their time perception.

In short, the flow of time could be altered for individuals or locations. The game's sleeping facilities, for instance, did make you feel drowsy at an alarming rate. That was probably an application of the system too. If that was the case, altering time on that scale wouldn't be too difficult.

"Despite everything, the island's development is going smoothly," said Romina. "If you want to delve deeper into the dungeon, however, we'll need to craft recovery items and bolster your equipment... I don't think it's a place that you can brute force," said Romina.

"This might just be the furthest point of the latest update," I replied.

Romina nodded. "Yeah, I didn't want to say it, but instance dungeon challenges are oftentimes endgame content. There's a high chance that's what we're up against."

Yeah, I was thinking the same thing.

Hmm... That said, since when was it our goal to tackle the hardest content in the game? Up until I washed up here, we were being tossed around at sea...

It felt like my stranding had become a distant memory.

"We could just have the Pekkles keep it up while we focus on something else."

Honestly, I didn't belong to a race built to take on endgame content. I was just going to grow weaker every time I threw myself at the dungeon, and I was more into the laid-back parts of the game. I didn't want to forget my original goal of living a life of fishing.

“Don’t be so pessimistic...”

“Finishing up the development’s my goal here. I’m just saying it’s an option...”

After all, I just wanted to see new land and fish; it wasn’t like I wanted to become a powerhouse on the battlefield. I’d never been any good at physical activities. Sure, I wanted to be able to keep up with my party, but we’d decided to leave the big battles to the folks who were more focused on clearing the game.

“To be honest, it’ll be hard to overcome this one when Shouko’s our only combat-focused member.”

“Uh-huh.”

There was a clear gap between combat and crafting. Hybrid players such as myself couldn’t hope to beat those specialized in combat.

Just as we were having that conversation, the Santa Hat Pekkles picked the perfect opportunity to show up.

“Is there anyone you want to see, pen?”

“Nice timing,” I said.

“It’s almost like he was aiming for it,” added Shouko.

She gave a bit of a wry smile as she stared down the Santa Hat.

Now then, who to call? Our most pressing issue at the moment is the dungeon. Meaning we need a fighter who can get back up quickly even if they’re defeated.

As for strong and reliable combatants I knew... Kanade, Tsumugi...and maybe Yamikage, L’Arc, and Therese. There were a few others, but when it came to trustworthiness, it would have to be Kanade, Tsumugi, or Yamikage.

Come to think of it, I haven’t been talking to Kanade at all lately. She’s good at these sorts of things. I mean, she’s got a track record of breezing through roguelikes where floor ninety-nine or nine hundred ninety-nine are the end goals.

In this case, with a reliable return item, I could see her tackling it steadily.

However, I had no idea what she'd say if I summoned her out of nowhere.

That left Tsumugi and Yamikage... Unfortunately, Yamikage was a Spirit. If something happened and she was defeated, she'd suffer massive permanent losses. If possible, I wanted someone who could get back up and charge back in the next day.

I trusted that Shouko would never make a slipup big enough to cost her Energy, but Yamikage... I recalled how she'd fallen into the ocean and how scared she'd been on the ghost ship. How was I supposed to look her in the eye if she died because of me?

In that regard, it was better to go with Tsumugi, who would essentially go along with anything as long as she found it fun. She did tend to get bored easily, but she'd still managed to reach floor 999 in roguelikes just like Kanade, and I could see her enjoying some dungeon exploration.

"All right, let's call Tsumugi."

"Are you sure about that?" asked Shouko.

"Yeah, she's got a short attention span, but she does like a good challenge. Of all the people I know, she's our best bet. Also, she wouldn't get too upset about being called out of nowhere."

"She's your sister, after all."

"Sister Tsumugi."

"Uh-huh... Wait, our lines got mixed up, Sheryl."

And as that conversation went on, I selected Tsumugi from my friend list.

"Understood, pen. I pray that you meet them soon, pen."

Again with the same line, Santa Hat turned and returned to work. *I guess we're seeing Tsumugi tomorrow. It's going to get lively around here.*

"What about Yamikage?"

"I'll call her up next time. She's not really suited for clearing dungeons."

Yes, she just wasn't a good fit for our current predicament. *I'll just have to summon her the next time I get a chance.*

“I’m starting to feel sleepy from dungeon diving... Let’s get some rest.”

“Agreed. We’ll think things over after we meet with Tsumugi.”

In the end, we ended things early, each of us going off to do the pioneering tasks we were most passionate about. Me? Fishing. Why would you even ask? Night fishing wasn’t half bad either.

I need to get my Lure of Light back fast... With my current equipment, that Lord snaps the line the moment he gets hooked. I need to raise my proficiency and my technique.

†

“Something has washed ashore, pen.”

I was awoken by a Pekkle early the next morning.

“It’s that time again!”

“I’m not sure if you should be sounding so eager.”

We all headed to the beach, and sure enough, Tsumugi was lying prone on the sand.

“This isn’t the first time it’s occurred to me, but can we do anything about this?”

“Maybe the devs failed to calibrate it right?”

“It’s surreal, really. But interesting too. If we can predict exactly where the next person’s gonna wash up, we might be able to have a good gag waiting for them.”

“I like the sound of that.”

“It’s not good to treat people like they’re toys.”

As was standard practice, I snapped a screenshot. After all, for some reason, it seemed that the victims were unable to react until someone got close.

And once I’d finished my photo shoot, I dodged the usual hand that tried to grab me. This time, the hand was just as fast as Shouko’s. *Yep, that has to be Tsumugi! If I wasn’t so used to it by now, I wouldn’t have a chance at dodging that.*

“Mmm...urgh... Wh-Where am...? Huh? Kizzy?”

“What do you think you’re calling your brother?”

“Huh? You didn’t seem to mind when Yammy did it.”

“That’s something else entirely. I’m not about to let my own sister use that name.”

“Well, forget about that. What are you doing here?!”

Tsumugi shot up and took in her surroundings.

“Oh, Shouko, Sheryl, and even Romina!”

“It’s been a while.”

“I hadn’t seen you around lately—but I never thought you’d be hanging with my bro. There’s a rumor going around that you were so frustrated with being treated like an NPC that you stormed off somewhere.”

Then, Tsumugi returned her eyes to me.

“So you’ve been here the whole time?”

“Yeah, to be honest...”

I gave Tsumugi the brief rundown of everything that had happened to me. A sparkle seemed to grow in her eyes as I spoke, and before long, an excited smile spread across her lips.

“I knew it, it’s always funnest around you! So, point being, you want me to clear that dungeon, right?!”

“I’m glad you’re motivated. Please challenge the place with Shouko. We’re counting on you.”

“Aight! Leave it to me!”

“Oh, and sorry for calling you out of the blue. Were you in the middle of something?”

“Hmm... After we parted ways, I was helping Shouko with this and that, but she went missing too, and then Sheryl joined her, right? I was hunting with Yammy, wondering what sort of interesting things you’ve been getting up to.”

“Hmm... It’s good to hear that Yamikage is managing just fine,” said Romina. “I took her in at my workshop at Alto’s behest, and I was a little worried about her.”

Oh... Yamikage seems to be doing all right for herself. She did achieve solid results during the second wave.

Knowing her, perhaps she was putting the experience she gained with us to good use and fighting on the front lines. She was tougher than she looked and surprisingly resourceful. After all, she’d managed to make it solo before joining our party.

And so, our island life continued with Tsumugi along for the ride.

When it came to the dungeon, having Tsumugi around certainly made things a lot easier. She was born with an excellent sense for combat and could easily dispatch enemies with Shouko by her side. Once Shouko upgraded her equipment, the enemies that had once given us a run for our money became nothing more than fodder.

It was amazing how much of a difference a little gear could make. One could never underestimate those little tweaks in a video game.

“Man, I love a good challenge! Out there, it was like a waiting game until the next wave; at least, that’s what they were saying,” Tsumugi said as she sliced down a Slate Green Bat.

“Is that so?”

“Yeah. They still haven’t found a new city yet, and everyone’s just waiting around for some unimplemented regions to open themselves up. It’s a real grind to get stronger in places that don’t pose much of a challenge.”

“Hmm... What about the sea?”

“Only a few people headed out. The rest say that it’s too much of a pain to fight there. But it looks like some people caught wind of Yammy and me making it big on the waves, and they’re trying to copy us.”

Hmm, it seems like more players are starting to show interest. Has the info Alto leaked not reached Tsumugi yet?

Regardless, those on the front lines couldn't afford to take that sort of risk. If the sea map turned out to be a huge detour from the main plot, then attempting it risked having them fall far behind the other top players. It would be safer to level up on land for now.

Still, I'd really like to finish up the pioneering and get back...

Just as I was thinking that...

"What's this?"

An item called Some Sort of Doohickey dropped from one of the Jellies we defeated. I didn't even have to dismantle the Jelly to get it.

"Is it junk?"

"There's something kinda off about it."

And as we continued on, the small fries past floor fifteen occasionally started dropping them too.

Maybe there's a use for it? Maybe you need to gather a certain amount for something good to happen? I thought as Shouko and Tsumugi cut the way forward to the twentieth floor.

"This is...a safe area, perhaps?"

"I'd imagine so."

Floor twenty was rather spacious, resembling a large, hollow chamber. There was something at the far end. There were the stairs that led farther down, and...a mysterious door with a switch in front of it.

And just before the switch was a treasure chest.

"Is this the reward for getting this far?" asked Tsumugi. Her eyes lit up as she rushed forward and threw the chest open.

And there she found...more of Some Sort of Doohickey.

Umm...there's something else there too.

The item was called a Machinery Kit. We had obtained a Machinery Kit and Some Sort of Doohickey.

“Could these be new crafting tools and materials?”

“Probably.”

“There’s blacksmithing, needlework, and shipbuilding, so it might be possible...”

To think we’d end up locating machinery here. Wasn’t the game supposed to be in the fantasy genre? Sure, they could be relics of a lost civilization or a result of scientific advancement, like techno swords and gunblades.

“Drills were added recently, but from what I recall, they were hard to obtain. Maybe this is what you need to make them?”

Oh right, they became available out there too. Meaning this might be the tool you need to make drills and other technological equipment.

I hadn’t considered new factors being added for the crafting players too. The game seemed set up to keep players from growing bored for as long as possible.

Granted, unlike a normal game, it was impossible to quit just because you got bored of it. That was one of its main flaws. If crafting options became too limited, that gave an opportunity for bitter rivalries to form. It was better to have crafters take diverging routes.

“If anyone can do something with them, it’d probably be Romina.”

“Mm.”

For some reason, Sheryl raised her hand.

“What’s wrong?”

“Machinery.”

“You want to learn it?”

Sheryl was a shipwright. It made sense, since operating ships did involve some machinery. Even in modern times, ships still had compasses and mounted ballistae. Perhaps machinery was related to shipbuilding after all.

“Got it. It’s all yours.”

“Mm.”

“Still, you should consult with Romina. They might be used for more than just drills. We could be standing right before a whole new line of weapons.”

“Yes, we might find a good use for them.”

Images of Shouko swinging around a buzzsaw-embedded fan and Tsumugi swinging a chainsaw-tipped scythe crossed my mind... They looked very strong. Though they gave off a bit of an out-of-place steampunk vibe.

“Are you thinking of something ominous?”

“Well, these might be essential for our weapons going forward.”

“If possible, I’d prefer to fight with a traditional fan or a folding fan.”

Let’s just pray that someone who appreciates that stuff joins the pioneering team one of these days. Well, in most cases, that would be a branching job path...like the branching weapon trees that were already in the game.

“What’s the difference between the two fans?”

“They are treated as the same weapon type. But the size and shape are just a little different.”

In most games, the weapons and skill systems a player had used up to the point of unlocking new ones remained strong—and in many cases, were actually simpler and more convenient to use.

“I hope we get some strong weapons out of this.”

“That leaves the door...”

Once we were done with the treasure chest, we turned our attention to the door.

I tried pushing it open, but to no avail. The switch in front of it didn’t seem to trigger anything either.

“Maybe we haven’t met the conditions?”

“Here.”

Sheryl spotted an electrical panel below the switch.

It seemed broken, and if we were talking in game terms, probably needed

repair.

“Oh, so machinery skills are mandatory here, huh?”

They’d laid out a blatantly obvious hint. It seemed like the game was pushing us to learn the skill.

“On it.”

Sheryl used the tool we’d handed her and attempted the fix.

Hmm... From what I can tell, they’ve really simplified the process. She’s just tightening screws and doing a bit of soldering work. The kit also seems to include a wrench and spanner that she isn’t using.

“Failure...”

What was that? Sheryl said something, but I didn’t quite pick it up.

“It didn’t work out?”

“Uh-huh.”

Well, I guess it makes sense that you can’t use a tool right after you obtain it. She probably lacks proficiency or skill level.

“For now, let’s count on Sheryl to raise her skill level and move on.”

“What do you think lies beyond here?”

“Who knows?”

We pressed on until the twenty-fifth floor, where a fierce onslaught of monsters had us running low on supplies and forced us to ultimately retreat. Still, just having Tsumugi with us had allowed us to make it twice as far as before. That was quite the achievement.

Energy-wise, I was also gaining big time.

“It’s a bit harsh down there, bro. The EXP is good, so I’d recommend focusing on leveling and upgrading our equipment. Also, protecting you guys is harder than it looks.”

“Would you have an easier time fighting solo?”

“To be honest, yeah. When we entered, I saw a solo option on the menu, so

I'd like to give it a shot."

"Got it."

Shouko was able to fight while hardly losing anything, so she was fine, but...for me, every hit I took from the enemy was pretty painful.

Still, a solo option, huh... I know some instance dungeons inflate enemy stats the more players there are. And sometimes, they weaken the enemies for solo players. Of course, solo play has its own inconveniences compared to party play.

"You don't need to fight to get stronger, right, bro?" said Tsumugi.

But Shouko chimed in, "You can't raise proficiency if you don't fight."

"Considering efficiency, it might be better to take them in once we've gotten a little stronger ourselves, Shouko," Tsumugi replied.

"You do have a point..."

"The monsters' movements seem to have their own quirks; we could put some time into studying them. Going off my instinct, we'll have an easier time if we're up around five to seven Levels."

In Spirit terms, exactly how much Energy would that be?

"There's one more thing I noticed. The Lamp of Return was losing a bit of fuel for every staircase we went down beyond floor twenty. Once it runs out, I'm assuming we'll be kicked out."

"I didn't notice that..."

Is that a system to ensure we don't go down and clear it all in one fell swoop? It still seems possible to set up camp on a specified floor and keep defeating monsters there. We'll need to look into this.

"In any case, you can just fish and wait for us, okay? In exchange, we'll be counting on you to secure a steady supply of healing items."

"Roger. I'll work on farming in my free time."

And so, Shouko and Tsumugi both entered their respective instances of the dungeon. As for the results: the layout was mostly the same, and the variety of enemies up to floor twenty was identical. Also, they found it a little easier to

fight. However, the rank of the items dropped was a little lower.

In the dungeon we found Miraka ore, a material that seemed unique to the island. While in parties, we'd receive high-rank Miraka Crystal drops, but in solo dungeons, they'd only get Miraka Ore. Apart from that, they were still able to find Pekkles and Doohickeys.

Shouko and Tsumugi continued exploring the dungeon, and depending on the situation, we'd occasionally dive in as a party. All the while, I busied myself with fishing and procuring healing items. I was also hoping that Sheryl would raise her skill level.

Conquering the dungeon was proving to be surprisingly tedious, so I spent my days waiting for Santa Hat to come to me, yet he never came. *What exactly are the conditions?*

A large number of Doohickeys were delivered to Sheryl, who fiddled with them day in and day out. She would take all sorts of items from the workshop and the various storehouses on the island... I was quite surprised the first time I saw an electric light bulb dangling from a wire in my room. Sheryl went from house to house installing bulbs and connecting them to the grid.

Her work made the island a little brighter... Well, not really. There had always been light—albeit system-generated light. Still, her technical skills seemed to be improving.

"Sheryl's come out with materials for new weapons. Have a look."

What Romina and Sheryl showed off appeared to be something new crafted with the Machinery skill: Prototype Motor. Processing it with other materials could apparently create simple machines.

"It looks like I can make something simple like a drill with this. I just need to sharpen the tip, smack a motor on the base, and that'll do it," Romina said as she threw together a Prototype Iron Drill.

It seemed to have a higher output than the drill from the Seven Tools of the Pioneer. When I gripped the handle and squeezed the trigger, the powerful whir was much stronger than the sound I'd grown accustomed to.

"Drill!"

“Drill!”

Tsumugi joined me in chorus.

“You’re definitely related...”

Shouko, why is that what you’re going off of? What about me resembles this carefree, thrill-seeking sister of mine?

“If we use it right, we might be able to build something like a motorcycle.”

“Uh-huh. But it’s still a prototype.”

It looked like it could function decently enough, but it was still experimental.

“Steampunk!”

“That’s true romance right there.”

The two of them exchanged a conversation only they could understand. No, I got it too. I had my own hopes and dreams for what they could come up with.

“We can’t make anything beyond prototypes right now, but do you have any requests?”

“Then could you modify my fishing reel into an electric one?”

“Well, sure...”

“Everything comes back to fishing, I see.”

Why does Shouko look so exasperated?

“Well, I don’t know what else I expected,” Romina laughed. “I’ll give it a shot. If we can wind the line up like a drill, we might just pull it off.”

I entrusted the creation of an electric reel to Romina and Sheryl.

The result was a Prototype Motorized Reel. It wasn’t as good as a full-fledged electric reel, but it was able to wind the line at high speeds.

While they worked on it, we ventured into the dungeon and used the Prototype Iron Drill to dig. As a result, we came up with a large haul of ores, and when we turned them in, Romina made a special dismantling weapon for me: Miraka Bread Knife.

A bread knife? Its serrated edge let off a dull glimmer.

“You were complaining about how difficult it was to carve up Jellies, right? I designed something to help you cut up soft material. What do you think?”

Oh, I see... Bread is definitely soft. And what’s even the right tool to take apart slimes? Maybe the devs made it a bread knife because they didn’t know the answer either. There was also a chance that Romina lacked the skills or know-how to make something more suited for cutting up slimes.

“The Jelly Cores you’re bringing back can be used for fuel and alchemy. They’re pretty versatile,” Romina said as she enthusiastically fiddled with the materials.

She made armor from the Miraka Ore too, changing out what Shouko and the others had been wearing. *Is iron already behind the times?* I wondered. We still seemed a long way off from getting something like mythril.

Some time later, Sheryl managed to repair the panel below the switch on floor twenty.

“Done,” she said, raising a thumb with an accomplished smile.

“Looks like she did it.”

“Just barely. I’m far from a master.”

“I see.”

“So what lies beyond here?”

Tsumugi pushed the switch, and then—the door opened with a familiar chime.

It seemed to be a small, private room with nothing in it, just large enough to fit around six people.

I cautiously peered in. There were a number of buttons lining up next to the door on the inner lip. *Ground, 20, and—*

There were countless buttons placed in a strange, almost haphazard pattern. And yet, none of them seemed to respond to my touch... I had both a good and bad feeling about this.

“An elevator?”

“Seems like it...”

Indeed, it was like an elevator one might find at a department store.

“It must be a shortcut to help clear the dungeon,” Tsumugi concluded.

“I see... It would definitely be a pain to have to go down twenty floors every time.”

It was a thoughtful addition...but why did we have to repair it in order to use it? Wasn't there a problem with it when it came to user friendliness?

Would it have...been fixed a little faster if I put the Pekkles on it instead of assigning it to Sheryl? No, there's a higher chance they would have taken longer than it took for Sheryl to raise her skill level.

The Pekkles were a support system—nothing more, nothing less.

They could get things done without our help, but it had been proven time and time again that it would always be faster for us to do it ourselves.

“All right, let's keep it up!” Tsumugi shouted.

And so, we swiftly made it to floor forty. This time, the elevator's lock disengaged the moment we arrived. As was to be expected, we found some new Pekkles and blueprints along the way.

We could now build brick houses and even three-story buildings, although those ones could only be used by Pekkles.

“I'm getting pretty tired. How about we call it a day?”

“Yeah, let's.”

After experiencing seven straight hours of dungeon diving, it was no wonder we wanted a break. But still, time flowed differently here than it did outside; it almost felt like a waste to leave.

Our days were spent caught up in endless exploration. According to Shouko and Tsumugi, the difficulty curve of the monsters had started to smooth out.

“Maybe we should bring out a tent and some camping gear to rest up in the

safe zones?” Tsumugi suggested. “Then, we can keep going all the way up to when the lamp fuel runs out.”

“It would save time, but...” Shouko hesitantly said.

And Tsumugi replied, “Nonstop grinding is kinda fun too.”

“I won’t deny that. Endless grinding is one of the joys of an online game,” I said.

That being said, I was starting to get tired of seeing these same cave walls day after day after day. *Fishing is supposed to be my soul (sole) way of life! Fighting monsters to get stronger isn’t my goal here.*

“Actually, since we can all fight well enough without coordinating with one another, how about you all just do what you want?” suggested Tsumugi. “I’m going to master the dungeon! I’ll brag all about it later!”

Oh, that’s one way to enjoy it.

As the difficulty rose, she’d ultimately get better and better equipment.

“Break a leg.”

“I’ll do my best with Tsumugi,” said Shouko.

They were our best fighters. If we’d had more combat-focused players like them instead of people with half-baked builds like me, we’d probably have been even more efficient.

“All right, Shouko. Let’s get going, then.”

“Right.”

With that, Shouko and Tsumugi continued their exploration as a duo. In the days I spent resting, their power levels seemed to be skyrocketing.

According to them, they’d frequently take breaks in the dungeon’s safe zones before resuming their progress. But, as time moved differently inside the dungeon, there was no faster way to grind when it came to standard system time. The difference in time was no joke. Of course, there seemed to be a limit to it. They’d eventually get kicked if they took too long.

Oh right, and after Sheryl fixed up the elevator, an elevator door appeared

near the dungeon's entrance. It was a fine hunting ground.

And just as Tsumugi and Shouko had set their sights on the dungeon, it was about time for me to take out my fated foe.

I asked Romina to make me a fishing rod out of Miraka Crystals and raised my fishing skills. Pairing the rod up with the Motorized Reel that Sheryl made...

I'd attached a bobber, and I'd picked out the material for the hook with great care.

The bait was a dough fashioned from potatoes harvested on the island, kneaded with bioluminescent moss from the dungeon so it would glow in the water.

The time was night... With the faint glow of the Lure of Light as my guide, I was ready to reel in the big one!

Chapter 14: The Lord of the Pond

“Hyah!”

With a firm grip on the rod, I cast my line at the pond.

Come on, Lord. This time, I'll make you show yourself! Show me your elusive form that demands such peculiar tools and techniques to fish up! Spin the reel slowly...slowly...

From the moment I came to this new land and lost my Lure of Light, I'd poured all my energy into raising my Fishing Mastery. It was all for this moment! I snapped the rod up with a flick of my wrist, issuing a challenge to the elusive Lord. *It's only a small fry this time. I'll pull it in right away!*

“Peeen!”

Argh! I haven't been catching any of them lately, so why now?! You're in the way, Pekkle! No one called for you. Do you get me? There've been so many variations on you lately that I'm starting to lose track of who is who.

Another cast! A faint clicking filled the air as I slowly turned the reel and honed my senses. I saw the Lure of Light shift as a ripple spread across the water's surface... *Now!* The rod bent wildly as I pulled it up. It was a completely different kind of feedback than the last time I got a hit.

Yes, the line wasn't snapping this time... But what was this pull?! Was I dealing with some sort of monster?! I was the man who'd managed to fish up the giant squid, yet the pull was so strong, I felt like I was going to be dragged into the pond.

“Grrr... There's no way I'm losing here! Give me back my Lure of Light!”

As the Lord tried escaping to the right, I countered with a pull to the left. When it fled left, I countered right. *Don't even try snagging me on the rocks and driftwood! It's useless. Try to snap the line all you want—the line attached to my rod and reel is stronger than you could ever imagine!*

What's more, I had the motorized reel this time. Just like the drill, it used my Energy as fuel...to reel in at superfast speeds.

Now...who's going to win this waiting game? Will my Energy run out first, or will you run out of stamina?! It's one-on-one!

And so, under the night sky, I faced off against the Pond Lord alone.

"Oh, Kizuna, a lovely night, isn't it? A perfect night to sit and chat while watching the moon..."

Romina approached me in the middle of this epic showdown.

"Gnnhh... I will never lose!"

"Looks like I caught you in the middle of something... Another time, then. When it comes to fishing, you fishermen become just as heated as the warriors on the front line."

She shot me a bemused look before seemingly hurrying off to bed.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

There was a high-pitched grating, jarring sound as the motorized reel wound the line. And at the end of a long and hard battle...

"Fish on!" I couldn't help but cry out as I finally reeled in the thieving Lord who stole my Lure of Light.

There was a violent splash as its massive body breached the surface. I didn't need a mirror to visualize the fearless grin on my face.

Finally... I finally got you! Now let's get a look at that mug of yours!

"Whoa!"

The moment I laid eyes on the Lord I'd caught, I let out a gasp. And at the same time, I felt like I needed to get in a retort.

"How was this thing pulling harder than the giant squid?!"

Well, yeah, it was a game. A mid to late-game map would have a considerable level requirement—I got that, but...well, whatever. It was incredibly large; that much was true... *I should get an ink rubbing to commemorate the moment.*

But before any of that, I removed the Lure of Light that was still hooked on its mouth.

Reunited at last! Lure of Light! You're enough of a reward for me!

†

"Hmm... Looks like you managed to catch it."

Dragging the Lord behind me, I hauled it all the way to the island's central plaza where Romina was waiting for me.

"It's massive... This must be one of those Lords I've been hearing about."

"You did it again."

Sheryl—who'd been watching since who knows when—gave me a thumbs-up. I returned the gesture. She was the only one who'd give me these sorts of reactions, so I had to enjoy them when they appeared.

"It's all thanks to the gear you two made for me!"

"I figured as much... Hmm, that fish is practically a monster."

"Boss enemy."

Sure enough... I could imagine the players fighting something this large in one of the jungle maps.

"I'm back... Wait, Kizuna?"

As Shouko returned, I proudly showed off my catch.

"I finally got it back!"

"I did think you'd pull it off eventually, but that was fast."

"Wow, bro. You pulled in another big one."

"Sure did!"

I felt immense satisfaction as I held up the newly caught Lord—a massive catfish—for them to see. It was around four meters from head to tail, and its weight was something else. Even though the giant squid had been able to pull the whole ship, the catfish had been even harder to catch. I didn't know what standards the devs were going by. A part of me didn't want to accept it, but I

managed to fish it up anyway—all's well that ends well, and all that.

“Now then, it's time for some fun dismantling time!”

I took out a dismantling weapon and pressed it against the catfish. Using my support skills, I felt the distinct squelch as the blade slid into its skin—it was very slimy and required a decent amount of force.

Maybe it'd be better to use Cerberus Slaughter for this. It might be a fish, but dismantling it is going to be tricky, I thought to myself. I would have to make do with my experience and technique. I slashed through with swift and clean cuts.

“Dismantling...” Romina muttered. “That's the skill that people have started whispering about on the mainland.”

“We were trying to keep it a secret, but I guess it got out after all?” surmised Shouko.

“For what it's worth. But I reckon Kizuna's near the top when it comes to dismantling. Just have a look at how fast he's tearing through that massive Lord.”

“We see it all the time, so we're used to it. But now that you mention it, it's impressive...”

“After I heard about him taking apart a Jelly-type monster, I tried giving it a go myself, but it was so hard I gave up. There's no beating a specialist.”

“I think your crafting skills more than compensate for it, Romina.”

“Ha ha ha, glad to hear it. So, what should I make from the Lord's materials? More equipment for Kizuna?”

“Hmm...” I joined the conversation, chiming in as I worked. “I have most of what I need already... I don't mind something new, but there's no telling what you'll be able to make.”

“We can make an educated guess. It'll be a very unique weapon, and it might surpass the game's current top-tier gear.”

“In that case, it'd be better used on someone else than me. Despite this and that, I really just want to fish.”

“You’re really committed to that, huh? I’ve been expanding my repertoire lately, and crafting fishing gear isn’t completely out of the question... Though this might be overkill for that.”

In any case, the results of the dismantling: Giant Catfish Whiskers, Giant Catfish Fins, Giant Catfish Head, Giant Catfish Bones, Giant Catfish Heart, Giant Catfish Eyes, Giant Catfish Slime, Giant Catfish Liver, and Highest-Grade Catfish Meat.

The material names were pretty cut-and-dried. Even though the giant squid’s had been called Water God this and that.

“So, what should we make with these...” I thought aloud as I passed the items to Romina. I glanced at everyone.

I’d fulfilled my revenge already, and I could have fishing gear made with whatever was left over—that didn’t have to be the main attraction. With my Lure of Light back with me, I was already satisfied.

“You’ve already got one, so you’re fine, right, Sheryl?”

“Yeah.”

Sheryl was set with the Ahab Spear.

“Just for reference, Romina, what would *you* like to make, and for who?”

“Right... This is an interesting set of materials. I’m confident we’ll get something nice out of them. If I had to choose someone in your party who could get the most use out of them and look good while doing it...” Romina’s eyes turned to Shouko. “They’re from a giant catfish, right? That’s got a bit of a traditional Japanese ring to it. Don’t you think it’d suit Shouko?”

“What about meee?” Tsumugi protested.

“Do you want it?”

“Hmm? Well...using a rare weapon sounds fun!”

I didn’t like how that was the main criterion. Maybe it was because she was my little sister, but I felt like pushing her to the back of the line.

“All right, that does it. We’re going with Shouko!”

“So stingy!”

Call me stingy all you want! In the game, I’m going to prioritize the people I’ve been with the longest!

“Something is bothering me about the selection criteria, but are you sure about this?” Shouko asked.

“Well, you’re always lending me equipment. I’d like to return the favor,” I said, showing her the haori I still used from time to time.

“Understood... I’ll do my best to meet your expectations, Kizuna.”

“All clear? Then I’ll get to making it right away. A fan’s a must...and if there’s anything left over, I’ll throw together a haori.”

“I’m counting on you.”

And so, I handed the material to Romina and she got to work crafting equipment for Shouko.

Now that I think about it... How do those materials become a fan or haori, anyway?

Perhaps this was one of those things I wasn’t supposed to think too hard about. It was a game, after all. My time was better spent rejoicing over the unique weapon we’d be getting out of it.

“Oh, by the way, I’ve seen people carrying weapons like yours, bro. I heard they were boss drops.”

“Which means my method’s just an unconventional way to get them, huh.”

Looks like fishing up a Lord gets you boss materials. But since + modifiers are based on material quality, the crafted ones might be marginally better. In that sense, maybe the devs designed it to give the slow-life players a way to get the good stuff too.

Before I knew it, Romina had crafted up the requested goods.

“Here.”

The items were a Keystone Fan and a Quake-Quelling Haori. What’s more, both came with a +3 bonus. That was pretty solid craftsmanship—in game

terms at least.

“Oh my, these are incredible. The stats are more than double those of my current gear. Is it really all right for me to take something this good?”

“Of course. You’ve done a lot for me, Shouko.”

“I’m glad we ended up with something interesting. This is far more rewarding than mass-producing for the front lines. I’m getting a lot of technical experience points too.”

Is that how it works? Well, I can’t say I don’t understand the feeling of crafting with rare materials. After all, there’s no way I wouldn’t fish somewhere that I knew a Lord was hiding.

“Umm... For the fan... It seems to be an earth attribute weapon.”

Shouko lightly brandished the Keystone Fan. If I wasn’t imagining it, the particle effect that trailed her swing seemed more powerful than before.

“It also seems to have a special effect. It is called Seismic Sealing Blade.”

As she fiddled with the fan, it changed shape in a flash of light. And then, she was holding a sword—a transforming weapon.

“Catfish were believed to cause earthquakes, once upon a time. A sword was said to be the keystone needed to seal them; perhaps that’s where the gimmick came from.”

“Wow, what a cool mechanic! How nice. I would’ve loved one of those.”

“It seems it’s not just a technique, but an actual weapon. It has its own exclusive skills. What an interesting thing you’ve made. Unfortunately, I do not have much skill with the sword...”

Shouko seemed happy about it. She smiled before returning the sword to its fan form. A portable sword—quite the stylish weapon.

“As for the Quake-Quelling Haori, there’s nothing special about it, but it has good stats. Its defense values are double what I’m currently wearing. It also has a high resistance against earth attribute attacks.”

“That should make your dungeon exploration go a lot smoother.”

“Yes, I’m looking forward to trying it out.”

I’m just glad she’s motivated.

“You caught the Lord of the Pond, pen?”

It was then...that a Pekkile in a straw hat approached and called out to me.

“Then you should have this thread, pen. Keep up the good work, pen.”

That line... I remember hearing something similar in the Lurolona quest.

The straw-hat Pekkile handed me a spool of thread.

Cal Mira Fishing Line

Rank: Epic

Equipment Type: Fishing Gear/Accessory

Equip Conditions: Fishing Mastery VIII+

Line Strength Up (Medium), Improved Fishing Consistency (Large), Increased Chance of Rare Fish (Medium)

Synergy: Lurolona Bobber

Synergy Effect: Fisherman’s Festival (Fish Detection (Minor))

A masterpiece, something the natives of Cal Mira put their heart and soul into making. This fishing line can endure strong pulls, and it increases the chance of catching rare fish.

It has the potential to grow based on the fish caught.

“It’s even got synergy.”

“Hmm... Looks like you’re already holding an item that can activate it.”

“What’s synergy?” Shouko asked.

“Ah, you might understand it better if I call it a set bonus.”

“For instance, you can get bonus stats and effects if you’re wearing a full set of iron equipment.”

“I see, I think I get it. You get an effect by wearing matching equipment. There seems to be a minor one with this weapon and haori too,” Shouko noted.

Even though Shouko seemed pretty game-savvy, there were still some things she didn’t fully understand.

Incidentally, the catfish equipment’s set effect was Water Resistance (Minor), apparently.

“But when it’s between less obvious items, or when the pairings are meant to be hidden, it will say Synergy instead of Set. You need to find those combinations yourself,” Romina said, looking at the line in my hands. “The synergy between this and the Lurolona Bobber gives you Fish Detection (Minor).”

“I can already detect fish if I put my mind to it... I’ll have to see what it really does.”

“Yeah.”

Thus, I decided to give it a try, and I immediately saw the effects. When I cast my line and closed my eyes, I could visualize the area surrounding the hook in my head.

It felt like one of those fishing minigames—the ones where you get a screen displaying the moment a fish bites. However, because it was only (Minor), I could just vaguely make out black silhouettes, which only gave me a vague idea of what was biting.

It wasn’t the most helpful feature, but it was still neat. But even without that, the performance of my fishing gear had gone up by leaps and bounds.

“I’ll be off, then.”

As soon as we’d rested up, Shouko and Tsumugi promptly set off for the dungeon.

Me? Of course, I started fishing immediately. After all, I had to test out the Giant Catfish Rod that Romina made with what was left, right? With a new line,

it was easier to reel than ever before!

†

“Peeeeen!”

Much to my chagrin, I was starting to fish up Pekkles again.

Honestly, the number of Pekkles had gotten ridiculous. It was to the point where managing them all would take up the whole day. In fact, there were so many Pekkles that we risked something drastic happening if I ever left them unattended to venture into the dungeon.

I was managing them alongside Romina and Sheryl, but they both were often so absorbed in their work that they forgot about it.

Isn't there anything we can do? I wondered. A few days later, I heard that the party consisting of Shouko and Tsumugi was making smooth progress without my or Sheryl's input. As expected, the materials from the Lord played a big part.

If they wanted to focus more on EXP, it was apparently easier to hunt the stronger boss-like monsters that respawned with each visit. But it was a tricky balancing act.

The dungeon was instanced, for what it was worth, so they could revisit certain floors to collect items and fight monsters they'd bested before. But their ultimate goal was to make it to the deepest floor.

Though the elevator gave them a shortcut every twenty floors, there was a limit to how far they could travel in a day. We didn't know how deep the dungeon went, and, for now, it was all in their hands.

Just as I was hearing about their latest progress...

“Isn't it about time to build a castle, pen?”

“Huh?”

The Santa Hat Pekkles approached me as though I'd called for him. Just when I thought I'd finally be able to summon Yamikage, he threw out an unexpected line.

“Here's the blueprint, pen.”

The Pekkles pulled a set of blueprints from his Santa Hat and registered it for construction.

“Oh, I see.”

“I’m waiting for the orders, pen.”

A castle...huh.

The place was originally an earl’s domain, and a Pekkles had been inside the treasure chest in the manor. Given the goal was to develop the land anew, I’d more or less expected a castle blueprint to be mixed in somewhere.

On that note...this island is pretty big. There’s no denying that it’s probably big enough for a castle, but... Oh, the build location’s already been designated. They’ll start as soon as I give the orders...

There was still the fundamental issue of us lacking materials.

We’ve found quite a bit during the dungeon exploration... Maybe we should put it off for now?

“Isn’t it about time to build a castle, pen?” Santa Hat repeated.

“We probably ought to build it, but...”

The castle was probably a necessary structure to complete this long, drawn-out event. But the sheer number of resources it required was more than I could have possibly imagined. Before we could even attempt it, I’d have to lay a sturdy foundation.

Managing the Pekkles workforce is becoming a pain too. I’m usually pretty good at these sorts of tedious tasks, but if you ask me if I can do it efficiently...that’s something else.

I could play for long stretches of time, but managing schedules wasn’t really my thing. That was just my play style.

“Isn’t it about time to build a castle, pen?”

What’s more, I had to raise the proficiency levels of the newly recruited Pekkles. I had to watch out for stress and secure the food supply. Many of the Pekkles were so stressed I had to keep them off of work for a while, and that

meant our food reserves were starting to run low. Sure, I could send the higher-proficiency Pekkles to fish, but that would slow down development.

“Kizuna?”

“Hmm? What’s up, Romina?”

“This isn’t exactly a report, but the Pekkles have started opening stores on their own. It’s now possible to buy the materials you can find on the island.”

Romina guided me to a Pekkles Shop that had been erected next to the workshop without my knowledge. They were selling all sorts of things, including all the materials necessary to build the castle.

It looks like we’ll manage so long as we have the money, but...they don’t sell food.

“Isn’t it about time to build a castle, pen?”

“Can you just shut up already?!”

Could you at least put a little more cooldown time between those notifications?!

“Pekkles is not a monster, pen.”

That again.

Every time Santa Hat passed me by, he’d given another reminder. This felt like a system warning, urging me to start the construction as soon as possible. But seriously, it was ticking me off. *I want to build it, but we don’t have the resources!*

“Kizuna, calm down. You’re dealing with a Pekkles.”

“I know. I get it, but he just won’t stop repeating it.”

“Why don’t you just give him the order?”

“Even if I give the orders, there’s no way they’re going to finish, right? And there are other, more important things we should be building first.”

“Sure enough... There might be something nice among our unidentified blueprints... How about you start multiple projects in tandem?”

“It’s not impossible, but...it’s a major project that has a high minimum Pekkles requirement. If we throw that in when everything’s finally started running smoothly, it’ll be a nightmare to manage.”

“Hmm... Resource gathering, food supply problems, and personnel management... You’ve already figured out a way to secure a steady supply of Pekkles workers, but everything else is dicey. I’ll help as much as I can.”

Just then, Sheryl appeared, having just entered her break.

“Shop.”

“Oh, yeah, they opened up a shop.”

“Is there anyone you want to see, pen?”

Romina pointed at the Pekkles as if to say the notification had come at just the right time.

But more importantly, I had something to say.

“I want to know how to get rid of you.”

“I don’t know anyone by that name, pen.”

“Kizuna, I understand how you feel, but let’s not say anything dangerous. If that username did exist, we’d end up summoning them.”

“To get rid of penguins...dolphins, perhaps?”

Ah, dolphins. Those lovable creatures everyone knows about...the loud, squeaky mammals that chirped whenever they appeared.

“Isn’t it about time to build a castle, pen?”

“Anyways, who should we call...”

Shouko and Tsumugi were making good progress in the dungeon, so that wasn’t really an issue anymore.

“Isn’t it about time to build a castle, pen?”

Romina was processing the drops and materials from the dungeon into equipment. Our gear had seen a major upgrade. Looking back, calling Romina had been a great decision. I’d gotten lucky. Real lucky.

I guess it has to be Yamikage.

“Kizuna. Could I make a suggestion? I just so happen to know the perfect person for this situation. Someone who can manage the Pekkles better than you.”

“Oh?”

For some reason, Romina had a rather wicked smile on her face.

An acquaintance of Romina? I passed the Pekkles input window over to her. She brought up her friend list, then copied and pasted a name before handing it back.

The name in the box read...Altorese.

“Alto?”

She grinned a sinister grin, and even Sheryl looked a bit displeased.

What exactly happened?

“It’s his fault that I lost my motivation to forge for the frontliners.”

“It is?”

That’s the first I’m hearing about this... But he’s been prioritizing money ever since the game kicked off. I can easily imagine him getting into a financial dispute.

He was, after all, the type to stow away on a ship to gather information. In fact, ghosts seemed to be the only thing to ever deter him.

“It was because of the frontliners whom he had so kindly introduced to me.”

So that was Alto’s fault?! Well, it’s those players’ fault, to be more precise, but still...

“They treated me like an NPC, demanding to have their weapons made like they ruled the place. And worse, once they realized I was a real person, I was suddenly part of the crew, and their personal blacksmith.”

Romina’s eyes sharpened in her deep resentment of Alto. *Do they not get along?* I wondered.

“He had me build ships. I got money, but...”

Sheryl had her own issues with him, apparently. *Come to think of it, she did mention that.*

But still, a normal ship order wouldn't provoke this much hostility. Using crafting skills to make things that were useful to people was the essence of being a crafter. *What did he make her do...?*

“So he got to you too, huh?”

For some reason, Romina and Sheryl exchanged a handshake. It seemed they'd found a common foe. The time had come for the crafters to mete out some justice on a greedy merchant.

“Alto, oh Alto. As my *proxy*, he was selling the weapons I hammered out at fifty percent more than my selling price without telling me. He's got a nose for money, and—don't know where it started—but people have started calling him the Merchant of Death.”

“That was probably me.”

“Was it now? We might just get along.”

Does Romina hate Alto? No, if she really did, she wouldn't summon him here.

“I think this is just around the right time to call him up and rein him in before he goes too far.”

“Isn't he the one supplying the front lines right now?”

“I'm sure he is. Heh heh heh...I wouldn't mind giving those *frontliners* a little trouble while I'm at it. But hey, it's not a bad deal for Alto either. A little forceful, yeah, but how about we make him take one for the team?”

“L-Let's have fun, okay? It's a game...”

To summarize, she was mad at a lot of people and Alto just happened to be one of them.

Anyway...what sort of frontliners had she been dealing with? I didn't have any issues with L'Arc or Therese, and even those fake-death-game players were pleasant enough to deal with.

There were some people that Shouko had a bone to pick with—I got that. But I thought they were the only ones. Were there more of them than I thought?

Well...I've heard of people who think being strong means they can do whatever they want. But Dimension Wave doesn't have PVP. It might be implemented at some point, but it's not a thing right now. It's actually impressive that they can act so high-and-mighty at this stage.

I wanted to believe it was just that the bad ones stood out more. They were a bit cringy, but the guys role-playing their death game were decent folks. And then there was Yamikage—looking at the results of the last wave, she was getting top results despite not being a frontliner.

In the end, it was all about character...and Alto was the sacrifice Romina chose to vent her frustrations on. He did deserve it to some degree, what with sneaking onto our ship and all that.

Yeah, I don't mind calling him. He's a member of our party, after all.

“All right, as per your request, I'll call Alto.”

After I'd hit enter, the Santa Hat Pekkles turned his back to me. “Understood, pen. I pray that you meet them soon, pen.”

It was the same line every time.

“Well then. Now that Alto's coming, I'll have to prepare a few things.”

Wh-What is she going to do?

A rather ominous festival was about to begin.

Chapter 15: Tribal Style

Don-doko-don-doko-don-don-don... A bouncing rhythm filled the air. The masks and costumes Romina and Sheryl had put together resembled those of stereotypical island natives, and they paraded them around as the sound of makeshift instruments reverberated along the beach.

“Ya-hoo!”

“Hee-haa!”

“Ho-hoo!”

Tsumugi, Romina, and Sheryl were matching one another beat for beat, rehearsing in high spirits.

These three really get along.

And as expected, Alto lay straight like a pencil as the waves lapped against him.

Is there nothing we can do about this?

“All right! Rehearsal over. Kizuna, are you sure you and Shouko don’t want to wear the costumes?”

Shouko and I had politely declined the offer. For starters, I couldn’t understand why they thought I’d wear them... I mean, it did look like fun.

“Well...”

“I’m still struggling to see why you all want to go so far to prank Alto...”

“Why, Shouko, you said it yourself, didn’t you? You told me about how the frontliners have harassed you.”

“Y-Yes.”

“Sheryl and I both have the right to prank Alto. That’s why we’re having fun with it.”

“I-I see... But why is Tsumugi participating?”

“Because it seems fun.”

Oh, she’s looking at me now.

“Are you wondering if I would’ve joined if Tsumugi didn’t? Don’t worry about it. Just hold up your spear and dance to the rhythm!”

Don-doko-don. We were set to be the drummers for this bizarre bit of performance art. Despite this and that, I didn’t hate this kind of mischief. With two sisters who were both so ridiculously strong in games, I’d played my fair share of party games that led to the complete collapse of any goodwill we ever had for one another.

“Yeah!”

“We’re going to give Alto the performance of his life!”

“I’m sure of it now. You and Tsumugi really are sisters.”

Oh? Did she pick up on something? But to clarify, we aren’t sisters; we’re brother and sister.

Anyway, I’d already taken all the pictures I wanted. They were from a bit farther away than the other ones, but so be it. All that remained was for me and Shouko to hide in a makeshift leaf enclosure as we rhythmically beat at the drums.

They were instrument-type items that probably required the corresponding skill to play properly, but it seemed I didn’t need to learn anything if I was just hitting them. As long as it sounded passable, all was well with the world.

“All right, here we go. Ya-hoo! En-pee-see-treet-meeeeent! Ngah!”

Are we really okay with these lines? You don’t hate yourself for saying that?

“We must purge the Merchant of Death!”

Whoa, that was pointed, Sheryl! But stick to the made-up languages. He’ll recognize you.

“Ugo-go-go! Ha-ha-ha! Ya-ho!”

Despite our rehearsals, they were all over the place. It was clear at a glance that everyone was just doing whatever they wanted. *C’mon, this is a game—*

shouldn't we have a bit of organization?

Not that I'd say it aloud; I felt like even I'd retort at myself for that.

"Isn't it about time to build a castle, pen?"

Quit it already! We're getting to the good part!

"Urgh..."

As the dancers approached him, the freeze was lifted from Alto.

"En-pee-see-treet-meeeeent! Ngah! SCREEN-YOUR-CLIENTS!"

"Hee-hah!"

"Ho-ho-ho!"

Romina, Sheryl, and Tsumugi, masked and dressed in island garb, encircled a bewildered Alto while chanting to the rhythm.

"Wh-Whoaaaaah?! Wh-What is this?! What's happening?!"



Yeah, honestly, this whole thing was pretty terrifying. I couldn't help but think they were going a bit overboard.

"Vine! Bind! Vine!"

"Ya-ya!"

"Hare-hore-sassa!"

To top it all off, they skillfully got a rope around Alto, pointing dramatically toward a large cauldron set up nearby. It was almost like they were going to sacrifice him in some sort of ritual. Or worse, like they were going to boil him alive and eat him.

Don-doko-don-doko. Shouko and I were hidden away. I beat my drum.

"Wh-Who are you people?! What are you going to do to me?! In the first place, I was resting in my room, so how did I end up here?! S-Someone save me!"

There he was—exposition dumping. He was unable to grasp the suddenness of it all, his eyes spinning as he was helplessly guided toward the cauldron.

Despite the game's lack of PVP, you could still shove people around. It was VR, after all. Even though we were just data, it was supposed to feel like we were moving our real bodies, and the world would seem empty if we couldn't feel any physical impact. Attacks could trip up and move around other players; they just couldn't do any damage. It was all about keeping the experience real—although the scene playing out in front of me did cross a strange line.

Alto, being a merchant who never really engaged in combat, lacked the physical strength to resist. His face contorted in terror as he was confronted by strange, hostile figures who didn't seem open for negotiations.

Is he aware that he's in a game? He just woke up. Maybe he's too addled to make the distinction.

"I'll give you as much money as you want! Just let me go!"

Man, that's some terrible begging... What sort of villain are you playing here? With a line like that, you're just asking to get shot by a hero at the end of the movie. Are you sure you're not saying this on purpose?

“Rhost-im-ole! Bena! Ochitochi!”

“Moby-Dick! Ahab!”

“Moge-re-moge!”

“Wh-What have I gotten myself into?! Erk...I knew this would come in handy!”

Oh, it seems Alto still keeps his wits in emergency situations, I thought as I watched him pull out a Return Transcript and hold it high. There was a noise, a flash...and Alto was immediately teleported to a nearby spot on the beach.

“N-No! I can’t escape?! Aaaaahh!”

“Run-run-no-use!”

“Escape-blocked!”

“Runner-runner! Hunt-down!”

Though he tried to flee, Romina and the others expertly caught up and cut him off, surrounding him once more.

“They locked my spawn to an area with an inescapable death penalty...?! What are the devs even thinking?!”

Ah, he’s grumbling to the devs now. I get it, but that’s not what this is.

“Bad-man! Bad-man!”

“Karma! Karma!”

“Bad-deeds-be-punished!”

“D-Don’t tell me this is a jail for players who breach the code of etiquette?! I haven’t done anything bad! I’ve only done what I could with the tools provided to me!”

Oh, so that’s how he sees it. Honestly, if the devs were watching, we were probably the ones who’d get a severe reprimand.

“Uho-ho!”

“Ha-ho-ho!”

“Iya-ho!”

The trio started poking at Alto with their spears, not causing actual damage but certainly annoying him. It had to be infuriating, being unable to move as they tormented him like this.

Wait, isn't this basically harassment? I wondered as they led him back toward the cauldron.

“Urgh... S-Someone! Anyone! Save me! I'll stop putting money before everything else! Devs, please forgive me!”

Alto's scream echoed across the beach. *You're surprisingly weak to torture, Alto.*

He was a scaredy-cat, after all... Did he think this was a detention facility programmed in by the developers? Perhaps it was time to put an end to this.

“Do you promise to put a little more thought into who you do business with?!”

“Yes!”

“Then I'll let you off, just this once! Be grateful!”

“Thank you so—huh?!”

Romina chose that moment to remove her mask, smacking her hands against Sheryl's and Tsumugi's.

“Trolling success!”

“Revenge achieved!”

“Mission complete!”

They really seemed to be having fun.

“I-If it isn't Romina! What are you doing here?!”

Shouko and I stopped drumming and stepped out from behind our leafy cover.

“Alto, you've been making quite a bit of money, haven't you? It sounds like you've earned yourself quite a few enemies.”

“You're here too?! No way!”

Alto's face flushed red as he finally realized he'd been tricked.

Wow, he's really pissed. I didn't know VR technology was this good at capturing emotions.

"Good grief... What were you hoping to get by doing this to me?!"

"Romina was the one who wanted to shock you. Not me."

At the very least, it had never occurred to me to summon Alto. Had it been up to me, I would have probably summoned Yamikage.

"You can't be completely oblivious, right? I'm sure you've been harassed by the frontliners countless times yourself. This is payback for selling to anyone as long as they had money."

"Hah," Alto sighed. "I supposed that was just part of the cost of doing business. The wider you cast a net, the more enemies you make... I'll keep that in mind. It might prove useful outside the game as well."

That's the Merchant of Death for you. He catches on fast. I wonder if that has something to do with why he started playing Dimension Wave.

"I do feel you went a little too far with your prank," Shouko chimed in.

"Even Shouko... My spawn point was forcefully reset... Can you please explain what's going on?"

After glancing at Shouko, Alto turned his eyes to me.

"Yes, actually..."

I explained everything that had happened since I'd arrived on the island.

"I see... So you're the culprit behind the mysterious disappearance incidents."

"Oh, are you talking about how Shouko, Sheryl, and Romina went missing?"

"That's right. It's not at the level of urban legend just yet, but there's a rumor going around. If you stray too far from the game's intended path, you'll end up mysteriously disappearing. It's said that those people are forcibly logged out by the admins, or that the ghost ship was real, and that everyone involved in that incident is being spirited away one by one... It's turned into a ghost story that goes beyond the game."

Alto lamented how the number of those challenging the unknown had dwindled, leaving fewer new discoveries to be found.

“Would *Dimension Wave*’s management really cause a fuss over something so trivial?”

I mean, just how much do you think I’ve suffered because of their poor management? How many days have I been here?

“I couldn’t tell you. It’s partly because the dark rumors surrounding Yamikage keep growing. It’s gotten to the point where I didn’t want to get involved with her anymore.”

“Yamikage? What do you mean?”

“Yes, well, it all started when you vanished with no way of contacting you. Then Shouko suddenly went missing...and Sheryl was next. Please think about it carefully.”

The leader of the party who’d completed the Limited Dimension Wave mini-event disappeared, and the other members of that same party were vanishing one after the next. It was impossible to reach any of them. This reeked of horror.

“It was fine up to Sheryl. People just thought you were wrapped up in another event. That was understandable. But then...something unexpected happened.”

“Something unexpected?”

Well, I can roughly guess what it is...

“The next one was Romina. Someone completely unrelated to the event had vanished.”

“Yeah... Well...”

That was an accident. She forgave me for it.

“Those who thrive on rumors started causing a stir; sure, this is a game, but I couldn’t help but feel afraid.”

“Online games have always been plagued by these sorts of horror stories.”

Yeah...like stories of a player logging in even after they’d died in real life. That

sort of thing.

After VR entered the scene, it felt like those urban legends were multiplying even faster than before.

“What was happening? Suspicion naturally fell upon the members who were with you at the time. Tsumugi, Yamikage, and myself. Worse yet, the next victim was Tsumugi.”

As a result, Alto skillfully maneuvered all the attention toward Yamikage.

How terrible. It just had to be Yamikage, who had tried her best to find me alongside Shouko. After Shouko disappeared, she tried teaming up with Sheryl, and once Sheryl was gone, she fell under Romina’s care...and then even Romina vanished.

She fought side by side with Tsumugi... And Tsumugi disappeared... *Yeah, it’s like... Yeah...*

“She’s earned a name for herself, and not a good one. Something ominous the players whisper among themselves. It’s rare for a player to earn a moniker like that. But I guess it happens.”

“Hmm... I happen to know someone who’s called the Merchant of Death.”

“I don’t want to hear that from the World’s Biggest Damage Sponge.”

“Ha ha, I lost the top spot when the Second Wave hit, right? I can’t hold a candle to the mighty Merchant of Death.”

“Why do I feel a chill?”

Shouko narrowed her eyes at the back-and-forth I was having with Alto. She wasn’t the only one.

Drat, why does my reputation have to go down with his? Anyway, let’s try to change the subject.

“Come to think of it, Alto. You’re on a southern island with a harem. Do you feel rich yet?”

Since Alto was the only male character, it was a harem by default. Not that I’d consciously set it up that way. That was just how it turned out.

Hearing my words, Alto scanned the area.

Romina, Sheryl, and Tsumugi were dressed in leaves. Then, there was me and Shouko.

“I don’t want a harem like this,” Alto firmly declared.

Yeah. I get you. There’s something off about it. It may be a harem, but there isn’t an ounce of allure to go around. Even when everyone looks decent enough thanks to the graphics.

Besides, if he could view the people who’d just set him up for a trap in that light—if he could, he’d have the makings of a big shot. Either a protagonist, or a love-born hunter of love.

“In the first place, I’m... No, it’s nothing.”

What? What was he about to say?

“Anyways, one of those harem members is openly a cross-player!”

“Oh, shut it! I never asked to look like this!”

It was mostly the fault of my real sisters.

And one of those real sisters was grinning and letting out a foolish laugh. *Any more trouble, and I’m dropping you off the bridge over the raging river.*

My older sister was also involved, but I was in no place to pursue her right now.

“So, what’s the nickname Yamikage got?”

“The Reaper. They also call her the Keeper of the Ban Hammer. Misbehave in front of her, and they say you’ll be forcefully kicked from the game.”

“I can see her loving that name.”

You’re the Reaper, Yamikage! Isn’t that what you always dreamed of?! Well, probably not...if it’s linked to mysterious disappearances.

She’d been that scared on the ghost ship... From a third-person perspective, it probably looked like the management team was trying to spook her. I was just glad her nickname wasn’t “The Admin’s Favorite Toy.”

“Yesterday, Yamikage barged into my shop, you see. I told her I didn’t want any trouble and tried to kick her out, but she was in tears. She said she had no one else to rely on. And just when I let her stay for one night, this happens. It just had to be today! I was planning to push her onto L’Arc tomorrow!”

Wow... You’re really going through it, Yamikage.

To think it ended up like this just because I called for the people the island needed in that order... *Sorry, Yamikage.*

Next time, I’ll request you. I won’t trouble L’Arc or anyone else.

Feeling a touch of mischief, part of me considered summoning L’Arc to rattle her a little more, but even I wasn’t going to go that far. Still, despite everything, Alto ended up taking Yamikage in. Perhaps he had some good in him.

“So, the fact that you called for me... It’s a real nuisance, believe me, but there’s something going on, right?”

“Quick and to the point. That’s the Merchant of Death for you,” said Romina.

The crafter and the merchant glared back and forth as the conversation picked back up.

Though I now understood Yamikage’s predicament, I had no way of summoning her after I’d just called Alto. For now, we had to keep moving forward. With some help from Romina, I explained the Pekkles management system and the shop.

“I see. So it’s a commission for development work... That’s definitely a job for me.”

“Will you do it?”

“I might not be able to leave this island if I don’t. I do feel I’ve overdone it a bit, and the frontliners have started to stagnate. You’re the one who always brought the best business opportunities, and then there’s making up for that stowaway incident. How about we work together?”

And so, Alto wound up helping with the development work.

After off-loading all the troublesome Pekkles management onto him, I would be able to focus on whatever I wanted.

“First off, when it comes to caring for these NPCs called Pekkles...”

Alto looked over the Pekkles-o-meter I handed him.

“Hmm... It might be a good idea to split them into rotating squadrons.”

“I was already doing that.”

“Knowing you, it was probably done in broad strokes.”

“No? That’s not quite...”

“Is the rate of stress gain for each individual Pekkles the same across the board?”

“My brother’s got perseverance, but he can’t get into the nitty-gritty.”

Even Tsumugi’s hounding me. Shut it, you.

I understood rotations, to say the least, but organizing them individually was far too tedious. Besides, the game had no walkthrough sites, so I had to come up with everything on my own.

“Anyway, I’ll look after the Pekkles in your place.”

“They’re all yours, Alto.”

“I’d like you to understand that this is something you should be doing. Not me.”

“I’m going to fish and resolve all the Pekkles’ food problems.”

I knew he had some choice words for me, but we were running low on food—that was a fact. I needed to force my way through.

“It sounds like you’re completely off-loading all the trouble onto me. Am I imagining it?”

“Th-That’s not true. Securing food is an important job.”

“Yes...it’s true that the reserves won’t last. Honestly, building a castle in this situation would just be reckless. Simply put, the growth and productivity of these Pekkles aren’t enough to offset their food consumption. It’s better to have someone secure it for now and for the future.”

Alto let out a sigh.

“The resources you can get from the dungeon are appealing indeed. It’s not a mistake to aim for the deepest level. I will be taking charge of the Pekkles, so everyone else, please work on your respective tasks.”

With Alto at the helm, the rest of us returned to doing as we pleased.

The next day, Shouko and Tsumugi returned from the instance dungeon.

“We’re back, bro!”

“We’ve returned.”

“Oh, welcome back.”

“Kizuna, there was a resting spot on the sixtieth floor of the dungeon that had an underground lake. It was quite a mystical and lovely place.”

What?! An underground lake?!

“Shouko! I told you not to tell him!”

Tsumugi hurriedly cautioned her. *Hey, why are you hiding it? Well, whatever.*

“Hmm...”

An underground lake, huh...

The instincts of a man who’d played a certain farm management sim for two hundred (in-game) years were kicking in. I could feel the presence of a new Lord. What’s more, this was an instance dungeon where I could fish all I wanted, and only a day would pass outside. This was great news.

“Umm... Was that a slip of the tongue?”

“Yeah, look at his eyes. There’s nothing in his head besides going to that lake and fishing the day away.”

“Fishing is my soul life. It came at a good time too.”

If I could fish in the dungeon, then perhaps I’d be able to solve the Pekkles food problem in one fell swoop. This wasn’t just for my hobby. It was to solve the island’s pressing issue.

Indeed. It wasn’t just my hobby. I needed to prepare for a large-scale

excursion.

And so, I had Romina make not just fishing gear, but camping supplies too.

The next day, I took Shouko and Tsumugi along to challenge the dungeon... Or rather, I immediately used the elevator to head to the underground lake.

“Well then, Shouko, Tsumugi, I leave the exploration to you. I’ll be here securing Pekkles food.”

“Kay! On it!”

“We will try to gather up as many useful materials as we can while we explore.”

We promptly arrived at the lake. Shouko and Tsumugi set off for the stairs to the floor below, while I was left alone.

Chapter 16: The Battle for the Lake

“Whooooa.”

As I looked up, my eyes were met with a massive stalactite-ridden cavity reminiscent of a limestone cavern, with crystal clear water softly bubbling up from the ground.

What’s more, the water itself carried a faint glow. I wasn’t really sure how to put it into words. It felt quite fantastical.

The water shimmered in a spectrum of hues, spread out across a handful of pools. The largest one seemed quite deep indeed and was certainly vast enough to call a lake.

If I had any swimming skills, I’d likely have been able to dive into it.

“It’s so beautiful...almost otherworldly.”

“Just look at bro’s eyes. They’re sparkling.”

“Yes, they are quite literally sparkling. I’m feeling a mix of happiness and weariness—it’s a complicated feeling, to be honest.”

“Now to do what we came to do!” I cried out.

But suddenly, as I approached...just as I’d gotten to the shoreline, a strange feeling filled the air.

“Kizuna!”

“Huh? Does something spawn here?”

It wasn’t just a feeling. A visible purple smoke began to amass as Shouko and Tsumugi hurried over to me.

“Last time we came, we only took a quick glance...”

“Since we didn’t go up to the lake, maybe we didn’t trigger the event flag.”

“Hey now...”

Well, what else can we do? Looks like we'll need to do some fighting before I can fish.

"It's gonna be an issue if monsters spawn here regularly."

"This is supposed to be a rest area, for what it's worth... Maybe it's one of those things? Like, a required event if you want to use the lake?"

"I hope so."

The smoke crackled, gathering like a storm cloud before scattering—and from it emerged a monster sporting the heads of both a lion and a goat with the tail of a venomous snake... It was a Chimera.

"GROOOOWWRRR!"

"Oh, I've seen one like this before!" Tsumugi noted.

"You recognize it? Did you see it somewhere in the dungeon?"

I looked at Shouko, but she shook her head to deny it.

"Umm, it's the boss that came out in the second wave that you and Shouko didn't participate in. That one was bigger, though. And it had a dragon's head."

"Well, it happens. Plenty of games let you rematch bosses, and sometimes those bosses show up as normal enemies in the late game."

"That might be it," said Tsumugi. "Now that you mention it, we fought a black two-headed dog on floor thirty-five, but maybe that was supposed to be a Cerberus rematch. Do you think the real Cerberus would have come out if our party was bigger?"

"It wasn't too strong, but you may be right about that," Shouko agreed.

Why is that the first I'm hearing about this...?

"What a pain... I just want to fish."

The roar of the Chimera caused lightning to rain down all around us...and from wherever the lightning struck burst swarms of locusts and bees. I guess those were the adds.

"Yeah. This formation is pretty similar to what I saw in the second wave. No doubt about it."

“Is that so...”

At that moment, Shouko gripped her Keystone Fan with a fearless smile.

“Kizuna, I feel a little happy.”

“And why’s that?”

“I mean... It’s almost like I get to fight the battle I missed out on, alongside you.”

Oh, come to think of it, I couldn’t have participated in the second wave even if I had wanted to, and I’d ended up summoning Shouko to join me in my predicament. Even though the system had me exempt from the fight, it still didn’t feel right to miss out on it.

But here, we could fight something similar to the wave’s boss—perhaps it would ease some of that frustration. That seemed to be how Shouko saw it.

She’s...not entirely wrong. And better yet, we’re able to monopolize this battle.

The lack of any other players made it a fair bit tougher, but at the same time, we didn’t have to worry about anyone else. We could even take all the spoils if we made it out with a win.

Whoever designed this event, they’re not too shabby.

“I’ve already fought it once, but this really gets the heart racing.”

Tsumugi had worked up her motivation, and it looked like she might leap at it at any second.

“Aight... Let’s win and make this place our own.”

Before us was an underground lake...and if we had to defeat this Chimera to use it, then defeat it we would. I prepared Cerberus Slaughter in one hand and my fishing rod in the other, ready to fight at a moment’s notice.

“Here I come!”

“Let’s go!”

Shouko and Tsumugi called out as they burst off toward the beast.

“First, we gotta clear out the mobs! Shouko, follow my lead!”

“Of course!”

Their weapons gleamed as they charged forward, and with their next shouts, they unleashed powerful techniques.

“Crimson Heaven Wheel!”

“Wild Dance Third Formation: Cherry Blossom!”

Tsumugi’s technique took the form of a massive red sweep with her weapon, while Shouko unleashed a barrage amid countless scattering petals, both sweeping through the hordes of enemies surrounding them.

“Graaaaah!”

And naturally, the Chimera—being the boss—remained completely unfazed. Their large AoE attacks had been enough to deal with the lesser mobs, but they did little beyond that.

“Now, Shouko! Which head do you want? And I doubt I have to say it, but watch out for the tail—that snake’s definitely venomous.”

“Yes, well... I’d prefer to deal with the goat. It seems like it’ll be the trickier one to handle.”

“Got it; then I’ll start on the lion head.”

And with that, they began their assault. The lion, as one might expect, relied on biting and clawing, and as for the goat... *So that one’s main focus is magic.*

Shouko deftly deflected the magical blasts it fired off.

“Meeeeeeh!”

A rather flashy particle effect broke out as the goat head began chanting... It was getting ready for something big. And the moment after the thought occurred to me, a meteor—yes, an actual meteor—came falling from above, aimed straight at Shouko.

We’re in a dungeon... I thought, though nothing would come from retorting at a game.

“So that’s how you fight,” Shouko remarked, calmly observing the meteor’s

trajectory and swiftly dodging out of its path. Fluidly, her dodge shifted into a charge, and with that same forward momentum, she released the energy stored in her fan to inflict massive damage on the goat's head.

"Hssssssh!"

Immediately, the Chimera's snake tail hissed in retaliation, spewing a thick, sickly green breath at her.

"Poison breath?" noted Tsumugi. "The attack patterns are a little different than last time!"

Luckily, the breath was visible enough and they both got out of the way in time, but that green fog seemed to linger for an awfully long time. *That's a pain, plain and simple.*

The lion's biting attacks, the goat's spells, and the snake's area-denying poison made for a relentless onslaught. But even in the face of such ferocity, Tsumugi and Shouko were dodging, blocking, and countering left and right.

Still, there was a problem. The Chimera's frenzied attacks meant there were few openings to land any meaningful strikes. Shouko and I could rely on our Energy to face-tank it and push through, but that would result in heavy losses and make the rest of the battle an even tougher challenge.

Now then... Honestly, I'm not like those two. If I went out there, I'd just take damage, and I highly doubt I'll be able to contribute anything, I thought to myself. Instead, I opted to keep Cerberus Slaughter out to take care of any mobs that might attack me, while using my fishing rod to provide support from a distance.

We were up against a single Chimera, but with each head acting essentially on its own, it felt like far more than that. Aggroing one of those heads seemed like my safest bet.

All right... Which one should I target?

The close-range lion was out of the question. If I targeted it, then the whole Chimera would be coming at me, and I'd just get in Shouko and Tsumugi's way. That left the goat that was spamming magic like there was no tomorrow and the snake that spewed an ailment-ridden breath... The goat was tracking

Shouko, and Shouko was similarly focused on it. The snake seemed like the clear winner. More than anything, its poisonous breath was incredibly annoying.

“That does it. Hate & Lure.”

There was a swish as I swung my rod back and forth, taking aim. Then a snap. Just as the poisonous serpent head opened its mouth for another breath attack, I sent my lure flying straight into its gaping maw.

“Hsssssh...ngh?!”

The snake gagged in surprise, visibly shaken up by the unexpected damage and the feeling of something foreign in its mouth. *I’m surprised they even bothered to animate that.*

The moment I felt the pull, I instinctively used a skill.

“Pole Fishing!”

I raised the rod high overhead; the Chimera’s snake tail shot up as well.

Did that do it?

“Nice one, bro! You raised its back legs and threw it off-balance,” Tsumugi said, closing in.

“Perfect timing! Here I go!” Shouko followed up. Together, they launched blow after blow, leveraging what was only the slightest gap in the Chimera’s defenses.

“Grooowwrr!”

“Meeeeeh!”

It staggered under their combined assault, but as it recovered, the lion and goat heads roared in fury, each retaliating at their assailants.

“Hsssssh!”

The snake head was glaring at me... The hook was still snagged in its mouth. In a fit of fury, it spewed a yellow liquid in my direction.

“Whoa there.”

With a taut line still connecting us, I swiftly sidestepped the projectile.

I've got some distance, and it doesn't go too fast. I think I can manage. I'd be a goner if I was any closer. You could say I'm fine because Tsumugi and Shouko are holding it back.

Now, concerning the yellow liquid... It seemed to inflict paralysis, and it had a defense-lowering effect. I could see it from the condition of my hook and line that showed they'd suffered a decrease in defense.

If it hadn't been for the Cal Mira Fishing Line, my line would have melted and snapped, and the hook would have been shaken free. Praise be to epic items!

As for the paralysis effect, I figured that one out as the liquid splashed over one of the locust enemies, which flopped over with the sparking overlay of a paralysis status.

I'm in hot water if that hits.

"Hsssh! Hssh!"

The snake head was thrashing around violently, doing whatever it could to remove the hook and to drag me closer. This thing was persistent.

But... This feeling in my hands... Yep. It was very close to the sensation just before I pulled a fish in.

If I lost to this pull and was dragged into close quarters, I'd undoubtedly be showered with blows. Worst case, I'd fall victim to a special finisher, and suffer massive damage.

Match its movements. Right for right... *Whoa!* The Chimera's body pounced at Tsumugi, dragging me along with it.

"Urrrrgh..."

Perhaps as a penalty for failing, the snake head inhaled a large length of string, yanking me closer. What's more, it had its mouth wide open ready to lash out. I barely managed to regain my posture, letting out more thread to take some distance.

That was close... It definitely has a finisher. Going off those motions, I just know it would have devoured me and inflicted instant death.

“Kizuna?!”

“You okay?”

“I-I’m fine!”

“That so? Well, it’s good that you’re dealing with those troublesome poison attacks.”

“If it’s hard, you can stand back. Don’t worry about us.”

“Stand back, and then what? If I let go right now, it’s going to snatch my rod away.”

It wasn’t easy getting this stuff. It’d be such a waste to lose it here.

“I know I stand to lose a lot if we fail, but I can’t stand down. Don’t mind me and fight.”

“Understood. Kizuna, let’s win this!”

“Got it! Let’s have a blast!”

With that off the table, Shouko and Tsumugi resumed the fight. *I need to keep my focus on the snake head... What’s my win condition here? Do I reel it in...? No, that just brings me closer to it. The snake will have the advantage in close quarters.*

No, I need to keep my distance and use Pole Fishing to give Shouko and Tsumugi their opportunities to attack. All right, let’s do this thing! Snake! I’ll swing you so hard it’ll get your head spinning!

Left, up, left...right, down... *I’ve got you! Now!*

“Pole Fishing!”

“Hssssh?!”

Yet again, I swung the line taut, pulling the snake straight up and lifting the Chimera’s body off the ground.

Oh? This time I managed to flip the body over.

The beast flailed and thrashed, desperate to get back on its feet. It even managed to remove the hook this time with its frantic motions. That was the

end of that attack pattern.

“That was incredible, bro!”

“Thanks! Let’s finish this!”

“Of course!”

Shouko and Tsumugi exchanged a nod, each brandishing a weapon toward their respective target heads.

I considered attacking the snake as well, as it lay limp and exhausted. *I can probably get in an attack or two before it’s back up. Let’s get up close and personal.*

I raised Cerberus Slaughter high...and unleashed a powerful swing.

“Cleaver!”

I could feel that one packed a punch. After that powerful blow, I quickly backed off.

The Chimera rose shakily once again.

“Grooaaaah!”

It let out a roar as its body lit up, lightning flashing and crackling around it.

“Watch out! It’s going for a big one!”

“Both of you get behind me!”

Shouko retreated to me, spreading her fan wide in a defensive stance.

Lightning raced all across the Chimera’s body, surging through the air around us.

“Hah!” Shouko cried out, parrying the bolts that came flying our way.

Just wow... I’d have been hit if it were just me. You’re insane, Shouko... Well, she might get mad if I say that to her face.

“Gaaawr!”

As the storm subsided, the Chimera wasted no time summoning more of its minions.

“All right! Here we go again!”

“Yes, but I’ve mostly got its attack patterns down. Kizuna, please keep distracting the snake.”

“Yeah, I’ve got it.”

Tasked with handling the snake, I cast my lure again and managed to hook it, doing just as I’d done before to make it easier for Shouko and Tsumugi to fight. The enemy seemed to learn—or perhaps build a resistance to my attacks, and it began to take more and more time and effort to throw it off-balance, but I persevered, giving them openings to strike at.

Incidentally, I managed to hook one of the other heads along the way, and I was able to use that to topple it as well.

Just how many falls did it take? I’d stopped counting at that point, but finally...

“This is...the end!”

There was a heavy thwacking sound as Tsumugi landed the finishing blow on the lion head.

“We did it.”

On another note, Shouko had managed to take out the goat head before Tsumugi had dealt with the lion.

It’s my turn... I thought that the snake head would be next in line, but the moment the lion was down, the Chimera seemed to run out of HP. It collapsed, awarding EXP...in other words, Energy.

“Yep, it was much easier with you around, bro. Out there, we didn’t know you could knock it over like that. Everyone was dodging and tanking and pushing through with antidotes.”

“That’s...about all I could do.”

“Who knew fishing gear could be that useful in a battle?”

“I just used what I had.”

If I’d really wanted to help them out in battle, I would have learned magic like

Yamikage. But I hadn't, and I hadn't worked on my proficiencies either... Honestly, preparing a long-range weapon like a bow would probably be better.

"Oh, here come the drops. This is...a shield?"

This time, the loot spilled straight out of the Chimera's dead body. *Umm... Chimera Viper Shield.*

It gave poison resistance and could inflict various status ailments with a counterattack.

"What do we do with this?" asked Tsumugi. "It's not really suited for me or Shouko."

The issue was that shields had their own mastery skill, and this shield in particular needed a high mastery level to equip it. I was a fishing specialist, and I hadn't raised my shield mastery at all.

"How about we bring it back and talk to Romina about it?"

"Sounds like a plan."

"And now, it's time for the all-important dismantling."

"Right? That's what I've been waiting for."

"Did no one do it in the second wave?"

"Well, you weren't around, and I didn't get MVP. I decided to go home with what I got."

Well, that sounds like Tsumugi... With that thought, I started taking apart the Chimera.

The spoils: Chimera Meat, Chimera Bones, Chimera Skin, Chimera Claws, Chimera Head (Lion), Chimera Head (Goat), Chimera Head (Viper). I thought about dismantling the mobs as well, but they were gone by the time I got around to them.

"Do you think that takes care of all the monsters around the lake?"

"I'd hope so. Look, the purple smoke is gone."

The lake was perfectly clear; it was calm once more.

“Then I’ll get back to my original plan. I’m going fishing. You two can take all the Chimera materials. Pass them over to Romina when you get the chance.”

“Yes, understood.”

“Break a leg. Well ’n... Back to the dungeon.”

After taking a short break, Shouko and Tsumugi set off to explore the sixty-first floor.

†

“No time to waste!”

I took out my fishing rod and cast it into the underground lake. It only took a few minutes before I noted a conspicuous bend in the pole. I didn’t need Fish Detection to know...that this was a small one.

“Fish on!”

I raised my voice with gusto, knowing no one else was around. *It’s pretty nice. I always wanted to shout it at the top of my lungs.*

My catch...

“Crucian carp.”

It was relatively small. I managed to pull it up with ease.

So you can catch normal fish here, huh? I was expecting something a bit stranger, I thought, fiddling with this and that as I dropped the line by the shore.

“Oh?”

This time, the bend was far more dramatic. I started winding the reel.

That’s the resistance I’m looking for. It’s stronger than koi! Fish Detection... The shadow’s too large to tell.

“Oh man! Arowana!”

This was in the game?!

Curious as to what else I might fish in, I devoted myself to fishing, settling on the shores of the lake as though I’d decided to live there. The fact I was in a

dungeon only made things better—no matter how long I spent fishing, only a day would pass by. That was why I'd asked Romina and Sheryl to fashion a camp set.

I'll fish for as long as I can!

By the end of it, I had a good idea of all the fish I could catch underground. Crucian carp, koi, arowana, garpike, piranha. There were also Vampire Fish and Ghost Fish, neither of which existed in reality.

For some reason, I also caught the occasional crab.

Right, now that I think about it, there are things for that...crab traps and fishing nets. As I recall, they're a branch of the fishing tree. Maybe I should try picking them up... But a net might go against the spirit of things. At least, that's not my style. Though I feel like I've already crossed that line with harpoon fishing... That aside, the fish I can catch here are all over the place. There doesn't seem to be anything connecting them.

Again, maybe I wasn't supposed to think about it. Regardless, I fished my heart out.

Chapter 17: Underground Fishing Log

Since I have some time on my hands, I figured I'd try my hand at a log. I'm not sure how long I'll be staying here, but seeing as I've got plenty of time, I'd like to stay as long as I can.

Estimated Day 1 of Fishing Life

I've more or less caught all the types of fish that live here. I can't really tell when one day ends and the next begins. I'll try to eat three square meals, and I'll sleep whenever the drowsiness overtakes me—that's what I'll consider the day's end.

Today, I set up camp early and took a break. I still reel in the occasional Pekkles while fishing. We're short on manpower—er, penpower—right now. Every extra flipper helps.

By the way, I think I might like this map. It feels calming for some reason.

It's quiet, and almost dreamlike—perfect for fishing while I let my mind wander.

Estimated Day 2 of Fishing Life

I'm experimenting with fishing gear today.

I'm testing to see what the most efficient setup is while thinking about how to prepare the fish I catch.

After some close observation, I've realized that the underground lake has a gourd-like shape. Unfortunately, the rock—or rather, the walls—prevent me from going all the way around it.

But that wasn't going to stop me. I used the boat I bought from Sheryl a while back to try rowing myself to the other side. This was supposed to be a safe area, but I feared what would happen if monsters suddenly started popping up... If

that happened, I'd have to make a hasty retreat.

I eventually reached the opposite side of the lake. It didn't seem all that different from where I started.

Estimated Day 3 of Fishing Life

I remembered something about crucian carp and koi. Apparently, they can be pretty delicious if you remove the mud, then fry them or serve them as chilled arai. I've moved away from just sashimi and grilled fish.

They weren't all that bad as sashimi, but they're better like this.

Since I'm in an underground lake, the water is nice and clean, and the fish don't even smell of mud. Maybe it's just because it's a game. Maybe it's a matter of perception.

I have no idea how to cook arowana or garpike.

I can dismantle them, but they don't taste very good as sashimi.

The Ghost Fish can't be dismantled; knives just pass straight through them. If I try grilling them whole, they melt away into the ether.

I think I need a special weapon to deal with them.

Vampyre Fish can be broken down, but they taste foul: far too bloody and raw. If I try cooking them over a fire, they immediately turn to ash. They're clearly not meant to be eaten. I'm sure there's a way to cook them, but not with the tools I have right now.

Estimated Day 4 of Fishing Life

Imagining what life would be like in a tropical zone where arowana thrived, I thought perhaps the best way to cook them would be to roast them whole. So I gave it a try.

Failure after failure, but I kept at it until I got one that seemed properly cooked.

I seasoned it roughly with salt, and the taste still left much to be desired.

The fact that the flavor can reflect the little things you do in free-form cooking really is incredible. I hope that my trial and error can yield some recipe with a decent buff...but maybe improvisation just won't cut it.

Piranha seems better suited for frying. Perhaps the fish and chips dish that Sheryl told me about would be nice? She said she liked mac and cheese more, but I've never had it, so I wouldn't know.

I might as well work on raising my Culinary Art skill while I'm here.

Estimated Day 5 of Fishing Life

I thought there might be a Lord in this underground lake, but I'm not hooking anything. It's an endless loop of crucian and koi, cooked however I feel at the time.

My condolences to the Pekkles, but they'll have to make do with arowana and gar. They were fine eating squid, so I'm sure it'll work out.

Estimated Day 6 of Fishing Life

I tried something that I thought went against my fisherman spirit—free diving.

My swimming skills were pretty low, so I figured now was as good a time as any to raise them.

It was a mistake. The underground lake water is freezing! When I tried swimming around, I started taking damage from the cold.

Thankfully, I had a ready-made bonfire in my camping supplies to warm myself up.

Did they really have to go so far with the swimming system? Sheryl's more impressive than I thought.

After warming up, I returned to fishing.

Estimated Day 7 of Fishing Life

The lake is nice and all, but I decided to see if I could catch anything in the

smaller springs. I dangled my line in one of them for a bit. But nothing was biting.

But, while I was investigating the shore, I found clams! I immediately tossed them into a pot to make clam soup.

There were also crayfish—those would probably be edible if I prepared them properly.

Estimated Day 8 of Fishing Life

Hmm... It's hard to believe there's no Lord in a place like this. There was one at the fishing spot near the First City. Maybe I'm just not meeting the conditions? Or maybe it only appears in certain areas?

Maybe this lake is connected to the pond, and the catfish from up there was supposed to pop up here too. Now that I'm thinking about it, I never fished up the Lord in the Second City.

I'll have to go there one of these days.

Estimated Day 9 of Fishing Life

At this point, I've started to wonder what exactly I'm doing out here, living like a survivalist on the lakefront. Honestly, I don't know. I feel like I've been talking to myself more and more.

This takes me back to my time on the island before I reunited with Shouko... I should've brought someone along with me.

But I don't want to waste all these days I've been given, so back to fishing.

Estimated Day 10 of Fishing Life

There are over three thousand fish in my inventory.

How many more do I need before I can head back? Maybe I should ask Sheryl and Romina for some serious gear and put my fishing life on hold for a bit.

By the way, after some testing, I found that Elemental Conversion has a way

worse yield on these fish than it does on outside fish. Probably because you can stay here for such long periods of time.

Estimated Day 11 of Fishing Life

While observing the lake bed, I've noticed that some areas are deeper than others... I can't shake the feeling that something's lurking in the depths. So, despite the cold, I waded in and started to raise my swimming proficiency while casting my line at the same time.

In the dungeon, my Energy replenishes slower, and my conversion is inefficient. But still, I managed to improve my swimming.

My dive time and movement speed have increased somewhat. Becoming a diving fisherman doesn't sound too bad.

Estimated Day 12 of Fishing Life

So fun! Fishing is great! So tasty! Yum!

Estimated Day 13 of Fishing Life

Looking back on my log entry from yesterday, it reads like what you'd get about three days into an elementary schooler's summer break journal. And what's with that "So tasty!" anyways... Rather than a fisherman's log, this is starting to sound like it was written by a guy who's been bitten in a zombie apocalypse. What was I even thinking?

Now that my swimming skills have improved, I resumed my exploration of the underground lake. As a result, I discovered a hole that led into a hidden side passage. Just how many secrets were packed into this one tiny floor? What's more, I found a mineral vein just beyond it.

After doing some excavating with my drill, I came out with some Starfire Gems and Orichal Ore.

I tried to dive as deep as my lungs would take me, but at my limit, I still couldn't see the bottom. Perhaps there's a place that requires a machinery

crafter to fashion an oxygen tank or something of the sort. A place with a special Diving Lord, perchance?

That's out of my jurisdiction. I might have to bring Sheryl when I get back.

As I looked around, I noticed round moss-covered rocks that gave off an ancient vibe. I scraped off some of the moss to reveal stromatolites.

Estimated Day 14 of Fishing Life

When I cast my line into that secret hole, I caught a splendid alfonsino. Isn't that a sea fish? Isn't this supposed to be an underground lake? But then again, we're stuck on an island, and the water seems to have a slight hint of salt.

It's wild how you can have so much variety in one spot—it could only ever happen in a game.

Estimated Day 15 of Fishing Life

I changed my fishing spot, adjusted my gear, and...

"I guess you can't catch them with the Lure of Light? This time, I'll try using the alfonsino as bait."

Using fish to catch other fish is a pretty common technique. It's often done with sweetfish.

Come to think of it, I haven't tried sweetfish fishing. I'd also like to do some fly fishing in the river once we get back to the continent.

Despite everything that had happened, I'd been mostly stuck with sea fishing... That's why the pond helped to spice things up.

Well, let's be careful not to waste too much fish. Seeing how I scored some valuable ores, let's just call it a fair trade, I thought when my rod gave a sharp bend.

"What? Another arowana?"

It seemed I was on a strange boundary line where I was catching both freshwater and saltwater fish. It wasn't like the mouth of a river either. The

underground lake just seemed to have it all.

I lifted the rod, but something felt different.

What? It's pulling as hard as the catfish.

"Grr... You're really underestimating me. I'm the man who took revenge on that lure-stealing catfish! You think a little tug like this is enough to snap my line?!"

I had the Cal Mira Fishing Line equipped. It wasn't going to break that easily.

Taking a peek with Fish Detection, I saw a large silhouette. I could immediately tell it was different from any fish I'd caught before.

And so, gripping the rod with both hands, I started up the motorized reel and began to pull it in.

My gear is even better than it was last time. Don't underestimate the power of the Giant Catfish Rod!

The twangs, the tugs—I could tell that the hook and line were both under attack. From the sensation in my hands... It had to be a Lord! And an aggressive one too.

If I had Sheryl, perhaps I'd be able to weaken it with her harpoon, but there was no point in pleading to someone who wasn't there! But... *What is this feeling? It's strange. Not like any fish I know. If I had to say, it's closer to the giant squid.*

"Haaaaah!"

The motorized wheel wound the line in at high speeds. The sturdy line held firm, and the Lord was gradually being pulled in.

Heh heh heh heh... My experience with the catfish is paying off.

If I'd come here without going through that fight, I would have faced immediate defeat. In that sense, the catfish was a good rival. He pushed me to greater heights.

I put all of my experience to use and lifted the rod.

Then...much to my surprise, I pulled up what seemed to be the Lord rather

easily.

Its massive body burst from the water's surface with a great splash.



“Fish! Oooooooooon!”

I shouted out—no, I couldn’t contain my voice.

I caught that fish that you sometimes see in survival games and fishing games!

“It’s a coelacanth!”

There was no doubt about it. When I checked my catch, it was labeled Coelacanth Latimeria.

Anyways, I can’t believe I caught one! This is a huge discovery! And it’s a Lord too! I need to share this joy with someone!

Thinking back, I’d spent what felt like fifteen days in the dungeon. Perhaps it was about time to head back.

With that said...it’ll be hard to stow it away like this. I’ll take a screenshot for now.

It looked to be around two meters and fifty centimeters from head to tail. I recalled coelacanths usually ranging between one to two meters, so this was even bigger than that. It was rather hard to accept that it was smaller than the giant catfish, but I wasn’t the one who made the rules. I’d have to live with it.

“Oh?”

I noticed something glimmering on the coelacanth’s forehead.

What’s this? Upon closer inspection, there was a key stuck to it—a glowing key that exuded a peculiar feeling. The moment I touched it, it seemed to lose its magic. The glow faded, and the key fell right into my hand.

Did I get an extra drop without dismantling it?

It was labeled the Key of Ancient Legend.

A key, huh... It must be for something, but I can’t think of any place with a slot to stick it in. Maybe we’ll run into a use for it somewhere down the line? It’s got to be an event item.

“Well, whatever.”

After making an ink rubbing to commemorate the occasion...I got straight to dismantling it. Ancient Fish Mouth, Ancient Fish Head, Ancient Fish Front Fin, Ancient Fish Dorsal Fin, Ancient Fish Pectoral Fin, Ancient Fish Pelvic Fin, Ancient Fish Anal Fin, Ancient Fish Scales, Ancient Fish Hard Scales, Ancient Fish Muscle, Ancient Fish Cartilage, Ancient Fish Heart, Ancient Fish Eyes. Yep, a whole lotta ancient fish parts.

“And that’s that. Time to head home! To be honest, I was starting to get tired of the lake anyway!”

It’s as good a time as any to call it quits. I’ll give it at least three days before I return. With better gear. I’ll have to ask Sheryl about making an oxygen tank.

And with that, after finishing the dismantling of the coelacanth, I patted the dust off my hands, snuffed out the lamp, and left the dungeon.

That much fish should be enough. It’s a huge haul for just a day. Man, I really lucked out. We’ve solved the Pekkles food problem in one go!















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ディメンションウェーブ 2

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