



A LATE-START TAMER'S LAID-BACK LIFE

5

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Prologue

“Now then, what shall I do today?” I wondered aloud as I logged in first thing in the morning. We’d already done a fair bit of mining and item farming in the Earth Elementals’ trial, and it wasn’t like we could take on the mini-boss by ourselves just yet either.

“Already found buyers for my crystals, so that’s covered...”

I had promised the earth crystals I’d obtained from the dungeon to Ashihana and Tagosack. Since Ashihana planned on taking Sawyer with her, it seemed like all of my friends would now have a chance to enter the gate, so I had no reason to attempt the Earth Elementals’ trial again anytime soon.

“Hrm... Maybe I’ll head north today.”

I’d heard you could get goat’s milk in the Northern Town; perhaps I could head there, then move on to Zone Four. Not that I planned on actually tackling the area, of course—I simply thought I might come across a new item or two if I poked around the entrance.

“Gotta take care of our farm first, though.”

Before logging out the night before, I’d stopped by the Undines’ village to purchase a hydroponic pool and installed it on our farm in the Eastern Town. The pool turned out to be much easier to use than I expected, coming prefilled with water. At the moment, the only crops growing in it were the aquatic plants I discovered in the Water Elementals’ trial, which I so far had found no use for besides making moss balls. As it happened, using dried aquatic plants instead of dried weeds resulted in higher-quality moss balls. I was sure the game would eventually introduce new crops that required Hydroponics, though, so I considered the aquatic plants more of a practice run.

“Hum-hum♪”

“You’re in a good mood, Reflet.”

“Hum!”

My Undine, Reflet, splashed about happily in the pool, her light-blue hair glistening like the surface of the ocean. She scooped up the water with her hands and threw it above her, laughing as she bathed in the falling droplets.



“Hum-ha-hum!”

Could this pool serve as a habitat for aquatic monsters? If so, there was a chance I might not need to buy a tank, should I tame a fish or other animal that required water. What had me even more excited, however, was the blackout farm I had bought in the Earth Elementals’ town. This I had installed on our farm in the Town of Beginnings the previous day. For the sake of experimentation, I’d planted a variety of crops, such as medicinal herbs, poison hemlock, firestarter plants, edible grass, spinach, soybeans, cabbavege, white tomatoes, and ultramarine eggplants. I was hoping I’d be able to grow blanched vegetables like white asparagus in this manner.

“Wonder how the blackout farm’s doing?”

“Mm-mm-mm! Mm-mm!”

“...! ...♪”

“Tri-tri-triii!”

The moment I stepped foot on our farm, I was accosted by three energetic monsters. Olto and Sakura tugged at my sleeves while Olea nudged me from behind. *Come on, no need to push so hard!* Judging by how excited they were, there must have been some kind of new development I needed to be aware of. I followed my companions’ lead obediently, letting them drag me along as they pleased. They seemed to be taking me to the orchard.

“What happened?” I asked, perplexed. Just then, I saw a flash of pink out of the corner of my eye.

“What was that? An insect or something?”

I turned to see what appeared to be a flower petal, baby pink in color and adorably dainty. The next moment, several more petals fluttered down from above. I caught one that had gotten stuck in my hair and examined it up close.

“Hey, this is...”

“Mm-mm!”

“...♪”

“Tri-triii!”

So *this* was what my monsters had wanted to show me. No wonder they were so stoked.

“Whoa...” I breathed out a sigh of amazement, drinking in the scenery before us. A cherry blossom tree stood in full bloom, dozens of petals drifting in the wind and turning the landscape pink.

“It’s finally bloomed, huh?”

“Mm!”

“...♪”

“Triii.”

“...”

“...”

The four of us gazed at the cherry blossom tree in silence, mesmerized by its beauty as it swayed majestically in the corner of our orchard.

“...”

I could’ve stayed lost in that moment forever.

Chapter One: Half the Fun Is in the Preparation

The cherry blossom sapling we planted some days ago had matured at last, covering the ground with its soft, pink petals and completely transforming its surroundings. Although cherry blossoms fell into the Miscellaneous Trees category in this game, they still exuded a distinctive charm; perhaps as a Japanese person I simply had an innate affinity for them. I felt oddly moved by the sight of this fully bloomed cherry blossom tree that had sprung up overnight. If I had encountered this scene in real life, I might have shed a tear or two, even though I saw cherry blossoms every year. As much as I longed to continue marveling at it, we still had quite a few tasks to take care of.

“What a sight, eh?”

“Mm!”

“Looks like we can finally finish the flower-viewing picnic quest.”

By that, I was referring to the special quest I triggered when I first obtained the cherry blossom sapling from Pisco:

Special Quest

Requirement: Grow a cherry blossom tree and have a flower-viewing picnic beneath it with Spade, Ryver, and Pisco.

Reward: Three bonus points.

Time Limit: None

I could now continue the quest chain and fulfill my promise to the florist, his brother, and their uncle.

“Wait ’til those guys hear about this!”

Even if this weren’t part of a quest, how could I *not* have a flower-viewing

picnic now that I'd seen this? We could sip on our tea in silence or sing and dance and have a merry time: both sounded equally delightful. I could hardly wait to inform the three NPCs. While I longed to keep staring at the tree, Olto and the others began tugging at my hand again, apparently having something else to show me.

"Huh? There's more?"

"Mm!"

I really had no choice but to follow them. Besides, it wasn't as if the cherry blossoms were going anywhere. This time, my companions led me to our newly installed blackout farm. Although the farm was underground, I could still see fairly well inside thanks to the glowing luminous moss.

"Wow! This is kinda pretty too," I exclaimed, awed by the ethereal glow that the moss on the ceiling cast around us. "Is this okay, though?"

I was worried the luminous moss would defeat the purpose of the blackout farm, but Olto reassured me it was fine.

"Mm!"

"...♪"

"Tri-triii!"

However, that wasn't the only reason my monsters had brought me here. They continued tugging at my hand, urging me to go farther.

"Holy crap!" I gasped. At last, I understood why they had been in such a hurry. "We finally got a white mutation!"

"Mmm!"

To my surprise, there was a white mushroom sprouting from the log I'd been using to grow red panther caps. Granted, it was just one mushroom, but the item was clearly labeled "Red Panther Cap (White)." Evidently, a proper blackout farm *was* essential to growing them.

"Why only one, though? Does this mean blocking out all sunlight doesn't necessarily mean your crops will mutate?"

“Mm-mm!” Olto nodded in reply.

“I see. So if you grow stuff on a blackout farm, there’s only a slight chance you’ll get a mutated crop—not a guarantee.”

I hurriedly checked the other crops, hoping to find similar changes. Unfortunately, most of them looked the same as before, the only difference being a drop in quality. However, there was one crop that *had* undergone a significant transformation: soybeans.

“Huh. So this is how they turned out.”

Interestingly, the soybeans had turned into Soy Bean Sprouts, much like in real life. Moreover, a single bean yielded an impressive amount of sprouts, which meant I could potentially mass-produce them. They also seemed like a great ingredient to spice up my cooking.

“Definitely adding bean sprouts to our to-grow list. Maybe I’ll buy more mushroom logs too.”

I was glad I’d bought the blackout farm. The possibilities seemed endless; I couldn’t wait to see how other vegetables would turn out. As I was thinking about what else I wanted to grow, Bear Bear came over.

“Growl growl!”

They then began tugging at my arm, just like the others had.

“Hey, slow down. What’s up? Did something else happen?”

“Growl!”

Apparently, Bear Bear wanted to show me something too. They led me to Ashihana’s beehive, which worked hard to provide us delicious honey every day and (literally) added flavor to our life.

“Did something happen to the beehive?”

That would be a real problem. Without honey, I wouldn’t be able to make food for Olto or Bear Bear. It didn’t seem to be bad news, though—far from it, if Bear Bear’s smug face was anything to go by.

“Growl growl!”

Bear Bear patted the beehive impatiently, urging me to hurry up. I approached the box gingerly, dodging the honeybees buzzing around it. Even though I knew they were harmless, I couldn't help feeling nervous whenever one flew near me.

"Let's see... Hey, the quality of your honey has gone up! *And* you got more of it than usual!"

The advanced Beekeeping skills Bear Bear acquired through evolution were already producing results. That wasn't the only effect they had, though.

"Whoa, what's this? *Royal jelly*? No way!"

"Growl growl!"

No wonder Bear Bear looked so proud of themselves. From the looks of it, royal jelly was a substance that ranked above honey. In real life, it tasted like crap, but how would it taste in-game?

"Hey, Bear Bear. Can you still get this stuff tomorrow?"

"Growl."

Bear Bear made a gesture with their hand, signaling an itty-bitty amount. It seemed like the beehive could only produce one or two units per day. If that was the case, though, surely it wouldn't hurt to try a bit now.

"Time for a taste test..." I said, taking the jelly out of my inventory. Unlike the royal jelly I was used to seeing in real life, this had an amber hue similar to regular honey and felt sticky to the touch. I scooped some up and put it into my mouth.

"Hm? This is actually good!"

"Growl..."

The jelly was sweeter than honey, with a slight bitter aftertaste. Rather than ruin the flavor, however, this bitterness enhanced it, making the jelly all the more delicious. Honestly, it made a helluva good snack, even on its own. Royal jelly seemed to be one of Bear Bear's favorite foods, as I caught them staring at me wistfully while I savored it.

"...C-C'mon, don't look at me like that. I'll let you try some tomorrow, okay?"

“Growl?”

“I promise. Cross my heart.”

“Growl!”

At this rate, I would probably need to build more beehives. Besides, if I could produce royal jelly in larger quantities, we might be able to sell it for a pretty good price.

“First things first, let’s harvest the remaining crops. Rick, Fau, Reflet. You guys wanna help?”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Aye♪”

“Hum!”

The little ones, who had been staring at us enviously, immediately perked up at my call. As much as they longed to play, they seemed to understand that we’d been in the middle of something important, so they had refrained from interrupting us until now. *Bless you, cutie-pies.*

“Awesome. Shall we start with our medicinal herb patch, then?” I suggested. As their master, it was only right that I gave everyone equal attention. When we arrived at our vegetable garden, I discovered something I couldn’t possibly ignore.

“Dang, would you look at that?! They’ve actually grown!”

Unbelievably, the unknown seeds I had created through my Selective Breeding experiments were now ready for harvest.

“Cure Carrots and Lantern Pumpkins, eh?”

Name: Cure Carrot

Rarity: 2 / Quality: 1★

Effect: A crop created via Selective Breeding. Recovers hunger status by 1% plus 5 HP. (10-minute cooldown)

Name: Lantern Pumpkin

Rarity: 2 / Quality: 1★

Effect: A crop created via Selective Breeding. Recovers hunger status by 6%.

Cure carrots were like ordinary carrots, except that they had a pink heart pattern on their leaves. These carrots would allow me to create dishes with more potent healing properties. Ever since seeing them at a stall, I had longed to get my hands on them; now, I finally had one. Lantern pumpkins were basically jack-o'-lanterns, i.e., the ones you saw during the Halloween season. The pumpkin had carved-out holes in place of its eyes, nose, and mouth, from which I could see a flame flickering inside.

"It won't, like, start a *fire*, will it?" I muttered worriedly.

"Mm?"

"Hmm... Oh well, guess I'll remind everyone to keep an eye on it."

What can I use this pumpkin for? I wondered. While I was curious to see what it tasted like, I couldn't eat this one as we needed to propagate it. The taste test could come later. Given its festive appearance, it would make a nice decoration at the very least, even if it lacked in the flavor department.

"In any case, we'll need to propagate it first so we have more to work with. I'm counting on you, Olto, Olea, and Bear Bear."

"Mm!"

"Tri-triii!"

"Growl growl!"

Despite all the changes they underwent during evolution, one thing that remained the same was their customary salute. If anything, their movements seemed more refined than ever.

"Sure is nice to see all these developments on our farm."

Lately, we'd been pretty active on the battlefield, which made me all the

more grateful for peaceful moments like this. I much preferred doing farmwork with my monsters to risking our lives fighting scary enemies in a dark and dreary dungeon. That said, I knew I'd probably start to thirst for adventure once I got tired of pulling weeds.

"Aye!"

"Chirp chirp!"

While weeding a patch, I heard Fau and Rick from the green peach tree overhead. I looked up to see them waving at me from one of the branches. Rick I could understand, but how did *Fau* get up there? I knew she had Jumping skills, but I didn't think she could jump *that* high. As if to answer my question, the pair shinnied down the tree, revealing a smug Fau astride Rick's back. Ah, so that was how she had "climbed" the tree. It all made perfect sense now.

"Ahoy there, squirrel rider."

"Aye."

"Chirp chirp."

Fau held on to the edges of Rick's bandana as though they were reins: they appeared to be just the right size for her to grab. She looked at ease in her perch, exuding the confidence of a seasoned jockey. I hadn't noticed until now, but apparently, they had become accustomed to traveling this way. It was probably impractical for Rick to piggyback Fau across the actual playing field as it slowed down his movements considerably, but so what? *Come on, a fairy riding a squirrel? How adorable is that?* Even though I saw them every day, I couldn't stop myself from snapping photo after photo in a frenzy.

"Good, good. Hold it right there."

"Aye!"

"Chirp!"

Not that I intended to make a profit off my monsters, but the pair were so cute together that if I were to sell these photos, people would be falling all over each other to buy them.

"Whoops, almost forgot. Gotta hurry up and finish our work."

We had a busy day ahead of us, now that we had a picnic to prepare for. Once we'd taken care of our daily tasks on the farm, I headed to the Farming Guild. I'd just remembered there was a quest to deliver a crop with a white mutation, and the panther cap I'd harvested fit the bill perfectly. I also delivered some soybean sprouts and aquatic plants from my hydroponic pool, bringing my total compensation to 5,000 G. More importantly, my guild rank had gone up, which meant I could sell additional items at my farm stand and employ more advanced NPCs—not that these NPCs were much more skilled, so it was hardly worth shelling out for them. *But who knows?* I thought. Maybe I'd be able to hire some really skilled NPCs once my rank was high enough.

Our next stop was Lewin's stall. Bear Bear was currently butt naked, having outgrown all their clothes when they evolved. Not that it mattered much since they were a bear, but it was still better when it came to combat to have some protective gear. Before logging out yesterday, I'd given Lewin some materials to work with, including a few items I'd retrieved from the Adventurers' Guild. Since he was in the Northern Town today, I hurried onwards with Bear Bear.

"Hi!" I greeted the blacksmith.

"Growl growl."

"Hey. Good to see ye again," Lewin replied. His gaze settled on Bear Bear, who also raised their right paw in greeting. "Your bear's gear is ready."

"Can't wait to see it! May I?"

"Here ya go."

Name: Cape of Protection

Rarity: 3 *Quality*: 6★ Durability: 280

Effect: Defense +48, minor resistance to magic.

Requirement: Sanity 12 or higher.

Weight: 6

Name: Mud Vest

Rarity: 2 *Quality*: 9★ Durability: 190

Effect: Defense +20, slight boost to Underwater Breathing and Night Vision.

Requirement: Intelligence 7 or higher.

Weight: 3

Name: Blue Quartz Brooch

Rarity: 3 *Quality*: 6★ Durability: 260

Effect: Defense +11, slight chance of reducing damage taken.

Requirement: Endurance 15 or higher.

Weight: 1

"Damn, that's strong!" I exclaimed in awe.

"Ain't it? I worked really hard on 'em, y'know."

Bear Bear's new equipment was far more powerful than what I was wearing. Not only did the gear have a higher rarity, but the requirements were also much stricter. Lewin had made excellent use of the drops I'd received and items I'd found in the Earth and Water Elementals' trials. The overall effect was incredibly flashy, though. The Cape of Protection, which was mostly made with the Earth Elementals' Guardian's drops, was shaped like a poncho—not the fashionable kind typically worn in South America, but the kind kindergarteners wore on rainy days. The cape was a brilliant sky blue, giving a cute rather than dapper impression. I supposed that was more up Bear Bear's alley anyway.

The Mud Vest underneath was dark brown, with a stylish turndown collar. I was confused by the use of the word "mud," but I guessed it meant the vest combined both water and earth attributes. Lastly, we had the Blue Quartz Brooch made with the gemstone I found. As the name suggested, it was a decorative ornament with a blue quartz embedded in it, twinkling on Bear Bear's vest like a medal. While it only had a slight chance of reducing damage, it

was still a welcome addition, given that Bear Bear was a frontline attacker. Coupled with the cape's magic resistance, they would likely fare well as a tank alongside Olto.

"Here you go. Thanks for everything," I said, counting out 60,000 G and handing it to Lewin.

"Eh, don't mention it. Pleased to do business with ya!"

It was pretty expensive, especially considering I'd brought my own materials, but the final result was well worth the price. Besides, it seemed that Lewin had needed to pull from his own supplies as well for the job.

"Here, take this too," he added, tossing me something else.

"What's this...?" I asked, catching the item. "A bandana? No, a scarf?"

"For your squirrel. Can't have him runnin' around with that weakass gear forever, can we?"

Lewin had tossed me a red scarf with a tiny quartz-like pattern embroidered on it.

Name: Guardian's Scarf

Rarity: 3 *Quality*: 5★ Durability: 210

Effect: Defense +19, minor resistance to paralysis, poison, and bleeding.

Weight: 1

The scarf was way more powerful than I expected. Could I really accept such a gracious gift from him?

"Don't worry. I made it with whatever was left over, so it ain't like I'm losin' any money," he assured me, sensing my hesitation.

"Well, if you say so. Sure you don't mind, though?"

"If it bothers ya that much..."

"Yes?"

“Yer can, uh, y’know...” Lewin faltered. It wasn’t like him to beat around the bush. Did he want me to pay extra after all?

“...Bring the squirrel next time.”

“Come again?”

“I said, bring your squirrel next time! Ya hear me?!”

Apparently, Lewin was a fan of Rick. I had to say, though, it was kind of cringey to see a burly, bearded dwarf blushing furiously over a tiny rodent.

“G-Gotcha. I’ll make sure to bring him next time.”

“Ya better!”

Considering how often he helped me, I supposed it wouldn’t hurt to grant his humble request. I made a mental note to let him pat Rick to his heart’s content the next time we visited him. That took care of our equipment for now. Although I debated getting a new robe for myself, I decided against it in the end, choosing to wait for the upcoming auction instead. Even if I couldn’t get a ready-made robe there, I could still make a new one as long as I got some high-quality materials.

“Guess it’s finally time to send out those invitations.”

After returning to the Town of Beginnings, I headed to the florist run by Spade. The old man was attending to his work as usual, his gruff appearance incongruous with the dainty flowers surrounding him.

“Hi, Spade.”

“Ah, Yuto, my boy! Long time no see.”

“Yeah, it’s been a while.”

“What brings ye here today, son?”

“Remember the cherry blossom tree from a while back? It’s finally in full bloom, so I thought I’d invite you to a picnic.”

“Well, fancy that! That’s wonderful!”

Upon hearing that, Spade beamed with delight.

“In that case, I’ll contact Ryver and Uncle Pisco. Can ya find other people to join us, Yuto?”

“Huh? You wanna invite *more* people?”

“That’s right, my boy! The more, the merrier!”

Special Quest

Requirement: Invite players and NPCs to a flower-viewing picnic.

Reward: Changes depending on the number of participants.

Time Limit: 3 hours

Damn, another quest? I hadn’t been expecting that.

“Meet ya under the cherry blossom tree in three hours! Ye good? Want me to ask around if ya have trouble finding people to join us?” Spade offered.

“No, it’s okay. I’ll hit up my friends,” I replied.

“Ya sure? Okay, I’ll letcha handle it then.”

Since the number of participants determined what we would get, I wanted to invite as many people as possible. I decided to go through my entire contact list and phone everyone up one by one. The first person on my list was Ashihana. Once I’d confirmed she was online, I pressed the call button and waited for her to pick up. I hoped she wasn’t *too* busy, though, considering she was one of the top Woodcutters in LJO...

“Hello?” Ashihana answered after a few rings.

“Hey. You busy now?” I asked.

“Not at all. What’s up?”

I told Ashihana about my plan to host a flower-viewing picnic as part of a special quest and explained that I was looking for people to join me. No sooner had I finished talking than I received an enthusiastic yes to my invitation.

“You sure?”

“Bear Bear will be there, won’t they?”

“Well, of course...”

“Then I’ll be there *too!*”

I supposed she wasn’t Bear Bear’s number one fan for nothing. Those three words were all the motivation Ashihana needed to accept my invitation. I supposed I could have Bear Bear pour her a drink in return; I just hoped their sudden growth spurt wouldn’t shock her too much. *Oh well.* If it did, then too bad.

“G-Great. We can never have too many people.”

“Shall I invite my friends too, then?”

“Sure, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Leave it to me! I’ll make sure to bring some food too, so don’t worry!”

Now that she mentioned it, I’d totally forgotten about preparing food and drinks. Even if I offered up every single food item in my inventory, I doubted it’d be enough to go around. I was grateful for every bit of help I could get.

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“No problem. See you in a bit!”

Next on the list was Amelia. As a fellow Tamer, I was pretty confident she would accept my invitation.

“Hey, are you free?”

“Mhm. Just recharging in the Earth Elementals’ town.”

Damn, *still?* Was she trying to clear the dungeon? *She might not be up for a picnic in that case.*

“Oh, okay.”

“What’s up?” she asked, hearing my disappointment.

“Thing is, I’m actually having a flower-viewing picnic today, and I was hoping you could come if you were free. I understand if you’re too busy, tho—”

“No no no, I’ll come! Olto’s gonna be there, right?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“Yay! I get to have a picnic with Olto!”

Both Ashihana and Amelia seemed hell-bent on joining. Amelia already had a gnome, though—did she really need to go out of her way to come see Olto?

“You’re missing the point! Sure, my little honey buns are cute, but Olto’s *special!*” Amelia replied hotly to my question.

“I mean, he is a unique specimen, but...”

“That’s not what I meant! Like okay, say you see a cute Chihuahua on TV and fall madly in love with it. Even if you eventually get one of your own, the dog that first ignited your love for Chihuahuas still has a special place in your heart, right?! That’s how I feel about Olto!”

“R-Right...” I nodded. I *sort of* got her analogy. “Anyway, the picnic’s in three hours at my farm in the Town of Beginnings. Think you can make it back in time?”

“No problem.”

“I’d also appreciate it if you could bring some food.”

“Okey dokey, I’ll buy something on the way! Hey, do you mind if I invite someone else?”

“Not at all. Be my guest.”

“Cool! I’ll bring my friends then!”

Since Amelia accepted my invitation, I already had two confirmed guests. I continued going down my list of friends who were online in the same manner. In the end, the following people agreed to come to the picnic: Ashihana the Woodcutter; gnome fanatic Amelia; Alyssa, trusty information broker and submaster of the Quick-Eared Cats; high schooler Tamer Ivan; sexy villainess incarnate Ursula; Siegfried the hardcore knight LARPer aka Purple-Haired Adventurer; Sawyer the underage-looking Alchemist elf; dependable biker-chick Farmer Tagosack; newbie duo Tsuyoshi and Takayuki; ninja-wannabe couple Murakage and Ayakage; and lastly, Lewin, the Quick-Eared Cats’ blacksmith.

I wasn't sure if that was too many guests or too few, but most of my friends had promised to show up. The only people I couldn't get in touch with were fellow unique-titleholder Akari—aka the Ruby Red Explorer—Amimin, and Mattsun as they were offline at the moment. Although I hadn't given it much thought earlier, now that I'd rung up all of my friends, I was starting to get a bit worried.

"Crap, did I invite too many people...?"

Enticed by the prospect of a bigger reward, I had invited a total of thirteen people. That might have been a bit much. If each person brought one friend, that would double our guest count; once you included Spade, Ryver, Pisco, and me, we already had thirty participants. The barn next to the cherry blossom tree was far too small to host such a large group. Fortunately, I'd avoided planting anything around the tree, so the four slots adjacent to it were available for use. At first, I thought that might be too much space, but if I took my Tamer friends' monsters into account—I doubted they would leave their companions behind—it was probably better to have a little extra room.

"Can't have a picnic without a picnic blanket. I don't have one, though."

Even though this was just a game, having my guests sit directly on the ground didn't feel right.

"Hmm, do we have a bench or something...? Oh good, we have chairs."

Thankfully, Sakura had made plenty of chairs with her Woodworking skills. We also had several tables. If I placed them around the open space, I could almost make it look like an outdoor café. I also had quite a few floor chairs in my inventory—that was, chairs without legs. I had asked Sakura to make a few prototypes so we had something to sit on during our breaks in places that had uneven surfaces, such as dungeons. Apparently, nailing the balance was pretty hard, however, and we had ended up with a significant number of unsuccessful products. Although they worked just fine, they had been rejected for various reasons, such as having the wrong color or back angle, as well as a less-than-ideal rating. I had initially planned on selling them at my farm stand, but I decided to use them for our picnic instead. While it would've been nice to have a straw mat too, I'd never seen one except for the protective straw mat

Ashihana showed me a while back.

“That just leaves food and drinks.”

Although I’d asked everyone to bring something, I was the one who’d invited them in the first place. I’d be a lousy host if I took advantage of my friends’ generosity and didn’t contribute anything myself.

“I should get drinks at the very least.”

The wine Reflet and I had brewed the other day was ready, but I had to buy some juice too, given that we had a few underage guests. If they were okay with herbal tea, I had more than enough to go around and then some; however, since this was a party, wine or juice seemed more fitting for a toast. The amount of food and snacks in my inventory was nowhere near enough for a crowd of this size.

“I should go buy some stuff in the square.”

There were plenty of player-and NPC-run stalls there; I was sure I could find something suitable for the occasion.

“Olto, Olea, Bear Bear. Take care of our work on the farm in the meantime, okay?”

“Mm-mm!”

“Trrrr!”

“Growl growl!”

Since I had no idea how long our picnic would last, it was probably better to get today’s chores done while we had the chance. I instructed Fau and Reflet to make more herbal tea leaves and cook some easy dishes, and Sakura to build more tables. We still had over two hours until the party, so as long as we didn’t aim for anything too fancy, she could probably make two or three additional tables. I also asked her to make some cups, plates, and chopsticks if she had time.

“Bye, guys. See you in a bit.”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Hey, buddy. You coming?”

“Chirp!”

I had planned on going shopping alone, but it seemed like Rick wanted to accompany me—not because he was trying to be helpful, but because he had no task of his own and was bored.

“Hmm, what to buy...?” I pondered, knuckling Rick’s head affectionately as we strolled through the Town of Beginnings.

“Chirp.”

Just then, one of the stalls in the square caught my eye.

“Hey, aren’t those straw mats?”

Well, would you look at that? One of the player-run stalls in the plaza was selling some beige items that could only be straw mats: just the thing I needed for the picnic. Rows of rolled-up, woven straw mats were on display, stacked on top of each other. It reminded me of those videos of outdoor markets in other countries where people sometimes sold carpets.

“Sup. Feel free to look around.” The owner greeted me half-heartedly.

“Excuse me. Are these protective straw mats?” I asked.

The stall was manned by a brown-haired, surfer-type dude. Contrary to his lazy manner of speech, however, he appeared to have a genuine desire to help me out, explaining, “Sorry, dude. Those are just plain ol’ straw mats.”

He seemed to have misunderstood my intent—if anything, it *was* the regular ones I wanted.

“Hey, how much are these?” I asked.

“Huh? I already told you, dude, they don’t offer any protection.”

“Which is perfect, since I was actually looking for regular ones. How much for the largest one?”

It seemed he had been asked that question one too many times by customers seeking protective straw mats, and he figured I was like the rest. While he was a general Craftsperson who usually made wooden crafts and handicrafts, he had

decided to make these standard straw mats as a practice run for the protective type. He'd then put them on display, thinking they would draw attention to his shop. Unfortunately, his plan backfired, as almost every player who visited him got upset once they learned the mats offered nothing special. I didn't blame them, though; protective straw mats were pretty revolutionary, given that they enabled you to rest in non-safety zones without fear of being attacked. I could understand why customers might be mad that they had been drawn in by false advertising.

"That'll be 1,000 G per mat."

Really? That was pretty cheap. Or would it be on the expensive side, considering it didn't have any magical properties? *Eh, whatever—I'll just buy two.* It wouldn't be right to have a flower viewing without some sort of picnic blanket. That was something I refused to compromise on, even if I wouldn't have any use for these mats again in the future. Surfer dude and I ended up briefly bonding over straw mats, my original mission to buy food for our party momentarily forgotten. I also learned that in order to make straw mats, you needed a skill called Handiwork in addition to Woodworking, which sadly meant that Sakura wouldn't be able to make them. *What a pity.*

"What should we make for our party?" I pondered aloud as we left the guy's stall. "Doubt we have time for anything overly complicated. What's something that's tasty and easy to make...?"

Hopefully something that went well with alcohol. Or would it be better to prepare a separate set of snacks for that?

"Chirp?"

"I know nuts are good, buddy, but that's not really what I had in mind." I shook my head at Rick, who had pulled out a blue acorn I'd given him to use as a nut bomb. While it might be a delicious treat for him, it didn't seem appropriate to offer that to my guests as party food.

"No, hang on... That might actually be tasty."

"Chirp!"

Could roasted acorns serve as a substitute for mixed nuts?

“Let’s give it a taste test.”

I accepted the blue acorn from Rick and tried peeling it, but the shell refused to come off. Giving up, I bit straight into it.

“Blegh!”

“Chirp...”

Rick shot me a dirty look as I spat out the acorn and tried to rid my mouth of the aftertaste.

“Sorry. I know spitting is nasty.”

“Chirp.”

Although it had a nice crunch to it like most nuts, it was dreadfully bitter. There was no way I could serve these as is. A real shame that was, especially as they tasted so good in cookies or pancakes.

“Wait a minute. Nuts... Of course! Roasted beans would probably make a good substitute for roasted nuts, right?”

“Chirp!”

“Plus, they’re cheap, so I can make them in big batches!”

“Chirp chirp!”

Having decided on my next move, I set off for the Village of Alf. During LJO’s first large-scale event, half of the villagers had been missing due to the Martial Arts Tournament, causing business to stagnate. Now that everything was back to normal, there were fewer restrictions on the items you could purchase, particularly fish and fruit. You could even buy cheese in large quantities, so I had no problem obtaining enough food for the roughly thirty people I anticipated.

“Just gotta buy some soybeans now.”

“Chirp chirp...”

“Ew, gross! Don’t drool on my shoulder, Rick!”

Rick stared at the roasted bean stall, a waterfall of saliva dripping from his mouth. He was like a miniature version of some large, dopey dog, like a mastiff,

eagerly waiting for permission to eat its food.

“Oh my god, my shoulder’s actually wet!”

“Chirrrp!”

“Okay, okay! I’ll buy you some, so *stop drooling!* And don’t give me that look!”

“Chirp.”

“Why you little... You did that on purpose, didn’t you?”

“Chirp?”

Damn it! Quit looking at me with those innocent puppy eyes! How dare you wash your face and whiskers so adorably?!

“You sly dog... Did you really think I would fall for...for your tric—”

“Chirp chirp?”

“Gah, you’re too cute for your own good!”

Don’t tilt your head to the side like that! How could I possibly get mad now?!

“...Fine. We’re getting alcohol and meat after this, though, got it?” I sighed in defeat.

“Chirp!”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Three bags of roasted beans, please.”

“Three bags, coming right up!” the woman running the stall replied cheerily. *Oh well. Consider that your reward for reminding me to buy soybeans, buddy.*

Cromch cromch!

Rick was powerless before his favorite food, abandoning all self-restraint as he shoved his head inside the bag and began gobbling up the beans. Soon he was waist-deep in the bag, with only his fluffy tail sticking out.

Cromch cromch cromch cromch!

He truly was aggressive when it came to soybeans, turning from a cute squirrel into some kind of ravenous beast. I recalled the same thing happening a couple of times: once in the Town of Beginnings and once in Alf. And still, he

showed no sign of giving me his Tamed Monster's Heart... I supposed that meant his favorability score wasn't high enough yet.

"What am I doing wrong, I wonder?"

Cromch cromch cromch cromch cromch cro—

"I take it you aren't listening..."

Cromch cromch cromch.

Once we had taken care of the shopping—well, once *I* had taken care of it while Rick was busy eating his roasted beans—we returned to our farm and started cooking away. Most of the dishes and drinks we made were simple fare, such as grilled meat or fish and juice, but the new condiments Reflet made with her Fermentation skills added plenty of zing. For the grilled meat dishes we used three types of meat, each marinated in a variety of flavors such as garlic soy sauce, miso, salt and pepper, garlic olive oil, and herb salt. That was sure to satisfy all of my guests.

"All right, that should be enough for food. Next, we gotta set up the picnic space!"

We only had about thirty minutes until the party was scheduled to start, so we had to hurry. I didn't plan on doing anything fancy, though; once I'd spread out the straw mats, set up the tables and chairs, and stacked the floor chairs for those who preferred them over regular ones, my work would be done.

"Where should I put the ma—"

"Yoo-hoo! Silver-Haired!"

While I considered the layout, I heard someone call my name. I turned around to find Amelia already waiting outside my farm. Damn, that was fast! I also spotted a few familiar faces beside her.

"Amelia! Marca! Good to see you again."

"Long time no see."

"Hey."

"I see you've got yourself more gnomes," I commented, eyeing the three

gnomes accompanying Amelia. She introduced me to each of them while stroking Bun Bun, who was perched on her head.

“But don’t think I’m done yet. I won’t stop until I get a unique specimen like Olto! My dream is to someday form a party solely made up of rabbits and gnomes—a bunny-gnomey party!”

It looked like she planned on completing every evolution route for rabbits and gnomes. Well, she wasn’t a Beast Tamer and gnome fanatic for nothing. Next to her was Marca, Bear Bear’s self-proclaimed number one fan, and her party members, who had fought with us on the same server during the village event.

“You said you wanted more people, so I invited them too!” Amelia smiled sheepishly.

“Silver-Haired! Where’s Bear Bear?!” Marca asked, eyes flashing.

“Huh? Over there, working.”

“Bear Beaaaarrr! ...Gack!”

Marca let out a weird half yelp, half grunt as she tried to step inside my farm.

“There’s some kind of invisible wall here!” she cried, stroking the bridge of her nose. I almost forgot—you couldn’t enter other players’ homes unless you were friends with them. *Wait a minute...* Did that mean I had to befriend every single player I wasn’t friends with for them to join the picnic?

“Hey, I see them! Bear Bear, my darling! Hewwo!”

“G-Growl growl!”

Bear Bear, who had come over to see what was going on, blinked in surprise as they dodged Marca’s pounce hug. That said, she couldn’t have touched Bear Bear anyway since we weren’t friends yet. Marca refused to be deterred, however, scuttling like a cockroach towards Bear Bear after face-planting in the ground.

“Bear Bear...”

“G-Growl...”

“Heh heh heh. You’re so big and strong...”

“GROWL!”

Marca slowly army-crawled towards Bear Bear, closing in on them until their back was against the wall across the street from our farm. I could practically hear Bear Bear screaming, “No! Leave me alone!” from the way they shook their head, desperately trying to get away from Marca. They didn’t have to be *that* freaked out by her, though—it wasn’t like this was their first time meeting her.

“Wh-Why, Bear Bear...? Why can’t I touch you...?” Marca wailed, sniffing. I was starting to feel sorry for her. Before I knew it, I had sent her a friend request, unable to bear her pitiful groveling any longer. Even if she hadn’t gone after Bear Bear, though, I’d planned on sending her one anyway. If anything, I should’ve become friends with her long ago, considering how much she’d helped me during the event.

“What’s this...? Are you sure, Silver-Haired?”

“Uh-huh. Feel free to cuddle Bear Bear as much as you like. Just don’t do anything that makes them too uncomfortable.”

“Got it! Thanks so much!”

With that, Marca threw herself at Bear Bear again. She latched onto their body, which had grown since the last time they met, hands roaming over their furry torso. Sensing there was no escape, Bear Bear stood stock-still, letting Marca do as she pleased. Had I been too hasty in my decision? *Forgive me, Bear Bear.* I apologized silently, unsure if I ought to help them or not.

“Um, we’re really sorry about Marca.”

“I’m sure she’ll calm down in a bit.”

“Where do you want this table, by the way?”

Marca’s party members, who I’d befriended at the same time as her, offered to help, bowing apologetically. *Hang in there, Bear Bear. You’ll be free soon.* Just as I’d offered up a silent prayer for them, another guest arrived.

“Hiya, Yuto. I’m here.” Ashihana beamed.

“Hm? Ashihana?”

Ashihana was another fan of Bear Bear. That could only mean...

“AAAHHH!”

Too late. Upon seeing Marca hugging Bear Bear, she let out a loud shriek.

“B-Bear Bear’s so *big*! I’d heard rumors about it, but... Gosh, I can’t handle so much cuteness!”

Oh, *that* was what made her scream. Unfortunately, she immediately transferred her attention to Marca and marched up to her angrily. The two women glared daggers at each other, each viewing the other as a threat.

“Excuse me? Who do you think you are?!”

“I could ask you the same question! How *dare* you interrupt my cuddling session with Bear Bear?!”

“Ugh, the nerve! Who gave you permission to hug them, huh?!”

“Duh, Silver-Haired. Who else?” Marca scoffed at Ashihana, not bothering to hide her irritation. *Hey! Don’t drag me into this!* Sadly, my prayers went unanswered as Ashihana turned on me furiously.

“Yuto! Who the hell is that bitch?!”

She was the spitting image of a jealous wife who’d just caught her husband being unfaithful to her. With skills like that, she could probably star in a soap opera if she ever considered becoming an actor. However, being the recipient of such a glare was nothing short of terrifying.

“Um, well, you see... Could you lower your voice a bit? You’re scaring Bear Bear. Also, can’t you two get along? Look, Bear Bear wants you guys to make up too.”

“G-Growl?”

Bear Bear shook their head and gestured wildly, denying all claims. *You little rascal.* Deep down, they probably weren’t as bothered as they pretended to be. Surprisingly enough, my last-ditch attempt to appease the quarrel actually had a noticeable effect on the two women.

“Hrm...”

“Grr...”

On hearing my words, Ashihana and Marca came to a halt and ceased arguing. *Good. One more push ought to do it.*

“Do you want Bear Bear to be sad?”

Both women glanced at Bear Bear simultaneously before glaring at each other again. Fortunately, there was no more yelling this time.

“We mustn’t make Bear Bear sad.”

“Obviously. No need to remind me.”

“What do you say we take turns playing with Bear Bear?”

“That’s probably for the best.”

Phew. It looked like they had calmed down for now.

“Bear Bear? Sorry for startling you like that.”

“Growl.”

“Heh heh.”

“Growl growl.”

Marca grinned as she rubbed Bear Bear’s stomach affectionately. I had to admit, the woman had based taste—that was one of my favorite places to pet too. Naturally, Ashihana wasn’t one to stay quiet before such a tempting sight.

“Ahem... Isn’t it *my* turn now?”

“Shh! Just a few more minutes.”

“You were already playing with Bear Bear before I arrived!”

“Well, I haven’t had my fill yet!”

“Move aside and let me have my turn already!”

“NEVER!”

Nope, I was wrong. They hadn’t made up at all. Marca and Ashihana pulled Bear Bear in opposite directions as though they were each trying to receive one half of Bear Bear’s body, as Solomon proposed in that famous biblical tale.

Actually, now that Bear Bear had grown, perhaps it was more fitting to describe the scene as two women fighting over their lover.

“Grr!”

“Hngh!”

However, due to Bear Bear’s teddy-bearlike appearance, I got the instinctive feeling they might be ripped into two if I wasn’t careful. *Time to intervene*, I thought, taking a step towards them. The next instant...

“Growl growl!”

“Gak!”

“Hwah!”

Bear Bear had finally resorted to force. About time too—they could have acted a lot sooner if they wanted. Marca and Ashihana rolled away from each other, having received a good socking. Peculiarly, Bear Bear followed this up by posing pigeon-toed with their paws crossed in front of their chest—a classic, “Please don’t fight for my sake!” pose you would expect of a clichéd romance protagonist. *Aha. You’re secretly into this, aren’t you, Bear Bear?*

“Hello? You two okay?” I asked.

“Mmm. That was a great punch.”

“I’d let Bear Bear punch me anytime.”

Clearly, these two were not okay, and in more ways than one. I had to put a stop to this before they attempted the same thing again.

“Look. If you keep this up, Bear Bear’s gonna get fed up with you.”

“No, please!”

“Anything but that!”

Honestly, I had a feeling these two would get along with each other pretty well.

“Anyway, Bear Bear has their preferences too, just like everybody else. At this rate, you’re pretty much guaranteed to earn a spot on their list of things they dislike. Who knows, they might already hate you.”

“Oh gawd!”

“B-Bear Bear...?”

The last sentence gave Ashihana and Marca a jolt as though they had been struck by lightning. Slowly, the two women turned around to face Bear Bear, fear etched on their faces.

“Growl growl.”

The next instant, Bear Bear patted each of them on the shoulder, grasped their hands, and brought them together. Apparently, they were trying to make them shake on it.

“I think they’re saying they’ll forgive you if you promise to make up and stop being so clingy.”

“Okay, I promise! No more fighting!”

“Will you forgive us now?!”

Good grief. Don’t wear me out before the picnic’s even started. I didn’t want them to start up another fight, so I decided to be extra firm with my boundaries.

“Look here, we’re having a picnic in a bit. If you two start bickering again and dampen the mood, I’m kicking you out, got it?”

“Yes, sir...” the two women mumbled together.

“You sound unhappy about it. Bear Bear doesn’t like people who can’t follow the rules.”

“Growl.”

Catching my drift, Bear Bear crossed their arms and nodded gravely. Immediately, Marca and Ashihana leaped to their feet and yelled in unison.

“Okay! We’ll behave ourselves!”

I knew it—these two were like two peas in a pod. I really hoped they could set aside their differences, at least for the duration of the party.

“Feel free to ignore them if they cross the line, Bear Bear.”

“Growl!”

Since physical discipline had more of a gratifying effect on the two, ignoring them seemed the best form of punishment. Once that had been taken care of, I picked up where I’d left off, Marca’s party members apologizing profusely on her behalf while we prepared the venue. They sounded pretty worn out too.

“I swear, she’s usually way more levelheaded...”

“Well, she can’t have a pet in real life. This is the closest thing that comes to it.”

“We’re really, *really* sorry.”

Bear Bear enjoyed physical contact, so in truth, I didn’t think they minded the glomping too much. They probably would’ve run away much sooner if it had made them genuinely uncomfortable. Shortly, another batch of guests arrived.

“Hello? Did we come at a bad time?”

“Is this where the picnic’s being held?”

“Whoa, check out this farm!”

“Of course Silver-Haired would have an amazing setup!”

The next group consisted of Tagosack, Fuka, and a few other players. That was an interesting combination—I hadn’t expected to see these two women together. According to Tagosack, however, Fuka was her number one customer for vegetables, given that she was a cook. When she put it like that, it made a lot of sense. The other players in the group were all either farmers or chefs, some of whom I recognized from the event server. After promptly adding everyone as a friend, I ushered them into my farm.

“Thanks for invitin’ us today, mate.” Tagosack grinned. “Speakin’ of food, mind if we cook here?”

“Wait, you can cook?” I blinked in surprise. I hadn’t taken her as the domestic type. It was hard to imagine her cooking in her farmer’s overalls, although it could be a good look for cooking on a teppanyaki grill. Furthermore, discovering that a tough-as-nails, macho woman was secretly a whiz at cooking was a huge win in my book. *Hallelujah!* Sadly, my hopes were short-lived.

“Naw, c’mon. I ain’t talkin’ ’bout me.” Tagosack shook her head, shattering my humble fantasy. “I was thinkin’ of havin’ Fuka and her mates cook for us with our produce. Sounds good, don’tcha think?”

“Yeah, it does, actually.”

No one would dare complain about Fuka’s cooking; I was sure about that. I would’ve loved to join them and observe their process too, if only I weren’t so busy setting up the venue.

“If you can just let us use that corner, we’ll get right on it.”

“If not, we’ll use whatever space is available.”

Being full-time chefs, the players had come ready with their own workstations.

“There’s plenty of space available, so feel free to cook wherever you like,” I replied.

“Thanks, we appreciate it.”

“Don’t mind if we do then.”

Fuka and her fellow chefs whipped out their cooking utensils and set straight to work, their movements steady and rhythmical. I took it that the mountain of vegetables beside them came from Tagosack and her farmer friends. Some of the vegetables seemed unfamiliar—I was dying to know what they were. I made a mental note to ask the chefs during the party; they were more likely to give away their secrets once the drinks started flowing. As a working adult in Japan, the ability to bond over drinks was practically an essential life skill.

“Hey. What’s new?”

“Good to see you again.”

“Wow, so *this* is the famed orchard everyone’s been talking about.”

“Never thought we’d get to enter this place ourselves.”

No sooner had Tagosack and Fuka’s group settled down than the high schoolers arrived. Ivan the Tamer led the clique, followed by the latecomer duo Takayuki and Tsuyoshi, as well as Cerulean and Hinako, the girls I’d met in Zone

Two's safe area. They seemed to be curious about my farm, eyes darting around excitedly. I guessed it was pretty rare to see a player-made orchard.

"Thank you for inviting us today!"

"It's not much, but we brought you a little something."

"Please accept our humble offering."

Cerulean, Ivan, and Hinako placed the food they had brought on one of the tables and bowed appreciatively, polite as ever. Their thoughtfulness never failed to impress me, especially when you took their age into account. Honestly, I didn't remember ever being this considerate when I was a teenager...

"What's the matter, Silver-Haired?" Ivan peered at me.

"Oh, sorry for spacing out. It's okay. Nothing important."

Thinking about it was starting to make me feel a bit glum, so I decided not to dwell on the topic any further. Meanwhile, Ivan's gnome and Amelia's gnomes had congregated in a corner, having an animated discussion about something. Shortly after, Olto led them towards the part of our farm designated for crops before turning around with a smug look. The other gnomes immediately began *mm-mm*ing in excitement. From the looks of it, he appeared to be showing off our farm to them. Amelia gazed at the band of gnomes from afar, entranced by the sight. *Go on, girl. Go play with them until the other guests have arrived.* I didn't want her to snap and go ballistic like Ashihana and Marca; it was way too exhausting to deal with.

The next to arrive was Akari, followed by Siegfried and Kokuten, whom I'd gotten to know during the Village Archdemon event. Akari had apparently logged in a few minutes ago, and Siegfried had caught her just in time. *Well done, my dude.*

"Hey! What's cooking?"

"Yuto! Good to see you again!"

"How have you been?"

The three of them were the same as ever. Akari still carried a giant sword on her back, although it seemed to have grown one size bigger. She looked

incredibly badass, like a certain vengeful berserker from a long-running manga series. As usual, Siegfried was accompanied by his trusty steed, Silver, a dumpy midsized white horse. Horse aside, he really was the perfect embodiment of a knight in silver armor.

“Well, would you look at that? All three original titleholders, together at last!” Siegfried exclaimed, his mannerisms exaggerated as ever.

“About time too!” Akari beamed. Here we were: Siegfried the Purple-Haired Adventurer, Akari the Ruby Red Explorer, and me, the Silver-Haired Pioneer, although unlike the other two, I hadn’t gotten my title by virtue of being outstanding.

“Thank you for having us over today,” Kokuten greeted me humbly, a professional to the last. While he was a great guy, I couldn’t help being reminded of my real-life career whenever I saw him. Since my behavior was more uninhibited in-game, I often got a reality check when we were together—not that there was anything wrong with having the same persona both online and offline, mind you. That reminded me; weren’t Akari and Kokuten’s party members front liners?

“Hey. Don’t get me wrong—I’m happy you came, but are you sure you don’t have somewhere more important to be?”

“Like where?” Siegfried asked.

“I mean, you guys are usually on the front lines, right? I didn’t think you would be interested in this sort of gathering.”

I was under the impression that for people fighting at the forefront, every second spent loafing around was a second wasted. Unless you were like me, playing the game purely for enjoyment, players who wanted to clear each area faster and get ahead of everyone else had to constantly be on the move, or else they would fall behind in no time. If I wasn’t mistaken, it was a pretty cutthroat world out there. However, neither Kokuten nor Akari appeared interested in investing as much time as a full-time front liner; they simply preferred being on the front because they enjoyed fighting. The same could be said for Siegfried, who saw clearing the game as merely a long-term goal rather than his main purpose for playing.

“Besides, we happened to be nearby,” he said.

“Exactly.” Akari nodded. Evidently, they had been in the area to attempt the Earth Elementals’ trial, so my invitation had come at the perfect time.

“Wow. It’s starting to get crowded in here,” I muttered. There were already more than thirty players present, which was far more than I had planned for. It was too late to regret my mistake, though—even now, I could see more guests coming our way.

“Crap, I totally underestimated how many people would show up...”

Presently, we were joined by yet another large assembly.

“My good friend! How is life treating you?”

“I am honored and delighted to be here.”

“How wonderful to have a banquet under the cherry blossoms. I feel incredibly blessed.”

“What marvelous flowers these are!”

The shinobi couple, Murakage and Ayakage, led the procession, their demeanor more eccentric and annoying than before. The two were clad from head to toe in black ninja suits, with chain mail underneath for added protection. Paired with their tabi socks, they looked exactly like the real deal. While their outfits were kind of cool, they were probably better appreciated at night than in broad daylight. And what was this? *More ninjas!* Their ninja clan—sorry, ninja *party*—seemed to be coming along just fine. That said, I found their associates highly objectionable.

“Hey, Murakage. What’s up with *those* guys? What happened to the whole covert aspect?”

“Those, my dear fellow, are our elite troops.”

“*Elite?*”

The “ninjas” Murakage and Ayakage had brought came in a real hodgepodge of styles, to say the least. One was dressed as a ninja from a certain once very popular franchise, known for his catchphrase, “Dattebayo!” By comparison that was still borderline acceptable, as some were even dressed in outfits of a

somehow even gaudier pink or yellow. The way they were dressed, they could've been part of a particular comedy show that was all the rage in the seventies.

"Though they may be our brethren, that does not mean we all share the same values," Murakage explained.

"Meaning?"

"They happen to be tokusatsu fans and are steadfast in their belief about what a ninja should look like."

I supposed it was only fair that the type of ninja people aspired to would vary. Murakage and Ayakage were more into old-school, period drama ninjas, while the others preferred the types depicted in tokusatsu films or manga.

"What's your opinion of them? Is that acceptable garb in your book?"

"I find it rather distasteful."

"Then why do you let them dress like that?"

"I tried to enforce a dress code at first, but unfortunately, it resulted in a few members deserting the clan..."

No matter what kind of organization you belonged to, it seemed like recruiting new people was never easy. As I was trying to console Murakage, an unlikely pair showed up.

"Hi!"

"How's it going?"

The pair was none other than Sawyer, the alchemist, and Sukegawa, the lewd blacksmith. It seemed their similar lines of work had acquainted them, and they looked pretty chummy. An underage-looking boy-elf with a handsome young man: no doubt fans of a certain genre would love to ship them together. Sukegawa was pretty attractive after all, even if his personality left much to be desired. He would probably rather die than participate in something like that, though.

"I wasn't sure what to bring, so I bought some juice on the way," Sawyer said.

“I got booze!” Sukegawa grinned.

“Thanks, guys.”

I was grateful for their contributions, as we could never have too many drinks. Sukegawa had also brought some snacks. His grilled chicken skewers looked delicious, and he even had some kind of jerky. I had no idea you could get jerky in-game. Sadly, he was unable to share the recipe with me since he bought it from one of his chef friends, rather than making it himself. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I was that Sukegawa was a legal adult in real life, and a heavy drinker at that. I shuddered at the fact that this pervert who called himself a lewd blacksmith and spoke passionately of “the true way of the lewd” was a full-grown adult.

“You okay, Silver-Haired?” Sukegawa looked at me curiously.

“Y-Yeah, I’m fine.”

The next guests were the largest group we’d had so far. They were more like a crowd at this point, although the monsters far outnumbered the players.

“Yeehaw! Did you miss me?!”

“You’re awfully hyper, Ursula.”

“Come on, it’s a flower-viewing picnic! How could I not be excited about a party?!”

“Good to see you too, Eulen. Wasn’t sure if you were coming or not.”

“Duh, ’course I would! A picnic with cute tree nymphs?! Wouldn’t miss it for the world!”

I hadn’t messaged Eulen as Ursula told me she was inviting him; thankfully, she had indeed brought him along. Besides him, she had also invited a few other Tamers I didn’t recognize. There were seven players altogether, including her, plus a staggering thirty-five monsters. Although each player had been considerate enough to choose small companions, they still stood out a lot. I was also intrigued to see so many unfamiliar creatures. Gnomes appeared to be the most popular choice—or was it squirrels? There were also quite a few Little Bears and Honey Bees around. Their group seemed to be comprised of

monsters similar to mine, although perhaps that was to be expected for the early stages of the game.

“Just so you know, there’s no way I can provide enough food for these many monsters.”

“That’s fine. We figured as much, so we brought our own,” Eulen replied breezily.

“Mhm. We also brought human food for the rest of us,” Ursula added. While chatting with the two, my monsters began playing with theirs. Rick was already involved in a game of tag with the other squirrels, while Reflet, Olea, and Sakura patted the nonhumanoid creatures. Fau alone sat on the edge of the table where the chefs were busy cooking up a storm, playing them a relaxing tune in the background. *Attagirl*. I definitely had to praise her for that later.

“Feel free to let your monsters play in the farm. Just make sure they don’t trample on any of the crops.”

“No crops shall be harmed, promise! I’ll pass on the message to everyone,” Ursula assured me. Our vegetables and herbs would most likely be safe since the game had safety measures in place, but it was probably better to caution them anyway. Who knew what would become of our farm if I gave them permission to run free?

“Hm, things are getting pretty tight...”

The last of my guests to arrive were the Quick-Eared Cats and their acquaintances. The people I knew personally were Alyssa the submaster, Maple the farmer, Lewin the blacksmith, Carlo the Tamer, and Shuella and Seki, who managed a shop that specialized in tailoring and leather goods. The other players were all part of the Cats. So far, Alyssa’s group was the largest, and their gifts were just as extravagant. Not only did they bring a whole cask of wine, but they also came bearing various kinds of finger food, fruit, and juice.

“Dang, that’s a lot. Sure you don’t mind?”

“Course not. They’re all yours.” Alyssa motioned me to accept them.

“Thanks, you’re a lifesaver. I didn’t expect this many people to show up, so I was kinda panicking there.”

“Eh, I knew this would happen, considering how casual you were about inviting me.”

For some reason, Alyssa had apparently predicted this outcome. *But how?* I hadn't a clue. In any case, she and the other members had solved our food crisis, so I guessed it didn't really matter.

“Can't believe we have over fifty guests, though, and that's *excluding* monsters... Didn't expect the party to become such a grand affair,” I mumbled. This was far from the cozy picnic I originally had in mind. “Was everyone bored or something?”

“You're actually clueless, aren't you?” Alyssa sighed exasperatedly. “Never mind that, though. Do you have enough space for everyone to sit?”

“Dunno... It's gonna be a tight squeeze.”

Though I'd purposely left the space in front of the barn and the slots adjacent to the tree empty, I doubted that would be enough. *Hang on—what about the space above the blackout farm?* We hadn't planted anything on the surface, so it was currently unoccupied. The mats were out, and we had floor chairs for backup too. I just had to hope everyone would fit somehow.

“Hey, son. This where the picnic is?”

“Yup. Please, come on in. We've been waiting for you.”

Spade, Ryver, and Pisco had arrived at last. As was expected of NPCs, they had arrived on the dot, exactly three hours since the start of the quest. I also saw two unfamiliar faces accompanying them.

“May I ask who your friends are?”

“This is my daughter Virgo, and this here's Leon, Ryver's son.” Spade introduced me to them.

“Pleased to meet you.”

“Hello.”

Eh, what did it matter if we had two extra guests? Frankly, it hardly made a difference at this point. I shook their hands in turn and led them to the space right in front of the cherry blossom tree, where the view was the best. After all,

they were the guests of honor.

“Which one would you prefer, a straw mat or a table?”

“For picnics like this, sitting on the ground is the only way to go.”

“That’s right.”

“Indeed, a straw mat would be nice.”

The three old men were unanimous. They obviously knew what was best for an occasion like this. Once they had settled down, I turned to my remaining guests.

“Ahem. May I have your attention, please! Now that our guests of honor have arrived, I’d like to get our flower-viewing picnic started!”

Hearing that, the players immediately gathered around the barn. Since I’d asked them to get their drinks ready for a toast earlier, everyone already had a glass in hand. The sight of over fifty players assembled before me was truly something else. How we had managed to fit everyone was beyond me, though.

Before launching into the festivities, Alyssa began listing a few dos and don’ts for our party. She had offered to do the talking, saying it was better to make things clear at the start. Despite over fifty pairs of eyes watching her, she remained calm and confident. It would figure that the Cats’ submaster was clearly experienced at this sort of thing.

“All right, listen up, everyone. You’re free to take as many screenshots as you want, but do *not* post them online without obtaining express permission! You don’t wanna get reported to the GMs over something like this, do you? In particular, don’t forget to ask their owners for permission when taking photos of monsters.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And be grateful to Yuto for letting us use his farm! I better not catch any of you tampering with his crops, you hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Obviously, sexually harassing someone is a huge no-no. Being drunk doesn’t excuse bad behavior either, although *some* of you might not be discouraged so

easily...” Alyssa paused, fixing her gaze on Sukegawa and Eulen.

“Excuse me? Rude, much?! As if we’d do something like that!”

“Exactly! Give us a little credit!”

Both players protested in earnest, realizing they’d been singled out. Alyssa remained unfazed, though.

“Just so you know, it still counts as harassment even if you don’t touch that person. Telling dirty jokes without their consent counts as harassing. Depending on the person, talking passionately about ‘the way of the lewd’ or asking for their opinion on female humanoid monsters’ curves could also be a form of harassment—in other words, anything that has the potential to make someone uncomfortable.”

“...Yes, ma’am.”

“Understood...”

Thank goodness for Alyssa; otherwise, these guys would have caused a lot of trouble.

“Over to you, Yuto. Take it away.”

“Oh, okay. Um, thank you f—”

“Who cares about the obligatory speech, dude?!”

“You heard him! Hurry up already, before the food gets cold!”

“Grr.”

Damn it, there goes my speech! Oh well. I guessed if the roles had been reversed, I would’ve felt the same way. It seemed like no one was in the mood for formalities, as all eyes were glued to the food in front of them. They were probably dying to tuck in.

“Here’s to us all. Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

Chapter Two: Picnic Weather with a Chance of Yōkai

Once I'd concluded my toast, the rest of the group raised their glasses, chiming in with a simultaneous chorus of "Cheers!" Soon, the air was filled with the sound of glasses clinking, followed by satisfied sighs and exclamations of joy and surprise.

"*Damn*, that's good wine! What the heck?!"

"The juice is great too!"

"No way. Who knew the juice in-game would taste so good?"

"I-I had no idea..."

"This wine slaps!"

Their thirst now quenched, people's obvious next inclination was to try out the food.

"Yo, what on earth? The flavor on these skewers—is this soy sauce?"

"Th-This miso-dipped cabbage is so simple, but so *good*!"

"How are these cookies so amazing?! They don't taste anything like the basic rations!"

"Oh my gosh, there's pizza—*actual* pizza! So *this* was what everyone was talking about!"

The food seemed to be a hit among the party guests. Fuka and the other chefs, who'd been responsible for about half of the cooking, watched everyone's reactions with pride and relief. I hoped they would help themselves soon, though; at the rate things were going, the food would be gone before they could get to it. I hurriedly piled a bit of everything onto plates for our guests of honor before the players polished it all off.

"Hey, guys. I brought you some food," I said, handing them their portions.

"Oho! Looks great."

“What a party, eh?”

I was worried the NPCs would find the gathering too rowdy, but thankfully, they seemed to be enjoying it too, munching on their grilled chicken skewers with relish.

“Good food, good booze, and gorgeous cherry blossoms! What more could you ask for?”

“Say it louder for the back!”

The others seemed to have heard Spade and Ryver, for they immediately tore their eyes away from the food and gazed up at the vibrant cherry blossoms. After a moment of silence, a sigh of contentment escaped from the crowd.

“Y’know, the cherry blossoms in-game are kinda fetching in their own way.”

“True. They’re really pretty.”

“Definitely gonna have a flower-viewing picnic in real life next year.”

What could I say? Cherry blossoms were pretty much synonymous with spring and brand-new beginnings for people who had grown up in Japan. It would be interesting to see how players from other countries would react when they joined us in the future—perhaps the flowers would appeal to them in a different way.

That said, the silence only lasted for a few minutes. With so many guests present, it was impossible to maintain a solemn atmosphere for long. Soon, the quiet evaporated and gave way to lively chatter, and the drinks began flowing once more. Some players avidly discussed their theories on how to clear specific areas, while other groups were more laid-back, asking Fuka and her friends for cooking tips, or gazing at the various monsters on the farm with longing in their eyes. Each group seemed to get along well with one another; as the host, I couldn’t have asked for a better party.

“Nice. Maybe I’ll join in later too.”

We were now approximately thirty minutes into our party. After sharing a drink with Spade and the gang, I stood up, debating whom I should mingle with

next.

“Silver-Haired! Come join us!”

“Psst! Over here!”

I spotted Amelia and Ursula beckoning to me. Their group seemed to mostly consist of Tamers—or rather, gnome lovers, I should say. Countless gnomes surrounded the group, even pouring drinks for the players. They didn’t seem to mind, though, bustling around smiling as though they were having the time of their lives. I strolled over, accepting Amelia and Ursula’s invitation.

“Having fun?” I asked.

“Sure am!”

“I could drink forever just looking at all these cuties!”

Both women beamed in reply.

“Also, Olto is simply adorable.”

“Mhm. There’s just something about him—like he’s more refined, I guess?”

“Mm?”

Olto seemed as popular as ever. I supposed that was to be expected; being a unique specimen, his appearance differed slightly from that of a regular gnome, making him stand out from the rest. The Tamers in the group were all huge fans—just seeing him seemed to have inspired a love of gnomes in all of them. As was only right—no one could beat Olto’s cuteness! He was currently busying himself joining the other gnomes in pouring drinks for everyone, delighting the guests with generous fan service. He very much seemed to enjoy all the head pats he was receiving. Everyone appeared to be enjoying themselves immensely, so I decided to let them be.

“Sit down and have a drink with us, Silver-Haired!”

“Here, let me pour one for you.”

Beside the gnome harem, a group of mostly male Tamers was busy exchanging game information. Reflet and Sakura had evidently moved on to a different table after pouring drinks for everyone, though, eliciting a wail of

despair from Eulen.

“Nooo! My little nymphs! Come back to papa!”

Eh, never mind him. Gathering intel was far more important, and I wasn’t about to pass up this rare opportunity to get insider knowledge from other Tamers. We exchanged various tidbits over drinks, becoming more animated as time went on. I was especially shocked to learn that you had to feed squirrels glowing walnuts if you wanted to receive their tamed monster’s heart. Evidently, no amount of their favorite food would suffice unless you fed them one.

“There’s food that they like, then there’s food they absolutely *love* to bits. Lately, the consensus is that besides raising their favorability score, you probably need to feed them their number one favorite food,” Ivan explained.

“Whether that only applies to squirrels or goes for other monsters as well is still up for debate, though,” another Tamer chimed in. *Aha.* That was good to know. It never would’ve occurred to me to feed Rick a glowing walnut, as it seemed too valuable an item to risk wasting. No wonder he hadn’t shown any sign of giving me his tamed monster’s heart despite all my efforts. Fortunately, I found a few glowing walnuts that we’d harvested from our farm in my inventory. Now was my chance to put everyone’s theory to the test.

“Okay. Rick! Come here, buddy!”

“Chirp?”

“I got someth—”

“*Chirp chirp chirp!*”

Oh wow. There was no doubt how much he coveted the item. Rick stared at the glowing walnut in my hand, eyes twinkling as he stuck his bushy tail straight up in the air. I tried moving my palm left to right, and his gaze immediately followed. As much as he seemed to love roasted beans, his reaction to them was nothing compared to this; he was utterly transfixed. It was interesting to note the difference.

“Here you go. Dig righ—”

“Chirp chirp chirp!”

Before I could finish my sentence, Rick pounced on me, wrenched the glowing walnut from my grasp, and sunk his teeth into it.

Cromch cromch cromch cromch.

He chomped on the walnut greedily, practically inhaling it. Within moments, Rick had devoured the whole thing, not stopping even once.

“Chirp!”

“Whoa! This what I think it is?!”

The next instant, his body started glowing. The players nearby all turned this way to see what was going on, startled by the sudden disturbance.

“My eyes! I can’t see!”

Eulen, who had been close to Rick, shielded his eyes and stumbled about like the colonel from a certain influential steampunk movie. Naturally, I decided to ignore him. When the light subsided, Rick was holding a beautiful, gemlike stone in his mouth: his tamed monster’s heart. The other Tamers were in an uproar.

“Holy crap! I got to film the *exact* moment a tamed monster’s heart is born!”

“So glowing walnuts really *were* the trigger.”

“I-I’m totally feeding my squirrel one too when I get back!”

“Damn it, I gotta start by going to the forest to get one.”

“You’re pretty strong now, though. Tackling the forest at night should be a breeze for you, right?”

“...Idiot! What if I run into a ghost?!”

“Oh. Didn’t realize you scared so easily.”

Rick, the source of the commotion, hopped onto my shoulder, unbothered by all the excitement. He twitched his nose and nuzzled his head against my cheek, clearly in a good mood.

“Attaboy. Thanks, buddy.”

“Chirp chirp.”

As I took the sparkling gem from him, Rick curled his fluffy tail around my neck, pleased by my reaction. Just getting his tamed monster’s heart had made inviting everyone to this picnic well worth it.

“Right. Who should we hang out with next?” I pondered aloud.

“Chirp!”

“Hm? Those guys?”

“Chirp.”

In reply to my question, Rick pointed to a group huddled in the corner. He appeared to be suggesting we ought to join their conversation. I wasn’t about to be fooled, though—I could clearly spy a plate of roasted beans on their mat. Apparently, that glowing walnut hadn’t been enough to satisfy him. *Sheesh. What a greedy guts.*

“Fine. Shall we join them?”

“Chirp!”

The next group was mostly made up of farmers. I knew Tagosack to be a big drinker, but so were most of the others, if their selection of refreshments was anything to go by.

“Yuto! Look who’s here, guys!” Tagosack whooped.

“Here ya go. Got a lotta catching up to do, my dude.”

“Chug, chug!”

From the looks of it, they were all pretty far gone; more than half of the players were on the verge of full intoxication. Also, how was it that a beauty such as *Tagosack* was behaving the most geezerish out of everyone? I could feel it in my gut that I’d get wasted as well if I stayed for too long, so I planned on skedaddling once I’d said hello to them. At least, that had been my intention...

“Like I said, those vegetables...”

“Uh-huh, I see...”

“Wait, really? So you gotta combine...”

I should've known I'd get stuck here. After all, this was a group of *farmers* we were talking about—how could their conversation *not* be interesting? I could have spent hours just exchanging farming tips. All the while, the drinks kept coming, in turn spurring talk about the ingredients used to make said drinks.

“Crap, I don't feel so good...” I mumbled, stumbling a little. By the time I got away from the farmers' gathering, I was feeling more than a little tipsy. Still, I didn't regret spending time with them; not only had they taught me new Selective Breeding combinations, but they had even given me some seeds to plant on my farm. Obviously, I had also shared what I knew, so it had been an equal exchange.

“Heh heh heh, imagine the possibilities...”

Before going anywhere else, however, I needed a break, still feeling a bit woozy after all those drinks. I slumped into one of the chairs nearby, waiting for the discomfort to pass. At the moment, there was no known cure for the status ailment Intoxicated, probably to discourage players from drinking too much. That said, the drunkenness would start to ease off as long as you took a break before you became fully intoxicated.

“Here, get some rest,” Kokuten said, handing me a glass of water.

“Thanks,” I replied, accepting it gratefully.

“Must be hard being popular, huh?”

“Here, eat this.” Siegfried handed me a plate of grilled chicken skewers. “Our group hasn't had much to drink, so feel free to rest up here.”

“Phew. Good to know *some* of you are sober.”

“Ha ha. Drinking and making merry can be fun and all, but we prefer a more relaxed atmosphere.” Siegfried chuckled. His and Kokuten's party appeared to consist mostly of battle-hungry adventurers. I also spotted Akari, the ninjas, and Takayuki and Tsuyoshi among them. I scooted closer to join their conversation, although I mostly just listened, not having much to contribute. The discussion on the Earth Elementals' trial was particularly intriguing. Evidently, the mini-boss dropped earth crystals pretty frequently, which could probably be used to craft powerful elemental weapons in the future once enough players had

unlocked the gate.

Another fascinating topic that came up in their talk was the gnome rental service. According to them, these helper gnomes could only move around inside the dungeon, meaning you couldn't bring them out of town to work on your farm. My guess was that they were the key to clearing the dungeon. Now that I thought about it, they seemed like the perfect size to crawl through the countless narrow tunnels running throughout the cave. Maybe I could attempt the dungeon again sometime—once I'd leveled up a few more levels, that is.

"Still going solo, Akari?" I asked her.

"You betcha! Besides, I have more freedom that way! Wouldn't wanna drag my friends into something that's guaranteed to get them killed."

"R-Right. Good point."

Well, she wasn't called the Ruby Red Explorer for nothing. As usual, she appeared to be going hard at dungeon diving.

"I'm interested in the Earth Elementals' trial too, but..." Siegfried paused. While he had attempted it once, its size had proved an obstacle for him and his steed. "Silver isn't fond of small spaces, you see."

"Now that you mention it, he's gotten a lot bigger since the last time we met," I commented, stroking Silver's muzzle as he trotted over to my side. He seemed to enjoy it, whinnying contentedly in response.

"Neigh!"

"Does he eat carrots, by the way?"

"Oh, absolutely. He loves them."

"Gotcha. How's this for a treat then?"

"Snort!"

Silver began chomping on the blue carrot I gave him, snorting appreciatively as he chewed. I was starting to see the appeal of horses, especially as they offered an easy means of transportation. Unfortunately, there hadn't been any sightings of them in the wild so far. The only people known to own horses at the moment were players like Siegfried who had obtained one during their initial

avatar creation process. It looked like I would simply have to wait until someone discovered them eventually.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Neigh!”

From the moment they first met, Rick had enjoyed perching atop Silver’s head, and this time was no different. He leaped off my shoulder and landed gracefully atop the horse, babbling about who-knows-what in his ears. Silver snorted and whinnied in reply, seemingly unbothered by Rick’s incessant chatter, head perfectly still so as not to accidentally shake him off. Though he may not have been blessed in the looks department, he truly was a kind and considerate horse. If only Rick had one-tenth of his thoughtfulness— On second thought, that might be kind of unsettling. *Nah, forget it. You’re fine the way you are, Rick.*

“It’d be lovely if Silver transformed into a winged horse someday,” Siegfried mused.

“Guess that would make you a pegasus knight. Hey, that’d be pretty sick!” I replied.

“It’s either that or a unicorn.”

“Either way, it’d be hella badass.”

“It would, wouldn’t it?”

No doubt Siegfried astride a winged horse would make for a fantastic photo. I was determined to get a screenshot of the two if he ever succeeded. Shortly, Murakage approached us, staring at Silver with a wistful look in his eyes.

“If only we owned horses too.” He sighed, patting Silver enviously.

“But you guys are ninjas. Aren’t horses more for samurai? You know, like the Takeda cavalry.”

“I beg to differ. Imagine a shadowy figure racing through the night astride a black steed. That, my friend, is the epitome of a shinobi!”

It didn’t sound too incongruous when he put it that way—in fact, it would probably look very dashing. *Good luck finding a horse, my friend.*

After parting ways with Siegfried's group, I moved on to the table next to them. This table was mostly occupied by crafter types, the majority of them chefs. Atop it sat a myriad of dishes, many of them unfamiliar to me. I was particularly drawn to the cheese fondue, in which everyone was dipping boiled vegetables and other ingredients. Come to think of it, I could've easily made it myself since it was essentially a mixture of cheese and wine—I wasn't sure why it hadn't occurred to me until now. While snacking on the cheese fondue, the other chefs shared their recipes with me. I was taken aback by how forthcoming they were; I hadn't expected them to give away their trade secrets so easily. I also wasn't sure what they meant by "owing me one," but whatever. I got a bunch of new recipes, and that was good enough for me. Besides, I was more curious about what Fuka was up to.

"Hey, Fuka. What're you doing?"

"I'm gathering some cherry blossoms," she answered.

"For what, though?"

"For cooking, of course. I'll give you the ones I collected, so do you think you could spare me some later?"

"Wait, you wanna cook with *cherry blossom petals*?"

"Mhm. I figure I can use them for all kinds of stuff if I cure them with salt, like sweet and savory dishes or herbal tea blends."

"I see."

Now that she mentioned it, you could sometimes find restaurants and cafés that served food with salted cherry blossoms in the spring. It seemed like she was trying to recreate that tradition in-game.

"In real life, you can make salted cherry blossoms by pickling them in salt and vinegar."

"Huh. Didn't know it was that easy."

Now, *this* was something I definitely wanted to try. In exchange for learning various real-life cherry blossom recipes, I promised to make some salted cherry blossoms and share them with everyone once they were done. I was glad our

acquaintanceship wasn't about to just come to an end after the picnic.

"Sure you don't mind handling everything?" Fuka pressed.

"Not at all. Reflet's a whiz at this kinda stuff. Just leave it to us."

"Does Reflet have Brewing skills then?"

"Yep. She also has Fermentation skills, which allows us to make stuff like miso in a shorter amount of time. Pretty sure it won't take too long to pickle the cherry blossoms either."

The next instant, the guy sitting diagonally in front of me sprung to his feet, chair clattering behind him. If memory served me correctly, he had introduced himself as Ishida earlier.

"Did you say 'Fermentation'...?" he muttered darkly.

"Huh? What's wrong?"

"Oh, sorry about that. Don't mind him, Silver-Haired. He's just salty." Fuka waved off my concern.

"Er, but I can hear him muttering something under his breath..."

"It's a long story. Never mind him, though—do you have any fermented condiments to show us? We'd love to see them."

"Yeah, totally. I wanna know what they're like."

Given how abruptly they had changed the subject, I sensed it would be unwise to pursue the matter any further. My guess was that Ishida had not had a good experience making fermented stuff in the past.

"Reflet made all these," I explained, pulling a variety of condiments out of my inventory. "Oh, and she made that wine too."

"The miso, the soy sauce... Everything's super high quality!"

"Guess Fermentation's the key, huh...?"

"Reflet puts a lot of love and care into her wine especially," I added. It was a pretty laborious task, considering how she followed the real-life traditional wine-making process.

“How so?”

“For starters, she crushes the grapes by stomping them barefoot. She also uses purified water inst—”

Before I could finish my sentence, the players nearby leaped to their feet, just as Ishida had. Most of them were men, and their eyes flashed dangerously as they closed in on me.

“Your undine made that wine by stomping the grapes with her *bare feet*?”

“I-Is your wine for sale?”

“Vintage labels mean *nothing* compared to this!”

Wh-Why on earth were they interrogating me like this? Did they want to drink Reflet’s homemade wine *that* badly?

“Sorry, but I’ve already served all the wine she made. There’s none left,” I apologized.

“N-None at all?!”

“Code red, code red! The wine must be retrieved this *instant*!”

“Hurry!”

Eventually, the nearby women subdued the struggling male players and drank the last bit of remaining wine before their eyes, ignoring their pitiful cries. I had to admit their outburst had rattled me a little. *Seriously, why?* If they were so desperate for wine, they could always buy it from a brewery...

Worse still, I had drunk too much again due to Fuka and her friends’ endless insistence. That was the unfortunate truth about being a working adult: declining a drink was almost impossible, especially one that someone else had poured for you.

“Shit... Not again...” I groaned, feeling light-headed. Just when I was starting to sober up, I found myself on the verge of becoming intoxicated once more. As luck would have it, yet another group called me over, denying me any chance of a respite.

“Oh, Silver-Haaaaired! Psst, over here!”

“Don’t be shy! Come and sit with us!”

“Growl.”

Ashihana and Marca had invited me to join a motley crew of players belonging to various jobs and ranks. It didn’t seem as though they shared any common interests, apart from one thing: Bears. Dozens of bears were seated at the group’s round picnic table, being fed various treats and fussed over by the adoring players. While Bear Bear’s living, breathing teddy-bear form was adorable as ever, the lifelike Little Bears were just as cute in their own way. *Call it the difference between Winnie-ille-Pu and Perrington Bear, if you will.* Either way, this probably felt like heaven on earth to bear lovers. Also, who the hell prepared *bibs* for all of them?! *A bear wearing a bib?* That was too cute for words! I found myself instinctively snapping a pic, unable to handle so much cuteness.

“Here comes the airplane! Say aah.”

“Mmm, honey, yum yum! Open wide.”

The bears were smearing honey all over their paws and faces as they ate, which only made them look even cuter. This clearly delighted the players, who grinned like idiots, drooling at the sight. Meanwhile, Marca and Ashihana were busy feeding Bear Bear some honey. They appeared to have bonded over their shared love for them, all traces of their earlier hostility towards each other forgotten. *Good grief.*

“Oh, that reminds me! I got something cool for you, Yuto!” Ashihana exclaimed suddenly.

“Something cool?” I echoed.

“Yep!”

Ashihana rummaged around in her inventory before pulling out a few items. Upon seeing what they were, a sigh of wonder and admiration rose from the crowd.

“Hot dang. That’s amazing!”

“Omigosh! You *made* these?!”

“I-I want one...”

Lo and behold, Ashihana had carved wooden figurines of my monsters. Each figurine was roughly twenty centimeters tall and unvarnished, which made it hard to tell whether it was a regular or unique specimen at first glance. Regardless, I had only to look at them to know they were *my* monsters. The facial expressions of gnomes tended to vary ever so slightly from individual to individual, and Ashihana had captured Olto’s expression perfectly. In the case of Gray Squirrels, there wasn’t much individual variation, so I couldn’t say for sure that the squirrel figurine was meant to be Rick. That said, I immediately thought of him since it was doing his signature salute. While I couldn’t tell if Bear Bear, Reflet, Sakura, and Fau looked any different from their kin in person, as they were the only ones of their kind I had encountered so far, Ashihana had done an excellent job capturing each of their notable traits, such as Reflet’s smile and Sakura’s beauty. She’d even carved Fau sitting on a tree stump Snufkin-style, plucking the strings on her lute. Understandably, being the bear-crazy woman that she was, she had carved an extra two figurines of Bear Bear. The only one missing was Olea, presumably because Ashihana had never seen them before.

“This is incredible!” I whistled.

“I know, right?”

“You sure I can have these?”

“Positive. I do have one small request in exchange, though.”

Although Ashihana had started off by making these figurines as a hobby, her friends had eventually begun pestering her to make one for them too. Before long, she had found herself overwhelmed with requests.

“...Which is why I was hoping you’d give me permission to sell these,” she concluded.

“Right... Gotcha.”

I gazed at the wooden figurines of my tamed monsters arranged neatly in front of me. They were undeniably well-made, a true testament to Ashihana’s exceptional craftsmanship. I could see why they might sell. They didn’t even have to be modeled after my monsters; I was sure I’d jump at the chance to buy

a figurine of a cool-and tough-looking creature if I saw one.

“They don’t necessarily have to be of *my* monsters, though, do they?”

“See, that’s the thing... People have already been sending in their requests, asking me if I could make Olto or Sakura, for example. Your monsters have an awful lot of fans, after all.”

Wow, to think my companions even had their own merch now. They were almost like idols at this point. I knew by now that they were far more popular than I imagined, thanks to the constant attention we got everywhere we went. Still, I’d never expected them to be so popular as to warrant their own figurines.

“I was thinking of creating a limited supply of them. What do you think of the name, ‘Silver-Haired’s Adorable Critters’?”

“Seriously? You think that’s a good name?”

“Trust me, people are gonna buy them by the dozen!”

Was this really a good idea, though? It couldn’t hurt to grant Ashihana permission to carve her figurines...or *could* it? The alcohol had finally gotten to my head, and I had a hard time thinking straight.

“I’ll buy them for sure!”

“Please? We would really appreciate it!”

“Please let us buy Bear Bear’s figurines!”

“I’ll pay you for letting me use them as models, obviously! How does twenty percent of the total sales sound?! Come on, Yuto! Do it for all your monsters’ fans living across the country!”

“Feel like that’s stretching it a bit... Well, I guess I don’t mind. Just don’t sell them to any weirdos, okay?”

“Definitely not! I’ll only sell them to people who promise to shower your monsters with love!”

That was kind of scary in its own way, but I supposed it wouldn’t be too bad if they were fans. Besides, I was genuinely happy to learn that there were people who wanted figurines of my companions that badly.

“Anyway...I was wondering if you had any screenshots that I could use as inspo.” Ashihana glanced at me hopefully.

“Screenshots? Of my monsters, you mean?”

“Yeah! The only pics I have are the ones I took the last time we met and the screenshots of the official event video the devs uploaded.”

I’d almost forgotten about that video. For some reason, the devs had decided to include a short, several-second clip of my monsters saluting and seeing off our troops in it. Naturally, I had downloaded it and burned the scene into my memory. Now that I thought about it, perhaps it was even kind of late that Ashihana was only asking for permission to make my monsters’ figurines now—everyone already knew about them from the official video. *Still, screenshots, eh?* I had quite a few, but which ones would provide inspiration for carving figurines?

“Hmm... Wait, I’ve got it! I have just the thing for you. I’ll guarantee you’ll love it.”

“Oh? What kind of photo?”

“Well, it’s— No, hang on. Maybe it’s better if you see it in person instead of a photo. Rick, Fau! Come here a sec!”

“Chirp?”

“Aye?”

The “pose” I was hoping to show Ashihana and the others was Fau riding on Rick’s back. I was sure they’d find it just as adorable as I did.

“Get into place, squirrel rider! Now is the time to unite as one!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Aye!”

That seemed to be enough to get my message across. After saluting together, Fau jumped onto Rick’s back, her movements swift and light. Meanwhile, Rick planted his feet firmly on all fours with his tail on end, proud and dignified. Fau then leaned forward like a jockey, hips hovering slightly as she grabbed onto his bandana. She bent her knees inwards and rested them against Rick’s back while

hugging his torso tightly with her legs to maintain her balance. Both of them remained resolutely stock-still, posing for their unsuspecting fans.

“Eeeek!”

“Squeeee! Help, that’s *way* too cute!”

“Eep eep eep!”

The crowd screamed so loud, I thought my eardrums would burst. I wasn’t bothered this time, however, as I was too busy taking screenshots to care. *Ah, this must be how a proud parent feels.*

“Oh my god, Yuto! This is great—better than great! It’s everything I hoped for and more!” Ashihana squealed.

“Pretty cute, isn’t it?”

The bear-loving Woodcutter breathed heavily, nostrils flaring as she snapped pic after pic. *Welcome to the club, Ashihana.*

“Promise you’ll sell it to me first, okay? I wanna be the first to buy this figurine from you when it’s done.”

“Nuh-uh, I wouldn’t dream of asking for money from you! Simply giving me a wonderful muse to work with is payment enough!”

I made a mental note to give Ashihana copies of any cute screenshots I took from now on. The squirrel-rider demonstration had also turned into an impromptu photo shoot without my realizing, as players from other tables had heard the commotion and joined us. Fau and Rick weren’t the only subjects either; by now, Bear Bear and the rest of my monsters were also being photographed by enraptured fans.

“Yes, that’s it. Hold it right there.”

“Look this way, please.”

“Th-This is perfect...!”

“Chirp!”

“Aye!”

“Come on, Bear Bear. Be a darling and move your paws for me.”

“Eek, Bear Bear’s hugging a Little Bear! That’s soooo cute!”

“Growl!”

“Damn it! Someone call Olto for me!”

Oh boy. At this rate, it would probably be a while before things calmed down.

“Okay... I think I’ve visited most of the tables by now.”

The first hour of our picnic flew by—a sure sign of how well things were going. *As the saying goes, time flies when you’re having fun.* Now that I’d sobered up a bit, however, something was starting to bug me.

“...Those guys are really staring at us.”

I hadn’t realized it until now, but a huge crowd had assembled in front of our farm within the past hour. Dozens of eyes stared at us from outside the invisible barrier, their expressions tinged with an envious sort of longing.

“Well, we do have food and drinks. Can’t really blame them.”

It was obvious they wanted to join us, but unfortunately, we were already filled beyond capacity. There was simply no way I could admit that number of people to my farm.

“Eh, probably best to ignore them. I don’t recognize anyone out there anyway.” I shrugged, deciding to return to the NPCs’ group to relax for the time being. “Besides, I kinda fancy spending some quality time with my monsters.”

At least, that had been the plan. It seemed like fate had other things in store for me, though.

“Wait, where’s Olto?”

He wasn’t anywhere, not even among the gnome harem. Where on earth could he have gone off to? Just then, the door to the barn burst open, and out he came.

“Olto? What were you doing in there, buddy?”

“Mm-mm!”

“Whoa, no need to pull so hard. Why’re you in such a hurry?”

“Mm-mmm!” Olto whined, tugging at my robes so forcefully I thought he might tear them off. What in the world was he— No, wait. This felt familiar; I remembered him acting this way just before Bear Bear’s egg hatched.

“Don’t tell me...?!”

I rushed into the barn, realization dawning.

“I-It’s hatching!” I cried, eyes widening at the sight that greeted me. My hunch had been correct—the Earth Dragon egg that I’d placed in the incubator was starting to crack. Several players had already taken notice of Olto’s unusual behavior. That, coupled with my loud yell of surprise, was more than enough to grab everyone’s attention.

“What’s going on?”

“Did something happen?”

“Ch-Check that out!”

People were starting to gather at the door and windows, trying to peer inside the barn. By now, nearly everyone had gathered to see the source of the commotion. People were getting so violent towards one another to get the best view, I was afraid a fight would break out eventually.

“Cr-Crap! This is getting outta hand!”

“Mm.”

“Should we kick everyone? Or actually, maybe I can just take the incubator outside. That’s what they’re all here to see, anyway.”

After all, there was no reason the incubator *had* to be in the barn; that was just where I had placed it.

“The question is whether we can move it or not... Ah, there we go.”

“Mm-mm!”

“Excuse me. Coming through.”

“Mm-mm!”

Olto led the way, motioning for the crowd of curious onlookers to step aside. Naturally, no one objected, hurriedly moving to make way for us.

“Aight, this should do.”

I plonked the incubator down in front of the cherry blossom tree, where it would be the most visible. Ivan, who had been watching me, came closer, the curiosity in his voice palpable.

“Um, Silver-Haired? May I ask what that is?” he asked.

“Oh, this thing? It’s the Earth Dragon egg I got from the village event.”

My response immediately caused an uproar among my Tamer guests.

“N-No way! To think someone actually got *that* egg!”

“Oh, Silver-Haired. Always going above and beyond our expectations.”

“Well, guess that rules out the possibility of it being a dragon.”

“How can you be so sure, though?”

“I mean c’mon, it’s *Silver-Haired*.”

“Good point. It’s gotta be a cute monster then.”

Judging by their reactions, my Earth Dragon egg seemed to be pretty rare. Perhaps I had been the only one to obtain it, seeing as it had been the most expensive out of all the eggs. I also spied several Tamers, presumably those whose eggs from the event had yet to hatch, take off running in the opposite direction. I suspected they meant to go check on them.

“Bye, Silver-Haired! I’m gonna take a look at mine too!” Amelia hollered over her shoulder.

“Ditto!” Ivan said, running after her.

“W-Wait for me!” Eulen scrambled to his feet. *Aw, you guys too?* Although I didn’t blame them, since this was a crucial event for Tamers, it did mean we’d lose quite a few participants. I needn’t have worried, however, as my guests soon returned with their own incubators. Within moments, there were more than ten dome-shaped objects lined up outside my barn.

“Gotta say, your incubator is really impressive, Silver-Haired. What’s with the green color?” Ursula commented.

“That’d be my Battle Skill Incubator with a Wind Attribute.”

“Dang, talk about a mouthful! Wait, does that mean you used an attribute crystal for it then?” Eulen asked. For some reason, they both looked dumbfounded. I didn’t get what was so surprising, though. Monsters were basically the bread and butter of Tamers, so it seemed only right that I used the best materials available to craft my incubators. I didn’t blame them, though—I had been pretty hesitant myself when I was first starting out.

“I envy you, dude,” Eulen sighed.

“But hey, there’ll probably be more crystals on the market now that the Elemental Gates have been unlocked. I’m sure your time will come,” Ursula replied reassuringly.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Good luck, guys. At the moment, earth crystals were probably the easiest to obtain.

“Figure it’ll be a while before our eggs hatch, so why don’t we return to the picnic for now?” Ursula suggested.

“Good idea,” I agreed.

We didn’t have to wait very long, though, as the eggs began to hatch while we were still sharing which ones we had bought. The first to hatch was Eulen’s “nectar bear” egg. The others had guessed it contained a Honey Bear, based on how straightforward the name was. Sure enough, a Honey Bear emerged from within. The creature growled cutely, glancing at the unfamiliar faces with round, blinking eyes, which elicited a chorus of squeals and fascinated murmurs. Amidst the fuss, Eulen scooped his new monster up into his arms.

“Growl?”

“Man, you’re adorable. You might not be a humanoid girl, but you’re still stinking cute!”

“No fair, Eulen! Me too! Let me!”

“What do you mean, no fair?! In case you forgot, this is *my* Honey Bear! Clearly, I have every right to hug it!”

“But I wanna! I wanna hug it too!” Marca pouted, yapping at Eulen to let her

hug his bear while tugging on his sleeve incessantly. Regardless, he showed no sign of yielding, which meant he had to be really smitten with his new companion. I could scarcely believe this was the same guy who'd been so desperate for a cute monster girl until now. *Guess people are capable of change.* Before long, however, he began muttering under his breath, shattering all pretenses of a changed man.

"Hang on... If I let Marca hug my Honey Bear and then hug them afterwards, won't that mean I get to share an indirect hug with Marca...?"

Nope, I was wrong! Eulen was the same perverted idiot as ever!

"Ahem. Better behave yourself, Eulen," I warned.

"...I-I know. Ha ha ha..."

The next to hatch was Amelia's egg. To my surprise, she had exchanged her event points for the "wind wolf" egg that I'd debated getting until the very last minute. We watched with bated breath as her incubator disintegrated into tiny particles of light, revealing...

"Arp!"

"It's so *tiny*!" I blurted out, having expected a larger, more majestic-looking canine. The creature in front of us was more like a small dog than a wolf, covered with green fur with white patterns drawn onto its body.

"Omigosh! Squeeee!"

"Arp?" the creature barked adorably. Small though it might be, Amelia looked overjoyed. My Appraisal skill told me it was a Little Air Wolf, so there was no doubt about it being the "wind wolf" the egg was supposed to contain.

"What are its stats like?" I asked.

"Lemme check. It's got wind magic, plus a Dash skill!"

Amelia granted us permission to see her wolf's stats, and we gathered around to take a look. For the most part, the Little Air Wolf appeared to possess skills similar to those of Wild Dogs, albeit more advanced and with the added capacity to wield magic. It also seemed capable of moving pretty quickly, as Dash was a skill that boosted the user's speed for a limited period of time.

Despite its small stature, however, its base stats were more advanced than those of a Wild Dog. I had a feeling it would become fairly powerful once it evolved into an Air Wolf. That said, my Earth Dragon egg had cost more than her Little Air Wolf egg, so it had to contain an even stronger monster. *A Little Earth Dragon, perhaps?*

One by one, the others' eggs began to hatch as well. Many of the monsters were unfamiliar to me, and it was intriguing to watch. At long last, it was my turn. All of us had our eyes glued to the final egg, holding our breath in anticipation. Finally, the crack around the egg came full circle, and the incubator started to glow brightly.

"It's hatching!"

"What's it gonna be?!"

"Something fluffy, duh! What else?!"

"Betcha anything it's cute as hell!"

What were these guys saying? It was an *Earth Dragon* egg. How could it be anything but a dragon?! *Come forth, Earth Dragon! Grace us with your majesty!* I waited excitedly for the hatching to complete. The wait felt like an eternity—it had to be the longest few seconds of my life.

"Come on, dragon!"

When the light subsided, a lone, murky figure stood beneath the cherry blossom tree. The creature was roughly 120 centimeters tall, with sharp claws, capable of slaying any enemy, at the end of its thick, ropy arms. It was brash and self-assured in demeanor.

"..."

The monster gazed at its surroundings calmly, not a trace of fear or bewilderment in its eyes. Despite being a newborn, it already had the composure of a full-fledged adult.

"Wow. What a badass!"

I had never seen a cooler-looking monster before. It was, without a doubt, the

most badass of its kind I had ever laid eyes on.

The most badass...*mole*, that is.



The mole stood proudly on his two legs, his soft, brown fur glistening in the sunlight.

“*Wow. What a cool-looking mole you are,*” I uttered in a monotone, my voice almost robotic.

The mole wore a yellow safety helmet on his head bearing the words, “Ain’t afraid of no sunlight,” and had a pair of small, round sunglasses perched atop the bridge of his nose. He was dressed in navy overalls and had a giant pickax slung over his shoulder, much like the type of construction worker you saw in stock photos.

“I knew it! Silver-Haired’s done it again!”

“Knew he wouldn’t let us down!”

“Who’s the wise guy who said it might be a *worm*?!”

“I-I wouldn’t mind having a mole. Wish I could stroke its pointy nose.”

The Tamers around me seemed to be having a field day, but I was too stunned to pay any attention to them.

“But, how...? What happened to my dragon? I mean, okay, you might *look* like a mole, but you’re really an Earth Dragon...right?”

“Squeak?”

“Nope! You’re definitely a mole!”

No way in hell a *dragon* would squeak! That would be an utter disgrace to their nobility! The mole pushed his shades up his nose with his rugged, clawed fingers, flashing me a sardonic smile.

“Seriously, *why*?”

“Squeak?”

“I mean, I guess the kanji for ‘Earth Dragon’ and ‘mole’ are the same, but...”

“Squeak...”

The mole lowered his gaze, looking slightly deflated. *Crap*. Obviously, anyone would be hurt if they got treated like a dud only moments after being born.

How could I have been so tactless?!

“Sorry! It’s not that I don’t want you—of course I do. You just look a little...different from what I imagined, that’s all,” I said, placing a hand on his shoulder to try and convince him.

“Squeak.”

The mole sounded annoyed as he swatted away my hand. Clearly, he wasn’t buying it.

“Come on, no need to sulk. I really do mean what I said.”

“Squeak?”

I hadn’t noticed earlier because of his sunglasses, but looking at him up close, his eyes were a lot cuter than I’d thought. They were round and button-like, glistening ever so slightly: a killer look. I had a feeling that underneath all that equipment, he was secretly a cracking cute mole.

“It’s the truth, I swear.”

“Squeak...”

The mole gazed up at me, still somewhat skeptical. How did he manage to look both hardcore *and* adorable at the same time?! That had to be illegal!

“If anything, I’m glad to have someone tough-looking like you. I mean it.”

“Squeak...?”

That was the honest-to-goodness truth. He did have a huge pickax, after all, so I figured he had to be pretty strong. I squatted down until we were at eye level, meeting his still-distrustful gaze. I then grasped his hand, forcefully shaking it. Thankfully, he didn’t swat it away this time.

“Happy to meet you, buddy. Hope we can get along.”

“...Squeak.”

Phew. It seemed like he’d finally stopped sulking. The mole let out a sigh, shrugged nonchalantly, then shook his head before patting me on the shoulder. He appeared to be saying, *Whatever, I forgive you.* Gosh, what an aloof little guy! I could almost picture him taking a drag on a cigarette. One thing was

certain: his personality and demeanor were wholly unlike any of my other companions'. Even more importantly, he *was* fluffy. Although it was a shame he wasn't the dragon I'd hoped for, I was still glad to have obtained another furry creature. Since his helmet was in the way, I patted just below it instead.

"Mm, that feels nice."

"Squeak."

His fur was incredibly dense, made up of countless short bristles that lent it an incredibly soft and fluffy texture. I imagined this was how it would feel if you were to felt fabric from the soft hair that covered babies. Though Rick and Bear Bear were just as fluffy, the mole's fur was unlike anything I'd felt before.

"Let's check out your stats, shall we?"

Name: TBD *Race: Drimole* Base Level: Lv. 1

Master: Yuto

HP: 30/30 MP: 2020

Strength: 11 *Endurance: 10* Agility: 4

Dexterity: 10 *Intelligence: 5* Sanity: 7

Skills: Tailwind, Wind Resistance, Thrash, Excavation, Mining, Heavy Bo Staff Skills, Earth Resistance, Earth Magic, Night Vision, Dragon Blood Awakening

Equipment: Mole's Pickax, Mole's Overalls, Mole's Safety Helmet, Mole's Sunglasses

The creature appeared to be a Drimole. Since he didn't come with a preset name, he wasn't a unique specimen. While that didn't bother me at all, there was something I couldn't possibly afford to ignore.

"Dragon Blood Awakening? Sounds hella fierce!"

There were a few other skills I'd never seen before, so I decided to look them up as well.

Tailwind: Boosts speed momentarily by creating a wind that propels user from behind.

Thrash: Enables user to concentrate all strength into a single blow in exchange for a lower hit rate.

Excavation: Improves ability to dig holes.

Dragon Blood Awakening: Awakens the inner dragon that slumbers within.

Given that Tailwind was a skill that enabled the user to move faster via a wind blowing from behind them, it had to have been the result of the added wind attribute. Thrash was likely the combat skill granted by the Battle Skill Incubator. Excavation was literally just a digging skill, although I wondered if it could be applied to agricultural activities as well. I'd have to test it out later. What was *Dragon Blood Awakening*, though? My "Earth Dragon" egg had turned out to be a mole after all, so the description baffled me. Given that it had been an event reward, it wasn't strange for my monster to come with special abilities, but I hadn't a clue what that might be just from the name alone. All I knew was that it sounded pretty powerful.

"Squeak?"

"Oops, we'll deal with that later. Gotta name you first."

Seeing as I could no longer use any of the grand, splendid names I'd chosen for my Earth Dragon, I had to come up with something new. What was a good name for a mole?

"Hmm... A mole, huh..."

Like Bear Bear, this mole was also a bipedal animal. If I decided to go a similar route to them...

"Got it! I hereby dub you Drimo!"

"Squeak squeak♪"

Drimo the Drimole—that was easy enough to remember. I nodded, satisfied

with my choice.

“H-Hey. Mind if I pat him?” Someone tapped my shoulder. I turned around to find Ursula behind me.

“You wanna pat Drimo?”

Ursula was practically drooling over my mole, grinning like an old woman who couldn’t wait to play with her grandchild. I supposed she was just that smitten with him.

“So his name’s Drimo! Mind if I pat him?”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

“Eek! Thanks, Silver-Haired! Don’t mind if I d—”

“Squeak,” Drimo harrumphed, slapping away Ursula’s outstretched hand.

“Huh? But why?”

“Squeak.”

Ursula attempted to pat him again, but to no avail. Evidently, Drimo didn’t want to be touched.

“Hmm, that’s weird.” I frowned.

“Squeak...”

On the other hand, Drimo had no problems with me patting him, showing no obvious signs of discomfort. If anything, he seemed to enjoy it, narrowing his eyes in satisfaction at my touch.

“My turn next!”

“Squeak.”

“Me too!”

“Squeak squeak.”

Though a couple of others tried their luck, they were all shot down immediately. Apparently, I was the only one who was allowed to pat him. As unfortunate as it was for everyone else, I also felt a sense of superiority at being the sole person he’d warmed up to. *Tough luck, guys. Call it ownership privilege.*

“Okay, that’s enough. Drimo’s looking a little uncomfortable.”

“Aww! But why?!”

“Hngghh! A tsundere mole?! I dig it!”

For some reason, Ursula alone sounded delighted. While we were busy fussing over my new mole, a familiar alert sound blared through the farm.

Ding-dong.

“You have successfully completed your special quest. The next special quest shall now take place.”

“Huh?”

What quest? I racked my brains, puzzled. The next instant, I heard a stir among the crowd.

“What *is* that?”

“Silver-Haired! Behind you!”

“Whoa! What the hell’s going on here?!”

I turned around, curious to find out what the others were pointing at. There, I discovered a strange creature floating in front of the cherry blossom tree. What *was* that thing? If I had to describe it, it most closely resembled...

“...A pink sea angel?”

The mysterious creature had a translucent body, large enough that you would seemingly need both arms to carry it. It looked like a cartoon rendition of a sea angel—the marine animal—suspended quietly in the air above us. It was clearly meant to be animate, with a face that looked like nothing less than a mascot character.

“The first special quest was completed by over fifty players. For special quest number two, all participants will receive the following: a boost across all stats, improved critical hit rates, auto HP and MP recovery, and increased drop rates.”

“Special quest number two?” I echoed. Instantly, my status window opened, and the next quest’s info was automatically displayed on my screen.

Special Quest

Requirement: A party-loving yōkai, who snuck into your picnic unnoticed, has begun wreaking havoc in its drunken state. Your task is to subdue it and return it to normal.

Reward: Changes depending on how long it takes to complete the quest.

Time Limit: 3 hours

Participants: All players present at the party. (Note: this is a raid quest)

Alongside the description was a pop-up asking me if I wanted to start the event or not.

“You mean we’re facing off a raid boss? Huh? This was an event all along?”

“Shit! I thought this was just a picnic, so I’m totally unprepared!”

“Me neither! I don’t have enough recovery items!”

The other players also had the same prompt on their screens. I could see them panicking at this surprise development, fretting about their severe lack of resources. Apparently, they hadn’t known this was an event. Come to think of it, I probably hadn’t mentioned anything about a quest; all I’d said was that I was inviting them to a picnic. *Oops. My bad.*

“Should be a breeze if we have this many people, though, right?”

“I’ve never joined a raid before!”

“I’m pumped!”

Regardless, everyone seemed more than ready to fight. The mere mention of a raid had been more than enough to get them fired up, plus the majority of them were already in a good mood from all the alcohol we had consumed earlier. Even those who were underage or teetotalers found the crowd’s enthusiasm infectious. That said, a good deal of them were already fully intoxicated. Even with all the added bonuses, I wasn’t sure how well we would fare, not to mention we had no idea how powerful the boss was. Though it

looked like nothing more than a cute little mascot, it had to be fairly strong if it was a raid boss.

“Oh crap! We can’t leave the farm!”

“Y-You’ve gotta be kidding!”

Although several players had attempted to return to their home bases to switch out their monsters or equipment, it appeared that no one could leave while the event was ongoing. It also seemed like everyone else had the option to either participate or decline to join; I assumed if you chose to sit out the raid, you’d be able to leave the farm and go home.

“Speaking of, I gotta decide who to bring with me too.”

Now that Drimo had joined the family, I was a couple of party slots short. Therefore, I had to choose whom to take and whom to leave behind.

“Well, it *is* a boss battle, so Bear Bear, Sakura, and Fau are a must. Olto and Rick are also pretty advanced...”

The question was, who to take for the last remaining slot? Was it better to take Reflet, who was at a higher level and capable of acting as a tank, or Drimo, who’d just joined the team and was in desperate need of leveling up?

“Interesting turn of events, Yuto,” Alyssa commented as she joined my side.

“Sorry for dragging y’all into this,” I apologized.

“Nah, don’t be. If anything, everyone seems to be enjoying it. Kinda feels like a festival, you know.”

“Well, I hope you’re right.”

“Make sure to sell me everything you’ve got on this event afterwards, okay?”

“I don’t mind, but you’ll need Arboriculture for this.”

“That so? The boss might be a nasty piece of work then. Something tells me this quest was designed with players of that level in mind.”

That did seem highly likely, thinking about it. This was probably the type of quest usually only triggerable by players who were advanced enough to obtain Arboriculture.

“Guess I should bring Reflet then.”

Not only was bringing Drimo too much of a gamble, but as the person responsible for triggering the quest, it wouldn't feel right not to give it my all. However, Alyssa appeared to think otherwise.

“Aw, really? Too bad. I was hoping to see your new monster in action.”

“Come on. This is a *boss* battle we're talking about.”

“My point exactly. Look, Yuto. Your undine isn't exactly made for combat, so I doubt she'd be of much use if you took her with you. Wouldn't it be better to bring your mole instead? He'd probably stand more of a chance than her,” Alyssa explained. She had a point. If the boss was truly a menace and ended up being too much for me to handle, Reflet would likely be of little help. In that case, it could be wiser to take my chances with Drimo, as risky as it was.

“Never heard of the skill ‘Dragon Blood Awakening’ before, but I'd love to see what it's like.”

Ah, the truth comes out. Judging from the way the players around us were nodding along, however, they seemed to be intrigued by Drimo too. *All right then.* If that was what they wanted, I didn't see why not.

“Okay. Guess our party will be Olto, Sakura, Rick, Bear Bear, Fau, and Drimo.”

“Mm-mm!”

I hadn't realized my companions had been waiting right behind me. No sooner had they heard my announcement than they formed a neat line, saluting in unison. Even Drimo was taking part in the group salute, despite only joining us today. When on earth had he had time to learn that? This brought a wave of applause and cheering from the crowd.

“Ah! Silver-Haired's monsters' famous salute!”

“This is my first time seeing the real deal!”

“I'm sooo making my monsters do that too.”

Wait, how was their group salute so popular? *Oh, right. The official event video.* I supposed it was rather exciting to see it in person if you knew about it.

“Take care of the farm for us, guys,” I told Reflet and Olea.

“Hum!”

“Trrrr!”

Meanwhile, the preparations for the raid were rapidly underway, thanks to the Quick-Eared Cats, Kokuten, and Siegfried taking charge. They appeared to be selecting the most potent dishes and drinks among the leftovers and distributing them to everyone, as well as gathering recovery items from players who had extra to share with those who didn’t. I also made sure to pitch in all the recovery items I owned. As the host of the party, it was my responsibility to do whatever I could.

With all of us chipping in, we were able to get everything ready in roughly ten minutes’ time. From the looks of it, all of my guests were happy to participate. It felt incredibly reassuring to see my status window filled with the names of the participants. *Hold on a second, though*—we appeared to be one member short. Maybe they had to attend to some other business and couldn’t make it? Just then, I noticed someone banging furiously on the invisible wall surrounding my farm. Apparently, those who had been out of bounds when the event was triggered were considered to have forfeited their right and were unable to join.

“...Don’t mind him.” Alyssa rolled her eyes. He appeared to be a member of the Quick-Eared Cats. *Oh well*. If she said it was fine, it probably was.

“Okay. Everyone ready?” I looked to the crowd for confirmation.

“Take it away,” Alyssa replied.

“Here goes nothing. Let the quest begin!”

Seeing everyone nod, I tapped the button, and we were off.

Suddenly, the scenery shifted. We were surrounded by a floating sensation, similar to how it felt when teleporting.

“There’s nothing here.”

We were no longer on my farm, but in a large open space. The ground was mostly unpaved, bare soil, like the playgrounds you might find outside rural elementary schools. While there was some scattered sparse foliage, it wasn’t

enough to impede anyone's movement. A lone cherry blossom tree stood in the corner. Although I didn't remember what my tree looked like leaf for leaf, I was pretty sure this was the same tree that was on our farm.

Presently, we were separated from the rest of the playing field by a translucent enclosure: a boss wall. It didn't seem like we'd actually been teleported anywhere, though. I could still see the guy from the Quick-Eared Cats, who had been locked out of the raid, staring at us despairingly from outside, as well as the crowd of wistful onlookers. My crops, however, had disappeared, leaving me with only the cherry blossom tree.

"Huh? M-My farm! Where'd it go?!" I gasped. What had happened to the farm that I—or rather, my *monsters*—tended to lovingly and diligently every day? It was *gone*!

"Relax, Yuto. This will all return to normal once the boss fight is over," Alyssa explained, trying to calm me down.

"I-It will?"

"It's not a raid, but there's this event that requires you to fight a ghost at the inn. The same thing happens there—your personal belongings disappear during the battle, but get restored once it's over."

"I-I see."

Thank goodness. If people actually lost their farms or homes permanently to special events, there'd likely be a riot. I knew I would complain, at least. It should have been obvious if I'd stopped to think about it, but seeing my farm disappear before my eyes had caused me some momentary panic.

"That the boss? Looks exactly like the thing we just saw."

"Is it...a sea angel?"

"Sea angels can't fly, though."

A gigantic pink creature was floating before the cherry blossom tree. Although it looked similar to the sea angel we saw earlier, it seemed to have grown several sizes bigger. It was abnormally huge, roughly the size of a monster truck. According to my Appraisal skill, the creature was called a Hanami Vandal.

This had to be the “party-loving yōkai” that had come to vandalize our flower-viewing picnic.

“Places, everyone! Vanguard to the front, now!”

“Aye, aye, cap’n!”

“Rear guards, we’re counting on you to restrain its movements!”

“Crafters, you guys focus on backup! Don’t push yourselves, though!”

Wow, the front liners sure were impressive. Marca and Kokuten immediately took the lead and began dishing out instructions, clearly used to this kind of situation. *Now then, which team should I join?* Being a Tamer, I *was* technically a rear guard. I could also use magic, so at the very least, I could aid in slowing down the bo—

“Yuto, you’re with the crafters!” Alyssa barked.

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied obediently. Alyssa immediately assigned me to the support team without so much as a blink. But of course she would. I was a noob, after all. *No complaints there.* Besides, I didn’t want to hold back the other players.

“Together now!”

“Hue hue hue!”

Thus began our battle against the raid boss. The vanguards were the first to attack. It was reassuring to have high-ranking players who usually fought on the front lines, such as Kokuten, on our side, even if half of them were drunk and unsteady on their feet. Still, our target was huge, so I didn’t think we’d have to worry about them missing their shots. That said, I was slightly concerned about whether they’d be able to defend themselves properly—trying to dodge attacks while drunk seemed pretty difficult.

“Hue hue hue!” the Hanami Vandal cackled, rotating on the spot as it scattered something on the ground. *Was that meant to be an attack?* I wondered, squinting to get a better look. They appeared to be empty beer bottles and plastic bags stuffed with trash, as well as used skewers and empty cans.

“Yech! What’s with this *garbage*?!”

“That’s disgusting! My equipment’s gonna get all dirty!”

“Phooey! It stinks!”

The Hanami Vandal had strewn the ground with litter, the kind that inconsiderate picnickers often left behind after a flower-viewing picnic. It appeared to be attacking us with literal trash. Even though it wasn’t a particularly powerful attack, it still managed to diminish our equipment’s Durability and poison us, making it highly unpleasant to deal with.

“Ack... Getting poisoned *on top of* being drunk...? You’ve gotta be kidding me...”

“Yikes...”

“I can’t walk straight...”

This was definitely not good. The other support members and I immediately ran to the front, dousing the players in poison neutralizers. At the very least, we had to cure them of their poisoned state, lest the front line collapse.

“Help me out, guys!”

“Mm-mm!”

“Growl!”

“...♪”

As it was, we were incredibly underpowered. I quickly handed my monsters some antidotes and instructed them to heal the frontline players. Thankfully, it was an easy enough task as it only entailed drizzling potions on them.

“Woo-hoo! I got healed by Olto!”

“Why isn’t the cute undine here?”

“O-Oh my gosh! I’ve been anointed by Sakura!”

Phew. That ought to do it. I was taken aback when some players rejected my help, wanting to be healed by my monsters instead, but I ignored their protests and drenched them in poison neutralizer. I sincerely hoped they wouldn’t try to get poisoned on purpose just so my monsters could cure them. *Don’t expect me*

to help you again, idiots.

“Hue hue hue!”

“Careful! It’s gearing up for another attack!”

“Crap!”

The Hanami Vandal, who’d been happy to let us treat it as a punching bag for a while, began twirling again. This time, it spat out a pink, hazy substance. The mist was relatively far-reaching, affecting not only the players who had been attacking the creature up close but the rear guards as well. This, too, dealt a reasonable amount of damage and had a chance of intoxicating players. Even though the odds of this were slim, we still had to be wary, as there was currently no known cure for intoxication—if our main damage dealers were to be afflicted with that status ailment, it would be a significant blow to our team.

Still, thanks to the bonuses we’d received from completing the first quest, we were doing reasonably well so far. The recovery bonuses especially were a godsend, as they meant we didn’t have to heal ourselves as often and could use more MP-based attacks. While I wasn’t sure precisely how much our stats or critical hit rates had improved overall, I was sure it was helping us one way or another.

“HUEEEOWNGGHH!” the pink sea angel screeched loudly.

“Guh!”

It sounded as though the creature was shouting through a microphone. The noise rang in my ears, practically rattling the inside of my skull. While it didn’t hurt, I found myself unable to stand upright. The screech also seemed to have a minor paralyzing effect, as I noticed Olto lying motionless on the ground, hands at his sides and stiff as a board.

“Mm...”

“Olto! You okay?! Here!” I said, hurriedly using an antiparalysis potion on him.

“Mm-mm,” he groaned, wiping the sweat from his forehead before standing up. How were the others doing? I quickly assessed my surroundings: Fau was on her feet, strumming her lute once more, while Sakura, Bear Bear, Rick, and

Drimo were busying themselves helping the other players. None of them seemed injured.

“They’re okay. Thank god...”

“Mm.”

Unfortunately for us, this was the type of boss that inflicted status ailments with its AoE attacks. If we spent too much time trying to bring it down, we’d run out of recovery items in no time.

“Sorry, guys! You’re gonna have to help us too! The longer we drag this out, the worse our chances of defeating it!”

Alyssa seemed to be thinking the same thing as she ran over and asked us crafter types for our help. Still, raid boss or not, everyone was in relatively high spirits from the picnic and eager to fight.

“All right! Let’s do this!”

“Heh heh, time to use my secret weapon!”

“Let’s show ’em what we’ve got!”

There was no going back now. I steeled myself and stepped forward, my monsters following closely behind. Sakura, Fau, and I took our places in the back, while Rick and Bear Bear joined the forces at the front. I wasn’t quite sure where to position Drimo, though. So far, I’d instructed him to stay put by my side and abstain from fighting, but now...

“Hey, Drimo. Can you use your earth magic to attack?”

“Squeak.”

“Guess not, huh... Okay, you’re with Bear Bear and Rick. Don’t do anything too crazy, though, got it?”

“Squeak!”

Drimo sounded eager to fight as he ran towards the Hanami Vandal, waddling as fast as his short legs would carry him. *Hmm...* Was he going to be okay?

“Don’t push yourself too hard!” I called after him.

“Squeak.”

Drimo raised his arm in lieu of a nod before dashing off to the front.

“Bear Bear! Rick! Take care of Drimo, okay? Don’t forget, he’s still at level 1.”

“Growl growl!”

“Chirp chirp!”

I figured Drimo was better off focusing on defense, or he would probably die in no time. Bear Bear and Rick flashed me a salute to show they understood, then swiftly took off to catch up with him. As long as he had their support, he probably stood a bit of a fighting chance.

“Squeak!”

Drimo, however, kept running, right past the front liners and straight towards the Hanami Vandal. The sight of him running on his short legs with a giant pickax raised above his head was rather amusing, if not endearing. That said...

“Uh, Drimo? You heard what I said, right? What happened to our promise to take it easy?!” I yelled.

“Squeak squeak!”

Drimo either didn’t hear me or chose to ignore me, for he showed no signs of slowing down. If anything, he sped up, accelerating rapidly. A faint green light engulfed him for a split second; the next instant, he shot forward, as though propelled by an invisible force.

“Squeak!”

“Huegh!”

Drimo’s pickax glowed red as he swung it down, slamming it into the Hanami Vandal’s body. *Whoa*. He actually dealt quite a bit of damage. Although it was only as strong as Kokuten’s holding attack, it was still pretty impressive when you considered Drimo was pretty much a newborn. According to his battle log, he’d used a combination of Tailwind plus Thrash to attack the sea angel. The former had likely been responsible for his sudden acceleration and the latter for making his pickax glow. In LJO, the strength of your blows increased in proportion to your speed. The faster you moved, the more damage you were capable of dealing to your opponent. If his Tailwind skill could boost his Thrash

skill's strength even further, the resulting blow could be significantly more devastating than I'd initially imagined.

"Squeak!"

Drimo thrust his pickax into the air and squeaked triumphantly. One of the women who'd been watching him, mesmerized, let out a shriek of disgust as she got showered with garbage. ...That wasn't *my* fault, was it? But what did you know—I just might have gotten myself a highly competent damage dealer. If he was already this strong starting out, who knew what more he'd be capable of once he leveled up? At this rate, he could probably even take on a field boss with ease. However, I soon discovered that I'd been far too optimistic.

"Squeak?"

Despite repeating the same move, Drimo fumbled hard and completely missed the mark. How could he have failed to hit such a huge target, and one that was more or less *immobile* at that? It did say that using a Thrash attack would lower your hit rate, but I didn't think it would be this bad.

"Squeak."

Having charged at the enemy with full force and missed, Drimo lost his balance. He stumbled onto the ground, rolling across the dirt like a runaway barrel. If this had been a regular battle, he could have been in grave danger. Thankfully, the Hanami Vandal stuck purely to AoE attacks, so he didn't have to worry about getting hit by a counterattack. With any other boss, though, it could well have cost him his life.

"Hmm. Guess that combo's kind of a double-edged sword..."

One thing was for certain: this wasn't a move I wanted Drimo to use frequently or in any old fight. I had to make sure he reserved it for more opportune moments. Besides, a normal attack combined with Tailwind would probably more than suffice for ordinary battles.

"Squeak..."

"Growl?"

"Squeak!"

“Chirp!”

Bear Bear had gone to help Drimo, who was lying flat on his back after his little Jack and Jill-esque tumble. Meanwhile, Rick patted him on the shoulder in an effort to cheer him up. They seemed to have things under control, so I decided to leave him to the pair of them.

“Oh man... Looks like we got in the way too.”

Several players had leaped aside in surprise at seeing Drimo roll their way, while some had been unable to move because of him. I quickly offered a silent apology to those we’d inconvenienced. To my relief, nobody had died as a result of his blunder. *Thank goodness for that.*

With one eye still on Drimo, I observed the other vanguards in action. I was particularly drawn to several players for their distinctive ways of fighting. The first person to catch my eye was Siegfried, who stood out the most due to his flamboyant fighting style. I saw him charge at the raid boss repeatedly, brandishing his knight’s spear astride his trusty steed. He steered Silver expertly, grazing the Hanami Vandal while careful not to come into direct contact with it. Each time they crossed paths, he thrust his lance at the monster before turning around swiftly, ready to charge again. While he often got in the way of other players, he also contributed the most to the fight and dealt the greatest amount of damage. Evidently, he was skilled at attacking stationary opponents. That said, I feared he’d be rendered useless if his horse were to become intoxicated and fail him.

Akari was the second best fighter after Siegfried. Though she resembled a hoplite at first glance, her movements were extremely agile; perhaps her jet-black suit of armor was much lighter than it appeared. She wielded her enormous sword with ease, getting in a surprising number of hits. According to the players who were in the know, this slick fighting style was made possible by abandoning all attempts at defense. Actually, “abandon” wasn’t the right word—she simply prioritized evading the enemy instead. Since this was a stationary boss, she was pushing herself more than usual by attacking it continuously. Apparently, she was most known for her usual pattern of alternating between attacking and evading, choosing to wait for an opening to deal a killer blow.

“Man, you titleholders sure are interesting. Look at all three of you go!” commented the player who’d told me about Akari. I refused to be lumped with those two when I was nowhere near as skilled or useful in battle as them, though. For some reason, the player gave me a strange look when I said that. *But why?* As a matter of fact, I’d barely done anything. Drimo might have contributed a little, but that was it. Or were they alluding to the fact that I’d triggered this event in the first place?

“Oh well, whatever.” I shrugged. Although Drimo, Siegfried, and Akari stood out the most, Tagosack and Fuka were also remarkable in their own way.

“Hiyah!”

Tagosack was fighting with a giant steel club, a long and thin blunt weapon that prioritized range of motion. While that alone was nothing unusual, seeing her swing a club like that around in overalls, I couldn’t help but be reminded of a gang leader fighting a turf war. Next to Akari, who was dressed like a typical fantasy RPG character, she looked pretty absurd.

The other farmers were also intriguing to watch. Most fought with hoes or traditional Japanese spades, but since they were dressed in farm wear or similar loose clothing, they looked like they were part of those large-scale peasant uprisings that were common during the Edo period. There was something rather tragic and awe-inspiring about them getting knocked down by the Hanami Vandal that made me want to root for them.

Another member that stuck out by a mile was Fuka, who was fighting with a frying pan, of all things. Because of that, she was quite possibly the furthest thing from a valiant soldier. Moreover, since she was in her chef uniform that she’d worn to prepare food for the picnic, she looked ridiculously out of place. Still, seeing everyone give it their all encouraged me to do my part too.

“Come on, guys! We can’t be the only ones slacking off!”

“La di da da♪”

“...♪”

Our magic boosted by Fau’s singing, Sakura and I fired shot after shot at the sea angel. It was nice not having to hold back, thanks to the auto MP-recovery

bonus in effect. I was also relieved that the boss only used AoE attacks, which meant we didn't have to worry about enmity. Furthermore, since its movements were fairly pronounced, it wasn't that difficult to predict when it was about to unleash its intoxicating smog. As long as we watched out for its screech attack and the potential paralysis that accompanied it, we could potentially get by without incurring any damage.

Nearby, other long-range fighters were also attacking the raid boss. Most Tamers tended to be rear guards, so there were plenty of monsters around us. It felt especially reassuring to have a group of gnomes barricading the front of our team. Occasionally, the Hanami Vandal was able to bypass the vanguards and hurl trash at us, but the gnomes' ironclad defenses shot them down easily. While their constant *mm-mm*ing bothered me somewhat, I didn't dare complain, as the other gnome lovers seemed to adore it. Besides, it was thanks to them that we hadn't sustained any damage so far.

One thing that I did find objectionable, however, was being lumped in with the other gnome fanatics. Sure, Olto was cute, and so were gnomes in general. That didn't mean I was into children or young boys, though. What did they mean by, "I could live off gnomes and rice alone?" I could agree that they were cute or a sight for sore eyes, but I had to draw the line *somewhere*. Disturbingly, however, a surprising number of people seemed to echo the sentiment.

"...Brr. Best not think too deeply about it."

I shook my head, shifting my attention to the other Tamers' monsters. Amelia's Little Air Wolf was, without a doubt, the most impressive of the bunch. It was incredibly nimble, probably thanks to its Tailwind skill. At the moment, its attacks served as no more than a temporary diversion or restraint, but I shuddered to think of what it might be capable of once it leveled up and evolved. I sincerely hoped I'd never have to fight it, and I vowed to be careful if I ever encountered one in the wild in the future.

"Hmm, we've been on the offensive for a while now."

The players on the front line showed no signs of stopping, their damage being negligible. Though intoxicated, they were still capable of dealing direct blows to the Hanami Vandal, given how massive it was. It was a strange sight, watching

the crowd of tottering and red-faced players steadily depleting the monster's HP. Being a boss, it would likely take a while longer to finish it off, but considering how seldom it attacked us and how little damage it dealt, it didn't seem that daunting an opponent. Unfortunately, things changed when the creature was down to twenty percent of its health.

"HUEEEGGHH!"

"Rats! Is that a new move?!"

"I-It's got buccal cones!"

"So it *is* a sea angel! Why the heck would a *sea angel* vandalize a picnic?!"

"Beats me. The devs must've thought it'd be a neat idea."

To our great dismay, the Hanami Vandal's head split open to reveal fingerlike tentacles inside, just like how sea angels did when they devoured their prey. Each of its six tentacles moved independently as it focused on attacking the vanguards. *Shit. This can't be good.* One of Kokuten's teammates was struck by a tentacle, and their HP immediately dipped into the red zone. Both stronger and quicker, the creature was now in a completely different class. If Drimo was to get hit, it'd be over for him in an instant.

Worse still, the sea angel was ejecting a clear, glittery substance from its head: a sticky mucus that inhibited its target's movements. This appeared to be its ultimate tactic; it incapacitated players by intoxicating them or trapping them with mucus, before finishing them off with a blow from its tentacles. So far, Drimo had managed to evade its toxic smog by hiding in a hole he'd dug in the ground, but I doubted he'd be able to dodge its tentacles as well. It seemed best for him to retreat.

"But first, I wanna see what *that* does."

There was one skill I hadn't seen him use yet: Dragon Blood Awakening. *What better time than now to put it to the test?*

"Drimo! Get back here once you've used your Dragon Blood Awakening skill, okay?"

"Squeak!"

Here it was—the moment of truth. Was it an offensive, amplifying, or auxiliary skill? I hadn't been able to figure out what it did just from the description alone, so I eagerly awaited for Drimo to activate it.

“Squeak squeak!” Drimo cried cutely. The next instant, a blinding light engulfed his entire body. I could even see light pillars shooting towards the heavens. *Dang*. The devs had really gone ham on the effects.

“Whoa!”

“No way! What the hell?!”

“It's a *dragon*!”

When the light disappeared, a collective gasp rose from the players nearby. One person even got knocked out by the boss's tentacles because they were distracted by Drimo. *Oh shit, they died! Sorry, mate!* I didn't blame them, though; where there had been a mole just moments ago, there now was a dragon.

The creature had sharp fangs, and claws on all four legs, its entire body covered in hard brown scales and ending in a thick and sturdy tail. Bat-like wings sprouted from its back, and from each side of its head grew two pointed horns. It also had vertical, reptilian slitted pupils. The monster was undeniably a dragon—there was no way of mistaking it for a mole. Who would have thought that Drimo's Dragon Blood Awakening skill would enable him to transform into an *actual* dragon? Although he was about the same size as before, he looked quite dignified, standing proudly on all four legs. Overall, he was more or less an ordinary dragon, even if he did have a rather stout body. His two forward-pointing, triceratopsesque horns were especially noticeable; they looked like they would hurt quite a bit.

“Squeak!”

Oh. His voice was still the same, though.

Drimo the dragon then charged headlong into the Hanami Vandal. Judging by the special effects, he appeared to be using his Tailwind plus Thrash combo attack again.

“Squeak squeak!”

Drimo slammed smack-dab into the monster's solar plexus, landing a critical hit. The blow from his horns reduced the creature's health drastically; it was almost as effective as the front liners' techniques. As impressive as his pickax swing had been, this was far more deadly. Unfortunately, that was the extent of his skill. The effects wore off immediately after, and before long, he was back to being a mole. It seemed like ten seconds was the most he could maintain his dragon form. That said, he still had quite a bit of MP left. I had hoped this meant he could use his skill again, but sadly, it had grayed out and become unavailable. The numerals "23:59:44" were displayed next to it, indicating the remaining cooldown time.

"So you gotta wait another twenty-four hours to use it again..."

It really was meant to be a last resort, then. I vowed to test it out some more in my spare time.

"Dang, that is one *badass* mole!"

"Well, can't let him do all the hard work, can we?"

"Rarr!"

Miniature or not, the crowd had just witnessed a dragon in action. That seemed to have roused their spirits. The players roared enthusiastically, attacking the boss with far more gusto than before.

"Ha ha ha! Shall we, Silver?" Siegfried chuckled to his horse.

"Neeigh!"

"Jinba Ittai! Horse and rider as one!"

Silver's magnificent neigh echoed throughout the field, drawing all our attention. Siegfried and his steed were both bathed in blue light, looking extremely regal and knightlike.

"Hup! Great Charge!"

"Neigh!"

Together, the horse and knight duo charged at the boss, leaving a streak of light in their wake. Gosh, how did this guy exude so much main character energy? Incidentally, Jinba Ittai was a buff skill that strengthened both the user

and their steed, while Great Charge was an art only knights could wield. Siegfried and Silver made an impressive team, and it was clear how much damage they'd dealt by looking at the Hanami Vandal's life meter. It was probably down to the last five percent, possibly less.

"Can't let Siegfried take all the credit!" Akari exclaimed, dashing towards the boss. The red light bathing her body and weapon made her look cool as hell, not to mention her black armor was incredibly fetching. If Siegfried was the Hero with a capital H, Akari would be more of the antihero type.

"D'aaah! Deadly Slash!" she bellowed, swinging her sword down on the monster. Her weapon left behind a red trail as it arced through the air, illuminating the field. In exchange for dealing an exceptional amount of damage, this art temporarily reduced your defenses to zero. All in all, it was a fitting skill for Akari.

"Hueeeagh!"

Akari's blow zapped the Hanami Vandal of its remaining HP. I glanced at the time: 29 minutes and 12 seconds. Somehow, we'd managed to settle the score in under thirty minutes. The pink sea angel groaned pitifully, writhing in pain.

"Hue, hue hue hue... Mind your manners...and always clean up after your picnic!"

Those were the creature's final words. Its body began to glow faintly, then expand, swallowing up the entire field.

"Whoa, what the...?" I yelped in bewilderment.

"Mm-mm?"

Olto didn't seem to understand what was happening either. We braced ourselves, confused by the pink light that had suddenly engulfed us. However, the painful shock I anticipated never came. Instead, I felt something soft brush my skin. I opened my eyes gingerly to a breathtakingly beautiful sight. A flurry of cherry blossoms danced in the air as though a spring storm had just passed through. Thousands upon thousands of petals floated down on us, light as a snowfall.



As mesmerizing as it was where we stood, the perimeter of the field was even more impressive. Countless petals swirled around the battlefield, forming some sort of cherry blossom wall around us. I found I wasn't the only one immediately snapping photos.

"Wow..."

"This is gorgeous."

"Well, I'll be!"

Ding-dong.

As we were all captivated by the unworldly sight, a familiar notification sounded, followed by a new announcement.

"A yōkai has been defeated for the very first time. Consequently, the Yōkai section in your encyclopedias has been unlocked."

Chapter Three: The Picnic May Be Over, but the Fun Isn't

"A yōkai has been defeated for the very first time. Consequently, the Yōkai section in your encyclopedias has been unlocked. Many more yōkai exist in the world of LJO, so we hope you have fun searching for them."

Apart from the update notice, this was the first time I'd heard a server-wide announcement in a while. Evidently, this had been triggered by the Hanami Vandal's demise.

"Hmm, they mentioned something about a 'Yōkai' section..."

I opened my encyclopedia, and sure enough, there was a new page titled "Yōkai" at the very end. The Hanami Vandal was listed on it as "Entry No. 7."

"The players who defeated the first yōkai in the game will receive the title, 'Yōkai Buster.'"

Title: Yōkai Buster

Effect: You have gained 10,000 G and two bonus points. Increases damage towards yōkai.

"In exchange for successfully defeating a yōkai, the job class 'Onmyōji' has become available to all participants."

"You have successfully defeated the yōkai, Hanami Vandal. All participants will receive the skill, 'Plant Knowledge.' Players that already possess this skill will be awarded two bonus points."

"You have successfully defeated the yōkai, Hanami Vandal. A new set of skills will become available to participants."

"Whoa, slow down there...!"

Talk about an information overload! We were suddenly bombarded with a rush of notifications. Not only had we each received a title, but we'd also obtained a few bonus points. I wondered what skills had been unlocked. Seeing Alyssa already scrolling through her list of obtainable skills meant we'd probably find out soon enough. The other players meanwhile had burst into applause and cheers at the news of a title; this seemed to be a first for quite a few of them.

"Thanks so much! Praise be to you!"

"All hail the Silver-Haired effect!"

"Yes! Title time! Finally!"

I was bewildered by the sheer number of players suddenly asking to shake my hand, but I supposed it was understandable that they would want to thank the host of the event, aka me. That said, I really wished they would stop treating me like some kind of lucky charm. *Praying to me won't do you any good, you hear me? And quit calling it "the Silver-Haired effect" or "the Silver-Haired phenomenon" or whatever! It sounds ridiculous!*

The notifications didn't end there. Next were our rewards for clearing the event. I recalled the description saying what we got would depend on how long it took to defeat the Hanami Vandal. We'd managed to clear the quest in just under thirty minutes—how had we fared?

"You have successfully completed Special Quest No. 2 in 29 minutes and 12 seconds. As a reward, you will receive three Otherworldly Cherry Blossom Potions."

Our reward was a four-star rarity potion that had the ability to cure users of intoxication. *Not bad.* Although it would likely lose its value down the road, it was a fairly useful item to own for now. The other players seemed pretty happy with it too; those who drank alcohol were thrilled to obtain an item that allowed them to drink more, while those who didn't were more than happy to sell their potions for profit.

That appeared to be it for event-related announcements—the rest were all level-up notifications. All of us had leveled up considerably, with Drimo experiencing the most growth: he had jumped from level 1 all the way to level 8

from this event alone—little shock for a raid boss, I suppose. I was glad to learn that both my Command and Monster Taming skills had reached level 20, granting me an extra two slots for tamed monsters. Moreover, my Command skill leveling up had unlocked a skill called Breeding Reinforcement, which strengthened any monsters born through monster breeding ever so slightly. I also gained a skill called Monster Assist, which would provide a temporary boost to my monsters' strength and agility for a few minutes. I was liking all these upgrades so far.

And that wasn't all. I'd also obtained new magic abilities thanks to my water and tree magic reaching levels 25 and 16, respectively. Aqua Cure was a skill similar to Monster Heal and had the ability to heal the following status ailments: poison, paralysis, bleeding, crushing, burns, and frostbite. Poisonous Perfume was a type of tree magic skill that allowed you to produce a poisonous mist. That was a lot to take in all at once, not to mention I still hadn't checked my boss drops. Frankly, I was on the verge of freaking out.

"Let's see, what did I get?" I pondered aloud as I opened my inventory to check the spoils of our battle. At the very top was a weapon called an Otherworldly Cherry Blossom Armored Fist.

"'Armored fist'? Looks like something for hand-to-hand combat."

I selected the item to get a closer look. It appeared to be a metal gauntlet, mostly pastel pink in color, with cherry blossom petals a shade darker adorning the hand plate. Overall, the gauntlet was more classy than childish or cute—suitable even for a grown man. Evidently, the boss drops were mostly weapons and armor, not items or ingredients. My wins included the following four items: Otherworldly Cherry Blossom Armored Fist, Otherworldly Cherry Blossom Body Armor, Otherworldly Cherry Blossom Shackles, and Otherworldly Cherry Blossom Rapier. Unfortunately, none of them were of any use to me, since they required a minimum of 20 strength just to wear, let alone wield. All that hard work for stuff I couldn't even use... *Figures.*

"Seems like you can activate special effects by wearing them as a set."

Meanwhile, the other players were already sharing what they'd got with each other and itemizing their wins. Altogether, there were nine items: four types of

weapons (armored fists, rapiers, whips, and steel gun staves), three types of armor (body armor, footwear, and headbands), and two kinds of accessories (shackles and earrings). The otherworldly cherry blossom shackles appeared to be the boss's rare drop. They were a rather unusual piece of equipment in that in exchange for an overall decrease in stats, there was a chance your stats would receive a greater boost when you leveled up.

By equipping yourself with four of these items, including at least one weapon, you could neutralize the effects of intoxication and accelerate your weapon's skill growth. None of this mattered to me, however, as my strength was only 9—I hoped to either sell or trade my rewards for something else.

"I also got one more potion and...a Miniature Otherworldly Cherry Blossom Shrine?"

The shrine seemed to be a household object of sorts, although the description merely said to install it, nothing more. Thankfully, it only required one slot's worth of space. Shortly, the Quick-Eared Cats rounded up the rest of the players and began tallying everyone's drops. As a result, we found out that I was the only one who had gotten the shrine, either because I was the host or for some other inexplicable reason. Apparently, this battle alone wasn't enough to make a conclusive determination. In the end, it was decided that I would set up the shrine before everyone's eyes once the event was officially brought to a close. Though Alyssa offered to pay for my information, I felt bad for accepting money for something that we'd won together as a team. Therefore, I agreed to install the object in front of everyone instead. Incidentally, an exit had materialized while we were busy sharing our finds. After passing through the pinkish portal, I found myself on my farm once again. The last few moments had truly passed by in a blur.

"Hey! H-How'd it go? What did you guys get?" A man suddenly approached me, slightly out of breath.

"Er..." I faltered, not recognizing him. How was he able to enter my farm? Only friends could enter my private property, unless... *Wait a minute.* I'd seen this guy before. Why did he look familiar? After racking my brains for a bit, I soon realized who he was: the Quick-Eared Cats member who'd gotten locked out of the farm when the event happened. I saw Alyssa bonking him on the

head as he tried to press her for details. *Sorry for forgetting about you, mate. Ask Alyssa to give you a rundown later.*

“First things first—gotta set up this shrine.”

I could feel everyone’s eyes boring into me, so I decided it was best to get it over with as soon as possible. Besides, some people probably had to leave soon.

“There we g— Hold on, I can’t install it?”

For some reason, the item name was grayed out, indicating it couldn’t be selected. However, after testing various locations, I discovered the only place it could be installed was in front of the cherry blossom tree. Considering it had the words “cherry blossom” in its name, I supposed that made sense.

“Okay, I’m gonna install it now,” I told Alyssa.

“Ready when you are,” she replied. “Oh, one sec. Let me get out my camera.”

“Uh, sure thing.”

Alyssa and her clan mates began snapping away, but I decided not to let that distract me. Once I’d selected the shrine from my inventory, I tapped the “Install” button.

“There we go.”

After a small *Poof!* the shrine materialized before the tree.

“Whoa!” A collective gasp rose from the crowd. Evidently, this was the first time most of them had witnessed a household object being installed.

“...Huh. For a household object that’s supposedly super rare, this is kind of a letdown.”

True to its name, the shrine was a dinky little thing, only coming up to my waist. The wooden object was roughly the size of a Stevenson screen, minus the legs, placed atop a square stone foundation. Never mind its shabby appearance, though—its *effects* were what mattered the most.

“So... What does this thing do...?”

Name: Miniature Otherworldly Cherry Blossom Shrine

Effect: A miniature shrine that contains the yōkai, Hanami Vandal. May bring you good luck if you make an offering once a day.

“Uh-huh. An offering, eh?”

Was this something like the Lakeside Sequoia Dryad’s altar? If so, I had high—and I mean *high*—expectations for it! For starters, I tried placing some alcohol in front of the shrine. Although Japanese rice wine would’ve been best, all I had at the moment was some store-bought wine. Oh well, it would have to do.

“Please accept this humble offering,” I bowed, clapping my hands twice. *Let’s see how that works.* After a few seconds of silence, the shrine started to glow faintly. The door then creaked open, revealing a pink sea angel inside.

“Oooh!”

For goodness’ sake, quit oohing and aahing every time something remotely interesting happens. I rolled my eyes, knowing damn well that I would’ve done the same thing had I been in their shoes. I looked around and noticed everyone was taking screenshots. While I was pretty sure they’d eventually delete the photos after viewing them a few times, I didn’t blame them for wanting to immortalize such a rare moment.

“That’s gotta be the Hanami Vandal.”

There was no mistaking it. The creature that had emerged from the shrine was none other than the yōkai we’d grappled with mere moments ago. The Hanami Vandal, now no more than ten centimeters in size—roughly the same height as the wine glass—went straight for the wine placed outside the shrine. It then grasped the glass with its short wings and began gulping the contents greedily. Bit by bit, the pink sea angel turned even pinker than before. It seemed quite tipsy by now, judging by how red its face was.

“...Wait, that’s it? What happened to the whole good luck thing?”

That couldn’t be it, could it? I eyed the Hanami Vandal, which looked properly sloshed after consuming all that wine. It didn’t seem like anything special was about to happen, though. Should I have offered something else instead? Just

then, the sea angel started to glow. The pink light gradually intensified, before flaring and shooting off into beams. The next instant, a blizzard of cherry blossoms surrounded the tree. The sight was breathtaking—I supposed I wouldn't mind making an offering if it meant being able to witness this scene. However, the blizzard appeared to be only for show. The cherry blossoms then burst into pink particles of light before raining down on me like a sparkling shower.

"What was *that* about?" Alyssa demanded impatiently.

"G-Gimme a sec. Hey, I said wait! No need to push me!"

I hurriedly opened my status window, prompted by an overeager Alyssa. There, I spotted several unfamiliar items in my inventory.

"'Otherworldly Cherry Blossom Petals'? Looks like I have five of those. I also got something called the 'Hanami Vandal's Wrath.'"

"Cool, the petals are ingredients. Judging from the name, I'm guessing you'd use those to make otherworldly cherry blossom potions."

"Right, gotcha."

Alyssa was probably right. I was looking forward to experimenting with them—that was, *if* I could get five of them every day. I was excited to see what tomorrow would bring.

"That means you could potentially harvest the ingredients for and concoct the antidotes for intoxication every day. Bet lots of people are gonna want this info..." Alyssa murmured. While we were chatting, Kokuten, who had been busy trading items with a few other players, joined us.

"Hey, Silver-Haired. I heard that you intend to give away your equipment drops. Is that true?" he asked.

"Yeah, most likely. It's not like I can use them anyway," I replied.

"In that case, why not sell them? Quite a few people are interested in buying, you know."

"Sure, I don't mind. I'd be glad if they went to a good home."

Acknowledging my reply, Kokuten told me the prices of each piece of cherry

blossom equipment. I couldn't tell if they were high or low, but I trusted his and his teammates' judgment. Fair market value or not, I had zero complaints if people were willing to pay handsomely for the equipment I couldn't use. Strangely enough, the armored fist was the same price as the shackles—the rare drop item—and nearly twice as expensive as the body armor and rapier. According to the drop rates that Kokuten showed me earlier, it didn't seem like the armored fist had a lower percentage than the other items. What was it that made it more valuable then?

“Oh, that has to do with the skills that became available,” he explained.

“So you've already put together a list of the new skills?”

“Yeah. Some skills seem to require prerequisites, so I can't say for sure that our list is definitive, but we do have one. Anyway, take a look at this skill here,” Kokuten said, pointing to the list he and a few other volunteers had compiled. Dang, that was fast! When had they typed this all out?

“Uh-huh... Wait, Drunken Boxing? *The Drunken Boxing*?”

“Yes, the one and only. There were rapier skills too, but as you can imagine, Drunken Boxing is simply too good a skill to pass up... Since virtually everyone wants to obtain it, and the armored fist is meant to enhance the skill's abilities, the price ended up skyrocketing.”

Well, duh—this was *Drunken Boxing* we were talking about. How could anyone say no to something as cool as that?! For me, Drunken Boxing was on par with Xing Yi Quan, making them the top two martial arts of my dreams. I would love to obtain it if I could, regardless of whether I actually planned on using it. *Could I learn it immediately if I used my skill points?* I wondered, quickly checking my list of obtainable skills.

“Oh, if you don't mind, Silver-Haired, I'd like to know what skills you got.”

“Hang on. I'll take a look at them now.”

Skills that had become available within the last twenty-four hours had a ★ next to them, so those were easy enough to find. Unfortunately, though I had several new skills on my list, Drunken Boxing wasn't one of them.

“I don't see it anywhere...”

“Apparently, it’s only available to players who have advanced fighting skills. It’s either that or you have to possess three or more fighting skills with a combined level of over fifty.”

“Were you able to learn it, Kokuten?”

“Naturally.”

Damn it, how I envied him! I asked him how the skill worked and learned that it only activated when you were fully plastered. The drunker you were, the stronger your punches. When they said “Drunken” Boxing, I didn’t think they meant it *that* literally! Kokuten then asked me what my skills were like. I wasn’t sure if he was trying to be sympathetic, or was simply clueless of my jealousy, but whatever. *If you really wanna know, then fine! Damn you, you lucky bastard!*

“Hmm, let’s see...”

“Wonder what you got?” Kokuten pondered aloud innocently. “You *are* the host of the event, so I wouldn’t be surprised if you managed to unlock a special skill of some sort.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I muttered, gritting my teeth as I painstakingly scrolled through my list. I mean, how could I say no to Kokuten? It didn’t feel right to turn him down, especially since his team had worked the hardest during the raid battle.

“Well, I got five skills that have a ★ next to them.”

Out of the starred skills I had, Intoxication Resistance, Yōkai Detection, and Yōkai Knowledge were the ones that everyone could obtain. As the name implied, Intoxication Resistance was a skill that prevented you from getting drunk too easily. Although heavy drinkers were thrilled by this, the skill didn’t seem too compatible with Drunken Boxing. *Take that, suckers!* Yōkai Detection was a skill that enabled you to sense if any yōkai were nearby, while Yōkai Knowledge was similar to Plant Knowledge, which let you know the details of each yōkai you assessed. Without this skill, the only information you had access to was the creature’s name and HP. There were two skills that weren’t on Kokuten’s list, though.

“Hmm... I also got Yōkai Whisperer and Yōkai Searcher.”

“...*Two* special skills? W-Wow! That’s incredible!”

“Perks of being the host, I guess.”

Honestly speaking, it felt kind of wrong that I should get unique benefits. At any rate, Yōkai Whisperer was a skill that improved the user’s favorability score with yōkai. Did that mean likability had a role to play in future yōkai-related events? Could it be that there were creatures you couldn’t fight unless you raised your favorability score with them, or that something would happen if you got in the Hanami Vandal’s good books? In any case, its mere existence seemed highly evocative. Yōkai Searcher was similar to Yōkai Detection and let you know if there were any yōkai near you on the playing field. In exchange for its scope being more limited, it allowed you to pinpoint the yōkai’s location more accurately.

“Think the miniature shrine has something to do with it? Or is it because you’re the host?”

“Beats me.”

As I was chatting with Kokuten, I suddenly heard a voice behind me: Spade. *Crap!* With everything that had happened, I’d totally forgotten about the old man and his family! Thankfully, they didn’t seem annoyed; on the contrary, they apologized for dozing off halfway through the picnic. Apparently, they’d all fallen asleep after drinking too much alcohol and didn’t remember a thing, or so they’d been programmed.

“I had a great time today. Gotta hand it to you, son.” Spade beamed.

“Likewise,” said Pisco. “I can’t remember the last time I had that much fun.”

“Let us know if ye ever need any help!” Ryver chimed in.

“We’d be glad to help in any way we can.” Leon nodded.

“Leon and I usually work at the guild, so I’m sure we’ll see each other again.” Virgo smiled. Once the NPCs had each bade us goodbye, they headed home. I was glad to hear they’d enjoyed themselves. Right after their departure, I heard an announcement signaling the end of the event—that appeared to be it for the

quest chain.

Special Quest

Requirement: Grow a cherry blossom tree and have a flower-viewing picnic beneath it with Spade, Ryver, and Pisco.

Reward: Three bonus points.

Time Limit: None

I'd received my bonus points as stated in the reward. Come to think of it, that was how it had started out initially. To think I'd spent several days growing my cherry blossom sapling, planning for and inviting people to a picnic, and had ultimately fought a raid boss. What a long journey it'd been.

"Guess it's time to bring this party to a close."

I motioned to the remaining players, asking them to gather around.

"Well, folks, that's it for the picnic. Sorry things got so hectic towards the end."

"Don't mention it. It was lots of fun!"

"Yeah. Besides, we got to kick a raid boss's butt!"

"Best flower-viewing picnic ever!"

Phew. Thank goodness none of them seemed angry or upset. If anything, my guests were all smiles. I bowed to show my gratitude, and the crowd broke out into applause. It reminded me of the doujinshi convention that I used to attend annually many years ago—the largest of its kind in Japan. Everyone would always smile and applaud at the end, with a tinge of sadness that we'd have to wait another year for the next one. Oh, and of course, I hadn't forgotten to sell my cherry blossom equipment to the people who wanted it. The 260,000 G my items sold for seemed way too much, but I supposed it was a fair amount for items so rare and powerful. In my case, the deal had been sweetened even further by the fact that I had gotten the armored fist and shackles. As my guests

began leaving in twos and threes, Alyssa pulled me aside, ready to grill me again.

“Right, where were we? Oh yes, the other item. So, what exactly is a Hanami Vandal’s Wrath?”

Whoops. I’d completely forgotten about it in my excitement over Drunken Boxing. I hurriedly pulled up my status window to check its description.

“Okay, time to see what the deal is with this item. Uh-huh... Wait, what?” Alyssa, who had been peering at my screen beside me, raised her eyebrows. “Interesting. It lets you have a rematch with the boss, and can only be used here in front of the cherry blossom tree... I must say, that’s one heck of an item. Wonder if it’s something you can use every day?”

“D-Don’t ask me.”

“Figured as much... Hey, do you mind giving me a breakdown of the types of items you can get at this altar over the next few days? I’ll pay you, of course.”

“Sure, no problem.”

“Also, I suggest you keep this item a secret for now—you might get a ton of uninvited visitors to your farm if word gets out.”

“G-Got it.”

An item that allowed you to challenge the raid boss would no doubt cause a huge stir. Would the next group still receive the recovery bonuses we got from the special quest, though? If not, winning would most likely be a bit of an uphill battle.

“What steps did you need to take to trigger this raid boss battle in the first place?”

I recounted each detail to Alyssa, explaining how the quest chain had kicked off. When I was done, she let out a deep sigh.

“Gosh... Talk about a long journey...”

“Is it really?”

“Plant Knowledge might be becoming more widespread, but it’s what comes

after that's a problem... This quest chain involves a lot of growing and downtime, doesn't it? You'd need crafting skills for that."

"Farming, Logging, Woodworking, and Arboriculture, to be exact."

"Which means most people will either have to obtain said skills as a party or ask a crafter-type player to give them a hand. They'll also definitely need a high-level farmer to help them out."

It did sound pretty difficult for a regular front liner group to trigger this event. Now that I thought about it, it was highly likely that this quest chain was meant for farmers.

"To top it all off, you have to go up against a raid boss in the end. I'm amazed you managed to clear the whole thing, Yuto."

"Well, I got lucky, I guess."

"Maple's been busting her ass trying to hone her farming skills, but she's not quite advanced enough to learn Arboriculture yet... Wonder if there are any farmers willing to help us out?"

Before long, Alyssa started working on a plan to tackle the quest chain. *Best of luck, girl. I believe in you.* Seeing the guests leave, the crowd of onlookers began to disperse too. I was sure they'd had fun even watching from outside, considering how chaotic things had been. Speaking of, the guy from the Quick-Eared Cats who had gotten locked out of the farm had evidently been filming the whole event, even asking his friends in the crowd for help to cover all angles.

"I'd like to upload the video to our website—if you don't mind, that is." He looked to me for permission.

"Sure, as long as everyone else consents to it."

Seriously, how could I say no to him? I would feel terrible if I did; the man had already suffered enough. I guessed I was the last person he asked, for his eyes widened in surprise at my reply. Wait, did I look like the type of person to turn down someone's earnest request? *Ouch.* That was so not the impression I wanted to give.

“D-Dang, they weren’t lying about Silver-Haired... Can’t believe you’d give away gaming tips like this so easily...”

“Come again?”

“Nothing, don’t mind me! Is that a yes then?”

“You’re just making the video public, not demanding money for it, right? That’s fine by me.”

“Thanks, dude!”

The player, who’d earned the unfortunate moniker “Doofus,” bowed deeply before running off. Hopefully, this would assuage some of his despair.

“All done?” Kokuten asked after Sir Doofus had left.

“Yep. Sorry to keep you.”

As a matter of fact, Kokuten had offered to perform Drunken Boxing for us. Naturally, I was more than happy to provide the booze.

“Seems kinda tasteless to just chug alcohol until you get drunk, though. What do you say we consider this our after-party?” I suggested.

“Ooh, nice. I can get on board with that.”

Now that most of my guests had left, it was time to party with Kokuten’s group. We snacked on cheese and sipped our wine, soaking up the peace and quiet under the cherry blossoms. The sun was starting to set in game, as evidenced by the crimson sky, and the slanting light had turned the tree a bright, fiery red, the petals looking as though they were ablaze.

“Aah, this is the life!”

“Be hard-pressed to experience something like this in real life!”

“We never really get to have flower-viewing picnics outside work anyway.”

“Yeah, tell me about it. And there’s just a crazy amount of people everywhere you go.”

I was glad to see Kokuten and his teammates enjoying themselves. We sat in a circle while we drank, entranced by the sight of the beautiful twilit cherry blossoms. They seemed to have their fair share of beef with flower-viewing

picnics in real life. One of the members nudged me, saying he wanted to show me something: it was a screenshot of the raid battle. Apparently, one of his friends had taken it from outside. Although you usually couldn't photograph or film other people's private property, that rule didn't apply to boss fields, which was what my farm had become during the fight. Come to think of it, Doofus had mentioned something like that too. Oh well, I didn't care as long as they didn't go around posting those pics online.

"Hm? Hey, this player's movements are a little weird. They don't seem drunk, though."

"Oh, they're probably weighed down."

Deadweight was an aggravating status ailment that increased the effects of gravity on you, therefore restricting your movements. It appeared that players who were immune to intoxication, i.e., those who were below the legal drinking age, had been subjected to this effect instead. It hadn't occurred to me at the time since my monsters and I were all capable of becoming intoxicated, but it made sense now; it wouldn't be fair if minors had a significant advantage over adults.

"Hum!"

"Hey, guys. You did good too."

"Mm!"

My companions joined me shortly, and we gazed up at the cherry blossoms together.

"Hum."

"Trrrr."

"Thanks for looking after the farm, you two." I patted Reflet and Olea, who had snuggled up to me for attention. They must have been lonely, as they were now busying themselves fetching snacks and pouring wine for us. *Well, whatever makes them happy, I guess. Knock yourselves out.* I patted them on the head from time to time, letting them do as they pleased, while Kokuten and his teammates smiled at us.

“Tiiii.”

After some time, Olea seemed to calm down, satisfied by the amount of physical affection. They then wedged themselves in between my legs and began dozing off. *Huh*. I didn’t know trees slept too.

“Hum.”

“There, there. Haven’t forgotten about you, Reflet.”

“Hum hum♪”

Determined not to be left out, Reflet plopped herself down on my left and clung to my arm. Usually, my other companions would immediately demand to be patted too, but they appeared to be restraining themselves out of consideration for her and Olea.

“La la la...♪”

As we were relaxing, Fau, who was on my right, started plucking the strings on her lute. Unlike the lively tunes she played at the picnic, this one was quieter and more melancholic. Good old Fau—she really knew how to suit the mood. Behind her, Rick was curled into a ball, using his tail as a pillow. She looked even more like Snufkin now, the way she was leaning against him whilst she played.

“Squeak.”

“You must be tired too, Drimo, especially since you got flung into a raid battle right after you were born.”

“Squeak squeak.”

Drimo smirked in reply, giving me a thumbs-up. *G-Gosh, what a man!* I was fascinated by how differently he behaved from the others.

“Well, aren’t you a dependable munchkin? I mean it, though. You were really strong and badass back there.”

“Squeak.”

He scratched his head sheepishly as I continued to praise him. It seemed like compliments were a weakness of his. He was the perfect combination of cute and cool. I’d truly hit the jackpot in the monster lottery this time, although

naturally, the same could be said for *all* of my monsters. Meanwhile, Bear Bear had sat down between Kokuten's teammates and was being fed nuts and various snacks. As much as they enjoyed the rather aggressive display of affection from their fans, they also seemed to like asking for pats and spending time with people in a more laid-back fashion. In any case, they were definitely a people person—or rather, people *bear*, to be more accurate.

My OG duo, Sakura and Olto, were leaning against each other on the edge of our picnic sheet. Both of them had their eyes closed, taking pleasure in Fau's soothing music and swaying to the beat from time to time. This party felt infinitely more relaxed than our previous one: a true adult picnic, and just as enjoyable in its own way. Shortly, I received a text from Alyssa. According to her, there was a new item for sale at the Farming Guild called Brushwood Fertilizer. Although it took twice as long, this fertilizer allowed players to grow various types of trees, even if they didn't possess Arboriculture.

"Not something I need, but..."

Still, it sounded like a great item for people who wanted to attempt the flower-viewing picnic event but didn't possess the means to grow a cherry blossom tree otherwise. Alyssa told me she and a few others would also be taking on the quest chain very soon.

After an incredibly chill thirty minutes, Kokuten was finally plastered. It was time for him to perform his Drunken Boxing technique.

"All right! Been waiting for this!"

"Let's give it up for Kokuten—the man, the myth, the legend!"

"C'mon, guys. Help me hype things up."

"Mm-mm!"

"Hum!"

The rest of us cheered him on, while my monsters clapped enthusiastically, Fau switching to a more up-tempo tune to fit the mood. *Well, so much for a chill picnic.*

Kokuten took a few steps forward until he was right in front of the cherry blossom tree before getting into a fighting stance. He swayed his body from side to side, palms thrust forward with fingers bent as though he was holding a sake cup.

“Hwaarr!”

Kokuten began jabbing the air and busting out one complicated move after another. It was exactly as I had imagined it; any martial arts movie buff would recognize his movements. He really looked like an action movie star.

“Attaah!”

“It’s Drunken Boxing all right, but...isn’t this borderline copyright infringement?”

That was how closely Kokuten’s movements mirrored their inspiration; not that I felt it was a bad thing, given I was a huge fan of the films. I could already picture people thronging to sign themselves up for this skill.

“Grr, if only I’d learned some combat skills too...!”

Aside from Drunken Boxing, rapier skills, whip-cracking skills, and steel gun staff skills had also become available. Though specialized skills like these could only be used with certain weapons and were more restrictive, they leveled up faster than all-purpose skills such as sword skills or spear skills. Kokuten’s teammates had each acquired one of the new skills as well. Despite the perks, they didn’t seem very practical in my opinion; you’d need to have your weapon custom-made if you wanted a new one, which would undoubtedly be a blow to your wallet. However, due to how functional the cherry blossom equipment was, it seemed like you wouldn’t have to replace them for quite a while. As a matter of fact, they were a grade above what players at the forefront were currently using. Man, if only strength weren’t the deciding factor. I might have been able to use them myself then.

“There, there. Drink up! It’ll help you forget your troubles!”

“...Mhm, I guess.”

“That’s the spirit, Silver-Haired!”

By now, our after-party was a full-blown drinking party. *Oh well*. I guessed this was *one* way to enjoy the nighttime blossoms.

Online Forum [New Discoveries Galore!] A

Discussion Thread for New Discoveries Made in LJO, Part 28

Feel free to report anything you've noticed, however trivial.

Don't make things up.

Don't assume others are lying.

If possible, include a screenshot as proof.

494: Hendrickson

I must have watched the Drunken Boxing video about ten times. Y'know, the one where that guy's doing a martial arts demonstration.

I really wanna learn that skill! That means I gotta join the raid boss battle, though...

495: Voyage

We've got a pretty good idea of how to trigger the chain quest and clear the event—that's not a problem.

What is holding everyone back, however, is the time it takes to grow the cherry blossom tree.

People have estimated it'll take at least fifteen days if you use brushwood fertilizer.

496: Hiruma

Personally, I'm interested in the steel gun staff skills. Seems like the new skills are all Chinese martial arts

related. Who knows? Maybe it'll let you fight like a kung fu movie star.

497: Heartman

You know, that'd be pretty cool.

One thing's been bugging me, though. You can only draw out Drunken Boxing's full potential if you're intoxicated, right? Isn't that, like, giving players above twenty an unfair advantage?

498: Voyage

Hmm, good point. There must be skills specifically for minors, then.

499: Fuka

Not a new *skill*, but I come bearing news about the new job class, Onmyōji!

500: Heartman

Noice, about time.

BTW, you *really* stood out because of that frying pan of yours.

Did you know people have started calling you the "Iron Chef"?

501: Hiruma

Let's hope the name sticks!

Anyway, what's it like? Are you even allowed to post stuff about it online?

502: Fuka

Hmm... Not sure how I feel about that TBH. Should I be

happy about getting a moniker like Silver-Haired?

Or should I be annoyed that people are essentially equating me to Steven Seagal?

And yeah, it's totally fine—this is already public knowledge. In fact, the Cats have already made a post about it, so the info must've sold really fast.

503: Hendrickson

Shoulda known people would go nuts about it. No way it wouldn't with a name like Onmyōji. I'm curious about it too.

504: Fuka

As you might have already guessed, defeating the yōkai raid boss was the trigger.

505: Heartman

Ah, *that* battle. Must've watched the video at least five times by this point.

There's just *so much* going on. No way I can deal with all that information overload lol

506: Voyage

Heard the whole thing was filmed by this guy who got locked out of the farm during the event. He had nothing else to do except film the event from the sidelines. I nearly cried hearing that.

Learning that people have been calling him “doofus” pained me even more ROFL

Seriously, who gave him such a miserable nickname? lolol

Oh well, I'm sure he's at peace now after getting all

those views.

507: Hiruma

How could anyone *not* loop that video? Like, there's a *dragon* in it.

ASDFGHJ ngl, I totally lost it when that player died after taking a second look at the dragon that suddenly emerged from the light

508: Hendrickson

That video alone caused a huge stir, but then the devs had to drop even more bombs on us. I tell ya, people are losing their minds over this.

New job, new skills, *and* new creatures called yōkai?

First, it was the Dryad's Altar, then the Earth Elemental Gate, and now, yōkai. The dude truly lives up to his Pioneer nickname. How on earth does he keep discovering stuff?

Guess that's the Silver-Haired effect, as they say.

509: Voyage

LMAO Silver-Haired effect

No further explanation necessary.

510: Heartman

Imagine giving us these many exciting nuggets from a single boss battle. The guy never fails to impress me.

511: Fuka

Well, he is Silver-Haired, after all.

But anyway. As I was saying, here's what you'll need to

do if you wanna switch to this job class.

The requirements seem to be that you possess Yōkai Knowledge, plus a specific set of skills. Also, since it's a secondary job, you can only make the switch starting at level 20.

So far, the following skills have been confirmed to fit the criteria: Magic Circle, Monster Taming, Summoning, and Necromancy.

512: Hiruma

I take it Onmyōjis are similar to Summoners, then?

513: Fuka

Bingo. Onmyōjis have the following three starting skills: Yōkai Summoning, Yōkai Detection, and talisman skills.

514: Heartman

So it's pretty yōkai-specific, huh?

515: Fuka

Yōkai Detection is a skill that notifies you when there's a yōkai nearby on the field.

Talisman skills are similar to Magic Circle skills and allow you to trap a yōkai's powers in an amulet or talisman.

And finally, there's Yōkai Summoning! It sounds similar to summoning abilities, but specifically for yōkai instead of monsters! You don't need to tame or form contracts with yōkai to obtain them—all you have to do is defeat them.

No instant summons either. Only perma-summons.

516: Hendrickson

I dunno, seems like a tough job until people discover more yōkai XD

What kind of abilities does the Hanami Vandal have BTW?

517: Fuka

It seems to specialize in status ailments and has been confirmed to emit a poisonous mist that gives you one of the following: poison, paralysis, deadweight, intoxication, or sleep.

It can also attack you directly with its tentacles, although they're nowhere near as powerful as the above.

I hear an archer who made the switch was despairing because their fighting abilities were reduced significantly.

518: Heartman

The poor fella... Aren't Onmyōjis kinda like mages in a sense?

Even if they still had their archer skills, they're probably far less powerful now if their strength has dropped.

Honestly, I would cry too if I were in their shoes.

519: Voyage

If only their previous job class had been something similar to a mage, they might have avoided such a fate.

RIP, my friend.

520: Hamakaze

This is the New Discoveries thread, right?

I actually have something yōkai-related to share,
discovered by yours truly!

521: Hiruma

That so? Sure you wanna post it here?

522: Hamakaze

Absolutely. I've always wanted to become the center of
attention online!

523: Heartman

Dang, talk about being shamelessly honest! I like your
style!

524: Hamakaze

Why, thank you.

Anyway, I found a new yōkai in the Town of Beginnings,
and I don't mean a Hanami Vandal either!

Isn't that amazing?

525: Hendrickson

Seriously? No way.

Sure you wanted to make that public, though?

526: Hamakaze

To tell the truth, quite a few players saw me, so I'm
pretty sure it'll be all over the news soon.

It's also easy to verify, so I doubt it'll take long for
people to figure out the triggers and stuff.

So please, shower me with attention. Let me bask in my
(no doubt) short-lived glory.

527: Hiruma

You're right, all the threads are kinda going wild now.
Not sure what sort of attention you crave, though.
Good job, I guess?

528: Voyage

whistle You're the G.O.A.T.!

529: Heartman

Squeee! You can step on me anytime!

530: Fuka

Yeah, like, totally! You're beyond amazing!
So, what's the skinny?

531: Hamakaze

This isn't quite what I had in mind...
O-Oh well, nvm.
The yōkai I found was a Sunekosuri.

532: Fuka

A what now?

533: Hiruma

IIRC, it's a yōkai that kinda looks like a dog-or cat, I forget—that rubs itself against people's shins to try and trip them or give them a nasty shock. Don't quote me on that, though.

534: Hamakaze

Yeah, it did sort of look like a cat.

Its torso was about fifty centimeters long and it looked like a ferret, but with a small cat's face.

One of the labor quests triggered our encounter, i.e., cutting grass, which requires you to cut the grass in the fields all over town.

There's one spot that makes your feet super ticklish when you enter it without any shoes or other footwear. Some people had already been talking about it online, but no one had really bothered to verify it yet.

Anyway, if you can endure being tickled for three minutes and not look at what's tickling you, the Sunekosuri will appear and befriend you.

535: Hiruma

Wow, so they *literally* tickle your shins? Can't imagine what it's capable of.

Can it even fight?

536: Hamakaze

Of course! Heh heh. Fortunately for me, I was just about to change jobs, so I immediately chose to become an Onmyōji.

To be more accurate, I'd earned just enough XP during the event. That's gotta be a sign from above, right?

Anyway, allow me to share the Sunekosuri's abilities with y'all!

Did you know it was capable of performing long-range attacks using psychokinesis? It literally has almost zero impact, but it seems like it can obstruct your target's vision and make it easier to hit them.

Also, it feels super soft and fluffy! That is all!

537: Voyage

That's it? Lame... But wait, it's supposed to be cute, right?

You ain't no Silver-Haired, so it's pretty impressive that you managed to discover a cute creature.

538: Hendrickson

True.

Imagine—you, an ordinary player, finding a cute yōkai!

539: Hamakaze

Wait, are you praising me?

You *are*, right? Doesn't really feel like it, though...

Like they say, Rome was not built in a day.

I hope someday people will look at me and go, "Hamakaze's done it again," just like Silver-Haired!

540: Hiruma

There's always a group of players who try to follow in Silver-Haired's footsteps—not that anyone has succeeded so far.

541: Voyage

What do you mean by that?

That they redo their character build and start over from scratch, or that they change up the way they play?

542: Hiruma

I mean the players who got off to a late start due to

personal circumstances. These people usually:

Scour the forums and try to obtain as much info as possible beforehand

Try to imitate famous players

End up choosing Silver-Haired since he seems the easiest

Attempt to recreate his gaming style

543: Fuka

How does one even imitate him?

Are they all Tamers?

544: Hiruma

They're players who, instead of fighting, grind hard at the shopping quests or talking to NPCs.

Obviously, that doesn't help them level up or earn much money. Eventually, the gap between them and other players widens so much that they end up giving up and returning to their old ways.

545: Hendrickson

Damn. That's tragic.

Do people really think they can get on *his* level?

It has more to do with individual talent, luck, and an unwavering conviction.

546: Hiruma

And that's why I haven't heard of anyone who's succeeded, at least not fully.

Still, it seems like asking for valuable information from NPCs or discovering new quests *does* pay off somewhat—just

that their lucky streak doesn't last very long.

I'm sure they'd be able to balance things out if they stacked their stats better and made sure at least half of them were actually fighting abilities.

Apparently, a lot of people seem to think copying Silver-Haired equals giving up on combat entirely.

547: Hamakaze

And that's where *I* come in! I shall become the first person ever to successfully copy the Silver-Haired method!

Just watch me, guys!

548: Hiruma

Having high aspirations is a good thing...I think.

549: Fuka

Well, good luck.

Even if you fail, that doesn't mean your effort was a waste of time.

550: Voyage

Feel like you shouldn't overwork yourself unnecessarily, but...

Good luck! I'm rooting for you.

551: Hendrickson

I'll cheer you up if things don't work out for you.

552: Hamakaze

Wait, huh? This is so not how I expected y'all to react.

I shan't give up, though! I know I'll become like Silver-

Haired one day!

I'll change my hair to silver, for starters!

553: Hiruma

That's another thing with Silver-Haired wannabes, apparently. Changing their hair color to silver is the second most popular thing they do, right after choosing to become a Tamer.

[Gather 'Round Tamers] LJO Tamer Megathread,

Part 17

Share the deets on new tamed monsters, show off your companions, etc.—this thread is for everyone!

Bad-mouthing other Tamers is not permitted.

Screenshots gladly accepted.

Avoid double-posting.

Be mindful of what you post.

70: KingOysterMushroom

First Amimin comes in, then we get Silver-Haired the screw up.

71: Eulenspiegel

I was surprised by Amimin's Subterranean Lake guide tho. Didn't think there was a passage in the ceiling. I was looking underwater.

But I heard that there's an underground cave that follows it, so I guess it's still mainly water?

72: Ivan

Well it's a limestone cave field, yeah? We clearly have more things to consider than just water. Amimin's amazing to have realized that.

73: KingOysterMushroom

Amimin's being praised, but Silver-Haired's being called

a screwup. So weird, lololol.

74: Eulenspiegel

I mean, that's how it feels though, right?

The term "screwup" is kinda perfect for Silver-Haired.

He deserves more praise for all that he's discovered though, IMO.

75: Ivan

Chain quests, raid bosses in the town, yōkai, new skills, new items, dragons, and moles. Did I miss anything? So many new things to unpack here.

He's had so much influence it seems right to poke a little fun at him.

76: KingOysterMushroom

Agreed.

So many players have started using up a crapload of skill points to trigger the chain quest.

People have been forming mole search parties, there's a new mole fan club, and the word "mole" is even starting to trend.

77: Eulenspiegel

Talk about mole overload. Lmaooo

Agreed, though.

The high rankers that didn't get the mole egg from the event are seething.

I'm predicting a Mole Shock after the Gnome Trend.

78: Ursula

I want a mole too!

I totally want one!

79: KingOysterMushroom

^^^ So many tamers like these are popping up.

80: Amelia

I want one too! Where can I get it?

I haven't seen the Air Wolf yet, so I feel like I'm not even close to seeing the Drimole.

81: KingOysterMushroom

Hey, Rabbit Tamer. Wait, aren't you a Rabbit Gnome Tamer, now?

You want a mole too?

82: Amelia

Yea, they're so cute!

83: Ivan

Cuteness wins in the end, huh?

Amelia, I feel like you'd get stuck and give up one day.

84: Eulenspiegel

I'm sure you'll be fine with that mole though!

They're incredibly strong. You saw, right?

It's like in that one game! With the P*ff! spell!

85: KingOysterMushroom

That dragon was intense.

The number of views on the video published by the Quick-

Eared Cats was crazy.

The yōkai looked weak in comparison. Not surprised though, this is the first time we've seen a dragon in this game.

86: Ursula

It looks like both tamers and warriors are interested.

I guess there's a chance that you can become a Dragon Knight now.

Wonder if I should raise my riding skills...?

87: MorningStarMeow

Hiyaaa! Y'all are talking about moles? Perfect timing, meow!

We finally finished compiling the list of all eggs obtainable from the event rewards.

We hadn't been able to find anyone that obtained the mole egg, but thanks to Silver-Haired, we completed the list!

It's uploaded on Amimin's page, so go take a lookie!

88: Amelia

I helped provide some info for Little Air Wolf!

89: KingOysterMushroom

Oho.

So you get a Little Burn Tiger from the Red Tiger's Egg. It looks pretty strong.

90: MorningStarMeow

And cute, right? I own one of them!

Pretty strong.

A cute little red kitten, but it has fire magic too~

91: Eulenspiegel

Speaking of, I got a Honey Bear from the event egg, and it had a weird skill: Woodworking. Isn't that a Blood Skill?

92: Ivan

Oh, my Honey Bear has Woodworking too!

So all monsters from event eggs are guaranteed to have a Blood Skill?

93: Amelia

That could be it.

It'd make sense then that Drimo had a weird skill like Dragon Blood Awakening.

That wasn't a mole, no matter how you slice it.

Maybe Drimo's the child of a dragon and a mole?

94: MorningStarMeow

If Dragon Blood Awakening is a Blood Skill limited to the event eggs, then getting a dragon might be impossible even if we find out where moles spawn from...

95: Ursula

I don't care! Who cares about dragons!

I want a mole!

I want to fluff up that tsundere mole!

96: Amelia

Same!

Moles > Dragons. Can't fluff up a dragon, can you?

97: Ivan

TBH, same. Ever since I watched a retro anime with a mole soldier as the main character, I've loved moles.

Scales are cool and all, but I'm more of a snake lover than a lizard lover. Now, if it's a Hydra we're talking about...

98: KingOysterMushroom

You see? The tamers, the ones closest to the dragons, are all fangirling...

The knight board is complete chaos. They're in shambles.

There were some more radicals that decided to assault Silver-Haired, but they got reported and are facing penalties.

99: MorningStarMeow

I want a dragon too, meow!

If only I chose the mole egg! Guh!

Barring that, I wish I could have seen the dragon's first appearance live!

100: Amelia

Well, I went to that Hanami thing thanks to a friend who knew Silver-Haired.

101: MorningStarMeow

Yeah, I know!

So why was I, an old friend, not invited?!

Eulen!

102: Eulenspiegel

Uh, I was invited last minute too...

Your cat persona thing is slipping, BTW.

103: MorningStarMeow

You still had time to contact me!

You knew I wanted to be friends with Silver-Haired!

Aghhh! I lost my chance to hear the fairy singing live!

104: Eulenspiegel

And *that's* why I didn't want to invite you!

If you cause trouble for Silver-Haired, it'll make me look bad too!

If you wanna be friends with him, do it yourself, pls!

105: MorningStarMeow

And also, the latest addition to the Silver-Haired's Tamed Monsters series from Ashihana!

I wanted it!

106: Ivan

Wait, it sold out already? That was fast.

107: Ursula

After the Hanami, all the players gathered around Ashihana, and it was gone in an instant. All the advance reservations sold out too.

108: Amelia

Obviously, I got Olto!

109: Ursula

Yep, goes without saying.

It's not a regular gnome figure. Ashihana, *the* top woodworker, carved it personally, with all her heart and soul.

110: Amelia

It looks just like Olto, and she personally got permission from Silver-Haired himself! In a sense, it's an officially licensed good!

Way different from the bootlegs and random gnome figures that look nothing like him!

111: KingOysterMushroom

Fans are scary...

112: MorningStarMeow

If I was there, I might've been able to get Fau's figure...

I sure hope you can finish your homework by yourself, meow...

113: Eulenspiegel

In due time! In due time!

Listen, if we get another chance like this next time, I'll invite you!

So please, you *have* to help me with the assignments we got during summer vacation!

114: MorningStarMeow

Hmph, I hope you spend all your time working on the Math 2 workbook and the Japanese essay, so that you can't login anymore.

115: KingOysterMushroom

Oof, that might be the strongest curse, in a way.

Well, you're in the wrong this time, Eulen. Good luck.

116: Eulenspiegel

The math workbook sucks, but one of my seniors from the Gaming Club told me that we can just copy/paste the essay! Heh!

117: MorningStarMeow

Mwa ha ha ha! Sucks to be you!

That teacher decided to install a plagiarism checker this year!

118: Eulenspiegel

Noooooo! I'm done for!

119: Ivan

I can't let a student gamer fend for himself! Don't die, Eulen!

After the flower-viewing after-party wrapped up, I headed to the Magical Beasts Guild in the Town of Beginnings and accepted a few new quests. Having had to leave Reflet behind for the Raid Boss Battle, I became acutely aware of my need for a Tamed Monster's Orb. The item would let me summon and exchange monsters however I wished during battle, as Amimin had done.

"If we come across another opportunity, I'll let you fight too, Reflet," I said.

"Hum!"

Aside from Olea, who was a special case, Reflet was the only one who hadn't gotten to level up this time. I assumed that had she been involved in the battle even for a little, she would've gotten some experience. If I was able to exchange my monsters as I pleased, I wouldn't be left feeling so frustrated and apologetic.

"All right, we've only got a bit more left! Let's do this!"

"Hum!"

With Reflet in the middle, all my monsters raised their fists in the air with a sense of solidarity. I already had the material needed to create the orb, a Tamed Monster's Heart. I'd received one from Rick today as well. All that was left was to raise my guild rank, so that I'd be able to create the Tamed Monster's Orb. *I only need a bit more.* Today's persistent quest was more squirrel taming, which wasn't hard to do. If I gave it my all, I would be able to rank up by the end of the day. As I was planning out my evening, I received a call from Alyssa.

"Hey, you free right now?" she said.

"Sure. We only parted ways a short while ago, but what's up?"

"Ah ha ha! This is just like you! I promised to pay you the rest tonight, didn't I?"

"Oh, that's right!"

I was so busy that I had completely forgotten. She was going to pay me the rest regarding the info for the Earth Elemental Gate. *I'm getting at least 250,000 G! Just thinking about it is getting me excited!*

"So you're calling about the payment, right?!" I yelled.

“Y-You got loud all of a sudden. But that’s exactly it. Where are you now?”

“I’m in the Town of Beginnings.”

“Can we meet somewhere?”

“Sure. I’ll meet you at your stall.”

“Ah, sorry, let’s go somewhere else.”

What could she mean? Does she not have a stall out in the Town of Beginnings today?

“It’s a bit crowded right now, and I don’t think we can sit down and talk here,” she said.

The Quick-Eared Cat was as popular as ever. *She’s part of the only informants’ clan in the game, so I guess she’d be a lot of players’ go-to for information.*

“We’ll go to you. Where do you want to meet?” she asked.

“How about my farm?”

“Sure. Sorry about this. I’ll send someone over right now.”

“Roger that.” *I can get 250,000, I’ll wait for as long as it takes!*

“I can’t leave my shop right now, so I’ll send Carlo over.”

“That busy, huh?”

“Yeah, it’s tough being so popular! My customers are spilling out onto the square—it’s a huge mess,” Alyssa said happily, not sounding troubled by this mess at all.

I was sure she was exaggerating a bit, but honestly I wasn’t surprised that she was swamped.

“I told everyone that I’d post it on the forums in a bit, but they all want me to sell them the information now!”

“I see,” I replied.

“Why do you sound so distant? This is all thanks to you, Yuto! You should puff out your chest a bit more!”

Sounds like everyone wants the information for the chain quest. I guess

everyone that wants to know rushed over to the Quick-Eared Cats. Our interaction was only verbal, but Alyssa sounded so chipper that I could imagine the grin on her face.

“I’ll be waiting,” I said.

“Okay. I’m counting on you if you find anything interesting again! Oh, I’ll also have Carlo bring you some interesting information.”

“Interesting?”

“Yep.”

“And what’s that?”

“You’ll just have to wait and hear! Later!”

Cheery from start to finish. I wasn’t accustomed to hearing her like that. *I guess she really made bank.* I returned to my farm, and in about ten minutes, Carlo, the tamer from the Quick-Eared Cats, arrived. He was panting, out of breath.

“Hello, hello! Thank you for your patience!” he called.

“Oh, I haven’t waited long,” I replied. I had finished my work and greeted him with Bear Bear and Olea.

“Growl!”

“Trrrr!”

“Is that so? I’m glad to hear,” Carlo said.

I’d never talked with him alone, but he felt like a completely different person at night. He had black hair, pale skin, and golden catlike eyes. He was half cat, and the pale light that shone through the night gave him a princely aura. His supple, black tail looked oddly alluring. His attire also stood out—though he was wearing a plain black robe and mantle, his left side protruded unnaturally. It looked as though he had bent his arm at the elbow and raised it above his chest.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Heh heh, this? Curious, aren’t you?”

“I-I guess.” *Was I supposed to not say anything?* After I pointed out his left side, he inched closer towards me with a huge smile on his face. It looked like he was holding something, and pointing that out only made him happier.

“Heh heh.”

I stayed silent.

“Mwa ha ha ha!”

Damn, he’s kinda a pain. I should’ve just ignored it.

“Skreeeee!”

“Whoa!” I yelled, startled by the noise.

“Growl!”

“Tiii!”

Th-That surprised me! Can’t blame me for yelling. Like a magician, Carlo opened his mantle and out flew the Dark Bat that he had tamed at the Earth Elementals’ trial. *Of course, you could use this as a surprise attack against enemies.* Surprised, Bear Bear fell on their rear, staring at the Dark Bat flying above in awe.

Despite Olea’s usual expressionless, puppetlike face, I could tell from how it outstretched both its arms in the air that it was truly surprised as well. It proceeded to put its arms over its left breast, its shoulders moving up and down rapidly. *Your body’s made of wood, and you’re like a tree spirit, but do you have a heart?*

“Now, how’s that?! Amazing, right?” Carlo said proudly.

“Y-Yeah,” I replied, slightly annoyed by his smug smile. *I can’t deny that I was surprised, though.* Bear Bear and Olea had also reacted more than I would have expected. I couldn’t help snapping a picture of them. I didn’t dislike people who came up with those sort of surprises, but something about Carlo kind of irked me.

“I can’t do it super often though—it’s so heavy it makes my arm go numb. It’s mostly reserved for special occasions,” he said.

“Then why’d you do it now?”

“Because I really wanted to surprise you, of course! I was worried that you might just ignore my antics!”

Damn, I should’ve ignored him.

“I’m super satisfied. You and your tamed monsters reacted wonderfully!”

“Oh yeah?” God damn it. I have to surprise Carlo one day. Just you wait, man. Maybe I should put Rick at the bottom of a rope and... Nah, I’m just copying Carlo’s moves then! I need to be more creative when exacting my revenge!

“Now, let me get straight to business,” he said.

Ah, right. I was too busy thinking about getting back at him. He’s here to pay up. After a brief moment, he handed me the money, but I noticed that the amount I received was a bit off. I know that there was a possibility I’d get paid a bit more than 250,000, but...

“I just received 500,000 G here,” I said.

I remembered saying something similar to Alyssa in the past. *But this must be some kind of error this time, right? I was supposed to receive ten percent of the earnings made from my information. That would mean her earnings were at least five million G. Even if you sold it at twenty thousand G a pop, you’d still need to sell it to two hundred and fifty people.* However, it seemed like there was no mistake, and they really had earned that much. It seemed this was additionally to thank me for the chain quests and new information regarding Drimo’s status.

Right, I didn’t receive payment for that either. So many things happened that I forgot about it. I was too wrapped up in Drunken Boxing and the Miniature Otherworldly Cherry Blossom Shrine. I still think I received way too much, but I guess I’ll take what I can. Combined with the money I already have, the earnings from selling the Otherworldly Cherry Blossom items, and the money that Carlo just gave me, I now have over 1,700,000 G...

“Man, I can’t believe it...” I murmured.

“You’re rich, Silver-Haired. That auction that we’ve all been excited about is

happening tomorrow, so it's good to have money," Carlo said.

"You're right. I wasn't planning on buying much though." I only planned on attending in hopes that I'd find something halfway decent. "But since I have so much money, I guess I'll try to find something good."

"That's the spirit. Our payment alone should've made you into one of the wealthiest players in the game."

He never said I was the wealthiest because there were most likely frontline players who were just as rich. If one were to be on the front lines every day from dawn to dusk, collecting expensive items and selling them for lucrative prices, it wouldn't be unusual to have around one million gold by now. That said, there was a good chance I was one of the only nonfrontline people to have that much money.

"Hmmm, this really might be a good opportunity to pick up something rare," I murmured. *I'm starting to get excited for tomorrow's auction. I wonder what sort of stuff we'll see? But I'm sure there are clans and parties aiming for specific items, so I doubt I'll be able to buy everything I want. I shouldn't get my hopes up.*

"Ah, yes, I've got one more piece of information that the submaster told me to tell you," Carlo said.

"Oh yeah, Alyssa did mention something like that."

"And payment isn't necessary. This is also part of your payment."

"You have my gratitude. So? What's the scoop?" *Since Alyssa's going out of her way to tell me, it must be something good. Like a certain spiky-haired protagonist with a vegetable name used to say, I'm getting pumped!*

"You see, we found another yōkai in the Town of Beginnings. It's not the Hanami Vandal either."

"Wait, really? Already?"

"Yes, just a few moments ago."

After the server-wide yōkai announcement popped up, it seemed like many players had started to passionately search for the monsters. *Obviously, most of*

them are just riding the high from the event, so I doubt this kind of thing will last for long.

“So a player found something new? What kind of yōkai is it?” I asked.

“It’s a Sunekosuri.”

“A what?” *I feel like I’ve heard that name before...* I thought. According to Carlo, it was like a ferret with the face of a cat.

“Well, guess I’ll know when I see it,” I said.

“Oh, I don’t think you can right now. I went to its supposed spawn location, but so many players were there.”

“You went to take a look?”

“Yeah. But hundreds of people had gathered, and they were forming a long line,” Carlo replied while gesturing.

“But we might be lucky, right?”

“Huh? No, I think it’ll still be quite some time before the crowd dissipates.”

“Well now, we don’t know that, do we? Go take a look, Carlo.”

“Sure... Wait, Silver-Haired, you’ve seen that movie too?”

“Have you not?” *This was a line I’ve always wanted to say ever since I met you.*

“No. My friends who get the joke keep saying the same line, or would sometimes tell me to not go. I can’t keep up, and I’m not even in on it.”

“Well, it’s an old movie.” *Having Carlo go take a look here is a death flag, according to the film. I’m surprised he doesn’t get the joke.*

“In any case, many people are currently after the Sunekosuri, so I think it’ll be difficult to obtain one right now.”

“Fine, I got it.”

It seemed like yōkai were triggers for all sorts of things, like unlocking the Onmyōji class. The Hanami Vandal unlocked my dream skill, Drunken Boxing, and I wondered what the Sunekosuri had in store.

“Oh, obtaining the Sunekosuri would unlock the job class Onmyōji and the skill Telekinesis,” Carlo said.

“That’s it?” I replied, slightly disappointed.

“I guess there’s a difference between the Hanami Vandal, a Raid Boss, and the Sunekosuri, which you can easily obtain without battling.”

“Makes sense.”

After Carlo and I parted ways, I decided to head to one of the fields that was the supposed spawn location of the Sunekosuri. A long line of players was already there. *Did everyone come here after accepting the grass-cutting quest?*

“This is impossible,” I muttered.

“Chirp.”

“We’ve already unlocked the Hanami Vandal, so we’re not in a hurry. Let’s get the Sunekosuri once this all dies down.” However, I did want to try something out. “I’ll use my bonus points.”

I used them on my two new skills, Yōkai Knowledge and Yōkai Detection. I was required to put two points in each skill. “I wonder how this will turn out.” After a brief moment, there was a notice on my status window. “Whoa, I see.”

“There’s a yōkai nearby,” the announcement said.

“So, what happens if I walk farther away?” As I backed away near the gates, the notice disappeared. Again, I walked closer to the grass where the Sunekosuri apparently was, and the notice and announcement popped up once more.

“What happens if I also learn Yōkai Searcher? Might as well get Yōkai Whisperer too, since it’s apparently a rare skill.”

Both of these skills required eight points each, but with all my titles, I had plenty of bonus points to spare. I was left with twenty-nine points even after learning both skills.

“Let me use the Searcher skill... Oh, I see now.” The Detection skill allowed me to know whether a yōkai was close. The Searcher skill placed a small, blue box on the map. *The map’s large, so it looks like a dot, but in actuality, this box*

must cover quite a bit of land, I thought. It indicated the area where the yōkai was located.

The field that I was at, where the Sunekosuri was supposed to appear, was on the edge of the blue box. Because the box only showed a general area, there was no guarantee that going to the center would guarantee me the yōkai. Still, these two skills would greatly help in finding yōkai. *I got some good skills.*

If I had any complaints, it would be that my hair or cowlick didn't stand up and point towards the location, or the fact that there wasn't a shrill, male voice to verbalize this information.

"Well, we're here to rank up today," I said.

"Hum?"

"Gotta work hard for you, don't I, Reflet?"

"Hum!"

Two hours had passed.

"Congratulations! You're now Rank 7!"

I successfully managed to raise my guild rank, and was listening to Barbara explain the newly unlocked features. *But the best part about this is...*

"I will now explain to you about the Tamed Monster's Orb."

"Okay!" I responded.

"This is a special item created by combining a Tamed Monster's Heart and a jewel."

The explanation was similar to what Amimin had told me before. It was possible to add the orb to any available slots on my gear, and I was able to summon any tamed monster from my home. Should my party be full, I could switch out any monster I liked. The cooldown timer was twelve hours, and that was about it. I could make these if I knew Alchemy. *Yep, got that skill. It's not an overstatement to say that I leveled up this skill for the sole purpose of creating these orbs*, I thought.

I went to my barn and decided to make the orbs. As we were done with the farm work for the day, my tamed monsters gathered around as well, curious about what I was going to do.

“I think I’ll use your heart first, Olto,” I said.

“Mm?”

“See, look. This is the Tamed Monster’s Heart that you gave me! I’m gonna make a Tamed Monster’s Orb with this!”

“Mm-mm!” Olto replied happily, as though he recognized the item.

“Chirp! Chirp!”

“Ack, stop! I’ll make yours next time, Rick! Don’t tug on my hair!”

“Chirp...”

“Why are you acting like waiting your turn is some kind of chore?”

“...♪”

“You’re such a good girl, Sakura. You can wait patiently.”

Sakura chided Rick. *I’m glad she’s so mature.*

“Now, I’ll add this.” I took out a green jade that I obtained a while back from my inventory. Bear Bear and Reflet, curious about the beautiful stone, started to poke it.

“Growl?”

“Hum?”

“Hey, this is an important item, so don’t play around with it, okay?”

“Tiii!”

“Aye!”

Olea and Fau, happy that we were all gathered in this small area, were dancing oddly together. *Did they learn about having fun during the picnic? Nah, they are both usually pretty excitable.*

“Squeak.”

“You’re always calm and collected aren’t you, Drimo?”

“Squeak.”

Until now Sakura was the mature older sister of the group, but if the calm Drimo became the older brother, it would ease some of the burden from her.
I’m glad I got him.

“All right, I’ll start making the Tamed Monster’s Orb. Attention, everyone. I’m gonna perform some alchemy!”

Chapter Four: The Auction and the Tanuki

I logged in late the next morning, not able to do so until then as there was a fairly large update being implemented.

“Eh heh heh. It’s so pretty,” I said. I stared at the Tamed Monster’s Orb that I made the night before, and couldn’t suppress my smile. Creating these wasn’t much of a hassle with my alchemical skills. All I needed was to combine the Tamed Monster’s Heart and a jewel.

I used the Tamed Monster’s Heart (Olto) and a green jade; it seemed to take on the jade’s appearance. At a glance, it looked like a normal jewel, but a magical flame flickered within. It was fairly attractive. If I brought this to a smith, I would be able to set this into one of my equipped item’s slots—I planned on stopping by Lewin’s shop before heading to the auction.

“Growl! Growl!”

“Chirp!”

Bear Bear and Rick greeted me as I entered my farm. They each grabbed on to one of my legs and rubbed their heads against me.

“Morning, you two. Energetic as always,” I said. They were good at acting spoiled, and as I was giving them attention, Olto and the others appeared. I petted them one at a time, leaving this farm in their capable hands. “I’m relying on you guys for the farm, Olto, Olea, and Sakura.”

“Mm-mm!”

“Tiii!”

“...♪”

The auction was at 1 p.m., so I only had two and a half hours to spare. The auction catalog was supposed to be distributed before that. At the very least, I wanted to finish what I needed to do before the event began. I took Reflet and Fau, who didn’t have any assigned tasks, and headed to Lewin’s shop.

“Long time no see, eh, Yuto?” Lewin said.

“Hi there,” I replied.

“Hum hum!”

“Aye!”

“Been a while since I’ve seen yer monsters too.”

Though Lewin looked scary, his kindness more than made up for it, and my monsters were extremely friendly with him. *Apart from me, my monsters might like him the most.*

“Aye♪”

“Hum♪”

My monsters crooned happily as they were petted. They seemed to enjoy the rough handling, and cried out playfully, almost as if they were being tickled.

“So, what’s up? Ya got some amazin’ material for me?” he asked.

“Wait, what do you mean by amazing?”

“Ya usually got somethin’ wild for me, don’tcha?”

“That’s not true. Also, unfortunately, for the past two days I’ve only been fighting at the Earth Elemental gate or around the town. I don’t think I have anything that would make you happy, Lewin.”

“Oh, that so? Pity.”

“I came by because I wanted you to set this for me.” I took out my green jade with a Tamed Monster’s Heart and handed it over. He seemed to get the idea just by looking, as his eyes glinted with interest.

“Oho? So ya can make these too, now?” he said.

“As of yesterday. I finally raised my rank.”

“I see. And where do ya want me to set this?”

“I can remove this once I set it, right?”

“Sure ya can. It’ll delete the effects of yer slot though. Of course, it’ll cost ya a bit.”

If I could remove it whenever I'd like, I wouldn't have to think too carefully for now. I first had all my equipment appraised. I wanted to know the number of slots I had available for each item. I found that my Beast Tamer Bangle had one open slot, and nothing else. *Wow, I don't have many slots.* My Blue Wood Staff and Fish Scales Robe already had enhancements applied, taking up any available space. I could remove these enhancements if I needed more slots, though.

"Okay, could you set it onto my Beast Tamer Bangle?" I asked.

The bangle was an accessory that boosted my command abilities, and I almost never removed it. I found it convenient that I could set my orb onto it.

The entire process took a matter of seconds. Lewin lined the two items up, used his skill, and the Tamed Monster's Orb melted away. I was a little disappointed that my bangle didn't change in appearance. I'd expected something more flashy, and I analyzed my equipment once more to confirm that the effect had been applied. Sure enough, the orb was set into my bangle. *Thank goodness.*

"O-Okay then! Let's test it out!" I said.

"Hum!"

"Aye!"

Reflet had her hands clasped in front of her chest, and Fau held her breath atop the Undine's head.

"Okay, summon!" I said.

"Which tamed monster would you like to summon?"

Because I only had Reflet and Fau with me, the announcement prompted me to summon a monster instead of exchanging it for someone within my party.

"Let's try out the voice commands for now. Olto!"

My bangle glowed, and in an instant, Olto was in front of me.

"Mm?" Olto said, appearing with a hoe raised in the air. He glanced around in confusion.

“Success!” I said.

“Mm!” Though confused, he seemed to have understood that I was happy. He grabbed onto my leg excitedly.



“And I can’t use this for half a day now.” I want more of these. If possible, should I get some gear with open slots at the auction? That is, if I can tell which items might have free slots.

I had manually chosen my monster this time, but I could also apparently decide on a monster to automatically set beforehand. I could even choose which monster to exchange them with. I was sure that Amimin had used this setting, allowing her to smoothly cycle through all her monsters. Judging from Olto’s reaction, it was also necessary to teach my monsters how to react once they got summoned. If they just stood there in confusion, I would only summon them to their deaths.

“I guess we should return to the farm.”

“Mm!”

I paid Lewin his fee, and went back to the farm with Olto and my other monsters. I stopped by the field where the Sunekosuri was said to appear, but the line was still long, and I felt that I’d need to wait a bit longer.

“Everyone here was enticed by the yōkai, huh.” Utter chaos. I’d only see something like that in a game. “We’ve still got some time before the auction.”

We could participate in the auction from the Town of Beginnings. However, there was also a special building dedicated for this event, which we needed to be transported to. Since this was my first auction, I wanted to enter the auction building itself, if possible.

“All right! Let’s finish our farmwork now!”

“Mm-mm!”

“Hum!”

“Aye!”

Before I knew it, it was time for the auction. It was currently just before 1 p.m., leaving us only a few minutes before it began.

There would be two types of auctions. The first was the real-time auction, the sort where prices were aggressively shouted out, and the item would go to the

highest bidder. The second was a time-based auction, which was more like an internet auction, where the item would go to whoever bid highest within a time limit. Players referred to the former as an auction, and the latter as an OA, short for “online auction.”

As a side note, players couldn’t bid more than what they currently had. I was sure there were many reasons why the player’s current funds might decrease during an auction, but if they didn’t have enough money at the time of purchase, their transaction would be voided. If players were to repeatedly forfeit their purchases, that is, be unable to pay, they would face a heavy punishment. *The scariest thing is that the details of this punishment aren’t given. I should be careful.*

I found a few cool items to bid on in the OA listings. Bidding closed at 6 p.m. and I assumed that things would heat up just before it closed. I decided instead to first focus on the normal auction commencing at 1 p.m.

“Oh, it’s time. Guess I’ll go ahead,” I said. I was presented with a prompt asking if I wished to be teleported, to which I replied “yes.” In an instant, I found myself already seated in a chair at an auction house. My monsters weren’t by my side, meaning that my party had disbanded. I had to enter this building alone.

“There’s so many people here... Or maybe there aren’t enough?” I murmured. At least five thousand people had gathered, but that wasn’t much when compared to the total server population. Apparently, there were two auction servers, and each player was randomly teleported to one of them. *This makes sense. It’s impossible to host tens of thousands of players on one server.*

Because each server had the exact same catalog this time, it didn’t matter which one we were teleported to, but if more items were to appear in the future, I was sure that there would be a different item lineup on each, and I would have to give up one for the other. I could always hop between both servers, but that would put me in a hectic situation.

“I guess I don’t have to worry about it today though.” I was most curious to know which item was the most sought after. I wondered if my picks overlapped with the other players that were here today. “I don’t see any familiar faces,” I

murmured, glancing around. As I was doing so, the auction began.

“Welcome to the very first auction of the game! I will be your host for today, and I’m proud to present to you the first item to kick things off!” the auctioneer said, in a voice that really hyped up the mood.

The item in question and the current bid popped up onto the status window. Our host was a middle-aged man with silver-gray hair, wearing a monocle. *Devs, you guys are people of culture!*

Once we were provided with a description of the item and the auction began, we had twenty seconds until bidding ended. Should anyone place a bid, we had ten seconds to top that. We had to trump the last bid by at least ten percent, meaning that we couldn’t go up in price with small numbers. This was probably to prevent any trolls or spammers.

“Sold, for 14,200 G!” the auctioneer yelled.

I patiently waited for the item that I was aiming for. The last item had sold for a much higher price than I’d anticipated, meaning that everyone was really feeling the spirit of the auction and opening their wallets.

“I better psych myself up too!” I told myself.

Finally, the first item that I was aiming for was brought to the podium.

“The next item on our list is the Wind Wolf egg!” the auctioneer yelled enthusiastically.

Eggs from the previous event were up for grabs at the auction. The “Earth Dragon” egg was also up for auction, but as I already had one, I didn’t need another. It was a bit sad that I would no longer be able to gloat over others by being the only dragon tamer, but I was happy to see other eggs being offered.

“Starting bid at 100,000 G!”

Expensive, but if this gets me the Little Air Wolf, it’s a total steal! However, I wasn’t the only one with this train of thought. The moment I placed a bid for 120,000 G, I was immediately outbid with a 150,000 G offer. *But I can’t back off now!* I thought.

I wasn’t sure how many people I was up against, but I placed a bid of 200,000

G. *Heh heh, I raised the bar by 50,000! I might go higher next time, so you better back off now!*

“Guh...” I muttered. My opponent, equally stubborn, had countered with a 250,000 G bid. I wavered for a second, but didn’t want to lose. I placed a 300,000 G bid. *How’s this?*

“Whoa, we’ve got a 400,000 G bid in!” the auctioneer yelled immediately, riling up the crowd.

It seemed like my opponent really wanted the Little Air Wolf, and had placed an enormous bid. The 100,000 leap may have been to show their determination.

I can pay up, though, I think. I can win in the end, but I think I’ll call it quits here. My heart hasn’t shattered, right? I only planned on spending around 400k or so on this egg anyways. I was silent for a moment. *Nope, I lied. My heart’s crushed into little pieces. I completely lost this auction.*

I didn’t think I’d be this terrified of not knowing how much money my opponent was working with. I might have been able to make the purchase had I forced myself, but I wasn’t sure if this sacrifice was worth it. I was scared. *This one was too expensive though. I’ll try again for my next bid,* I thought to myself. However...

“450,000 G? You’ve gotta be kidding me...” I mumbled, as I watched the next item, the Red Tiger egg, being sold. *I saw the video, and the Little Burn Tiger was adorable. I knew it would go for a high price, but this is much higher than I expected.*

The next item was the “Earth Dragon” egg, and it was sold for 730,000 gold. *Uh, everyone’s wealthier than I thought.* “Damn, I can’t buy anything,” I said.

Had I gone all in, I would’ve been able to make the purchase, but I wasn’t willing to pay that much. I had other items that I wanted, and was scared to bid too much money on the first few items. The auction turned out to be a tougher battle than I’d anticipated.

“I-I’ll win the next one for sure!” I said. *I’ll drop some real cash on my next bid, even if it means breaking the bank!* I thought as I steeled myself.

I waited for my next item with renewed determination. The auctioneer was listing off event rewards and event-related items. Event rewards lists differed based on the player's class. Since I was a Tamer, I received a list for Tamer-related items. It was interesting to see items specifically created for other classes. Once the class-targeted items had been auctioned, I heard the item that I had been waiting for.

"The next item is a Sacred Tree Sapling!" the auctioneer yelled.

Yep! This is it! Because I had selected Drimo's egg and the Tamer's Book of Secrets from the event rewards, I didn't have enough points for the sapling. When I saw the item listed on the auction catalog, I knew I had to get it.

"Bidding starts at 20,000 G!"

I have to get this, no matter what! I knew it may have been a bit rude, but I decided to go hard from my first bid. *I'll show them how badly I want this, and shatter the hearts of my fellow bidders!* I thought, placing my first bid at 100,000. *Heh, how's this? I bet you're too scared to bid now!*

The crowd murmured with surprise at the sudden increase in the price.

"Whoa!"

"For real?"

"Hey, isn't that Silver-Haired?!"

After waiting a bit, I realized that no one had placed a bid, showing that my plan was a success. The other bidders were terrified at the leap in price, and were unwilling to counter me.

"Sacred Tree Sapling has been sold for 100,000 G!" the auctioneer bellowed.

"Yes!" I cheered.

Once the item was sold, a huge round of applause echoed throughout the building. *I mean, I know we applaud after each item as a courtesy, but I feel like this applause is louder. Why?*

"I didn't think that item would get sold at such a high price."

"Wasn't it far and away the worst item noted on the forums?"

“Silver-Haired’s amazing.”

I assumed it was my rather hefty bid that had drawn everyone’s attention to me. I decided to not be bothered, since I had been able to purchase something I wanted. I had 900,000 G left to spend on this auction, meaning I had ample money to put up a good fight. The sapling was much cheaper than I’d expected, and I felt my heart and wallet be at ease. I was determined to win the next item on my list as well.

“The next item’s a weapon,” I said.

The auction progressed, and we were now in the weapons section. Powerful and unique items that I couldn’t equip were being sold one after the other. I saw a few items that looked interesting, but I either couldn’t equip them, or they weren’t a good match for me. The armor section also proceeded in a similar fashion, but I had my eyes on one item, an earring.

“The next item is the Elementalist’s Earrings!” the auctioneer said.

This was a type of headgear for command classes, and I was most curious about its effects—it would slightly boost the abilities of all Elementals under the player’s control. In the past, when I was thinking of switching jobs, I remembered seeing the name of Elemental Tamer as an option. A player could only select this job if they had more than three Elementals under their control. Olto, Sakura, and Fau were most likely treated as Elementals, and I believed Reflet was as well. Olea may have been treading a fine line, but if Sakura the Tree Nymph was considered an Elemental, I expected Olea to be one too. I was surprised when I realized that a lot of my monsters were Elementals. I was also expecting to welcome at least two more from the Fire and Air Elemental Gates. As such, I wanted an item that would boost my monsters’ abilities.

The one problem I had was that these were earrings. In real life, I wasn’t cool enough to wear something so fashionable, so I was a little embarrassed at the idea of equipping them. Since my in-game avatar was so good looking, I knew they’d suit him, but still.

The earring I received from prior event rewards only had one small stone and was on the low-key side, but the Elementalist’s Earrings were fitted with a moderately large jewel. *I know I’m going off stereotypes here, but these seem*

more fitting for someone in a visual kei band.

“Wait, the auction for this hasn’t even started yet. I can worry about wearing it after I obtain the item,” I told myself as I placed my bid. After a brief moment, the bidding was over. “Huh?”

The earrings had started at 10,000 G, and after I placed my bid of 50,000 G, no one had placed another. Just like that, the earrings were mine. *Did I overdo it?* I wondered. I realized that not many players had tamed Elementals, and that I might have been able to purchase the item for a lower price.

“I’ll go a bit lower next time,” I said, but I was happy that I got my bid. *But I actually have quite a bit of money left over. I don’t really have any other items I’m planning on buying, but I guess I’ll bid on some that I was still sort of interested in.*

I continued to watch the auction, and every now and then, a good item would pop up, like a pair of boots with three free enhancement slots. However, the bidding went heavy on those items, and I wasn’t able to win any at all.

The auction progressed, and we were now in the consumable items section. I saw potions and alcohol being sold, but since I was able to produce them myself, I wasn’t interested. Especially popular were items like a pack of four different attribute crystals and rare boss drops. The bloodshot eyes of the crafting-class players frightened me.

We only had a few items left now. They were mostly general goods and accessories, and the crowd seemed more relaxed. We were clearly in a section that many players weren’t as interested in, and only those who had a particular need for the listed items bid. For many, the auction had already ended, and I relaxed too. There were no other items that I was adamant on getting.

Next we moved to the interior design section, the auctioneer listing off Japanese items and accessories, including Japanese wallpapers, Japanese paper umbrellas, and paper lantern lamps. They looked cool, but none enticed me enough to place a bid, and I didn’t think these items would match the atmosphere of my barn.

“Here’s the next item!”

As I heard the auctioneer present another item, my ears perked up a little. It was a household object: a Japanese tea kettle. It was small, black, and metallic. The surface was chipped as though it was an antique, but I didn't dislike the aesthetic. An old tea kettle would blend in perfectly in my old barn. It didn't have any special effects, but I decided to place a bid. The kettle started at 2,000 G, and I offered 5,000 G. A moment later, I saw that there was another bidder, but neither of us were desperate for this item. I presumed that the other player impulsively decided to make a purchase, or wanted something from the auction as a commemorative token. In the end, I managed to win the kettle for 12,000 G.

"Phew, got the kettle," I sighed. The auction was drawing to a close, and I didn't think I had any other items to buy. "Hmm, if I knew it was going to end up like this, I would've bid more money on those eggs."

As we neared the end of the catalog, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of regret, but as they say, hindsight is 20/20. *Man, auctions are tougher than I thought.* I felt a little down as I stretched out my back. I was prepared to be sent back to where I came from, but though I kept waiting, I never received an announcement that the auction was over.

The crowd started murmuring amongst themselves.

"What's going on?"

"You think we're just waiting for the other server to be sent back first?"

"W-We're not stuck here, right? Like, as in unable to logout or something?"

"You've been reading way too many light novels, man."

Suddenly, the auctioneer, who had remained on the podium, said, "Now, I'd like to present our secret items! You won't find these in the catalog. All these items are extremely unique, so please bid on whatever catches your fancy!"

Nice, devs! You sure know how to excite us! Now this is an auction! I internally yelled. I knew that real auctions probably didn't work this way, but as we were in a game, I felt like many players had expected, or at the very least hoped for, some sort of last-minute excitement. Other players, including myself, sat back down. I was really getting excited.

There was a pause before the first item was brought out, as though they had waited for the crowd to calm down.

“Here’s the first item!”

A sword was placed onto the podium. The well-polished, silver blade glimmered beautifully under the light. *W-Wait, this has gotta be some kind of super rare item right? The fantasy staple? Something that’s equivalent to orichalcum, like mithril or something?*

“This is the Magic Silver Short Sword!”

The sword wasn’t made of mithril, but the crowd sounded excited as ever. I opened up my ears to my surroundings; conveniently, there was a swordfighter-looking player sitting right in front of me.

“Hey, that’s supposed to be better than regular silver, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I heard that an adventurer NPC who claimed that they came from Zone Eight had that sword.”

“They’re about to show the stats!”

I see. So this is from a late-game zone then, I guess? Is it good? I wondered, checking out the weapon’s stats with excitement. However, I found that it wasn’t as good as I’d thought.

The weapon was strong and of good quality, but it wasn’t very different from the stuff that we’d seen at the auction earlier. It had a rarity of five, meaning that the item was extremely rare, but there was nothing more to it. I seemed like the only one who was disappointed though, as the crowd started murmuring.

“It’s lightweight and even has an attribute.”

“It’s got high durability stats.”

“Two slots too. Pretty powerful.”

“It even decreases damage taken. It’s not much, but it’s better than nothing.”

“And its magic attack is about as powerful as a staff.”

Most of the weapons we’d seen at this auction had a unique ability applied,

making them powerful, but the base stats of this short sword were high enough to go toe-to-toe with any of those weapons. Since it had two slots, the weapon could be enhanced to the user's liking as well. It had a fire attribute, and decreased damage taken when attacked by an opponent. In addition, it was around half the weight of other iron swords, allowing the user to use heavier and tougher armor to protect themselves. This weapon was apparently highly sought after by front liners that specialized in defense. I felt this secret item was a bit of a letdown, but the sword fighters were all excited. However, the words that came out of the auctioneer's mouth next made everyone go silent.

"Starting bid at 400,000 G!"

That's expensive! A bit too expensive. Or is this normal for an item that's still two zones away? Since it's being listed at an auction, does it have really good abilities or something? The majority of players couldn't even dream of bidding on this item. On the flip side, this meant that these items were reserved for the wealthy, and the item would be guaranteed to go to a suitable player.

A fierce bidding war started on the Short Sword, and the price kept increasing with no end in sight. It ended with a price of 1,100,000 G. *Over a million gold for a sword, huh? I feel like I have no hope of getting any item on the secret list, but I guess I'll stay and watch.*

A Magic Silver Shield, a bow created from the Sacred Tree and a branch from the trees of evil, a staff made with several attribute crystals, and other luxurious items were auctioned. Each item hovered around a million gold.

I was a bit interested in the staff made from several attribute crystals, but the price kept soaring and I couldn't keep up. My budget was a million gold, but I actually had around 1.4 million, meaning that I could've bought the staff if I'd really wanted to, but I didn't fight very often. It felt like a waste to have a weapon worth over a million gold if I would hardly ever be using it, so I decided to give up.

"What's the next item? Art supplies?" I asked as I saw paint, paint brushes, and a calligraphy brush being brought onto the podium. *I mean, there's a painter class in this game, so I guess it's for them.*

"These are Painting Tools for interiors and household objects! We have also

prepared a pigment that's specialized in vintage aesthetics! If you use this pigment to paint a household object, you'd get a uniquely antiquated appearance, as though the item was created a hundred years ago!" the auctioneer yelled.

Huh, so this would give retro vibes to household items. Didn't know something like this existed. "This looks kinda interesting," I murmured to myself.

I could give some of the furniture that Sakura built a vintage feel, which would make my barn look more unique. *I like this idea.*

"Starting bid at 200,000 G!"

All right! I'll buy it! I want to bid on a secret item too!

"220,000 G," I said, placing my bid. In an instant, I was countered with a 250,000 G bid. I knew there were like-minded people, but I wasn't planning on giving up.

I then placed a bid for 300,000 G, but a 350,000 G bid immediately followed. Refusing to back down, I bid 400,000 G, but was swiftly countered with 450,000 G.

"Hmmm, what should I do?" I said to myself. I had already gone over the Red Tiger egg budget, and I couldn't justify spending more on an interior decorating tool.

Around twenty meters away, I saw a player looking over at me with victorious glee. The man was apparently who I was bidding against. I had no idea how he knew that I was bidding, but since I was voicing my thoughts out loud, I assumed that he was able to put two and two together. Seeing this, I got a little irritated. *So you think you've won, huh? Fine then, you're on!*

"500,000 G," I said.

After a short while, a bid of 560,000 G rang out. I immediately countered with my bid of 650,000 G. My opponent wasn't giving up, as he offered 750,000, a huge leap in price. *You're stubborn, but so am I! I'll add an additional 100,000!*

"850,000 G!" I said. The player, who was glancing in my directions, slumped his shoulders with a look of defeat.

“Sold, at 850,000 G!” the auctioneer said.

Yes! I won! I basically used up all of my money though! I was prepared to simply sit back and watch for the rest of the secret auction after that; I didn’t have any more gold to bid.

“Huh, an instrument. And it transforms into any instrument you want? Neat,” I said, staring at the next item that was brought up onto the podium. It was an interesting shape, and though it could only transform into the user’s desired instrument once, it was guaranteed to be of high quality.

There were many instruments in the game, including violins, trumpets, and the like. If there were only a small variety available, players focused on Musical Performance might not be able to purchase their own instruments. In my case, Fau was always equipped with an instrument. Thanks to her, I didn’t require any new instruments, which was very economical.

There were other items, like a hoe that prevented the growth of weeds for a set amount of time if it was used to plow a field, but it didn’t attract my interest too much. It would mean that I couldn’t grow any herbs, and it was a pain to divvy up the land and plan things out. The hoe’s stats weren’t that good either. It sold for a rather cheap price compared to the other secret items, at only 250,000 G. Farmers these days all produced some herbs, so I didn’t expect this item to be popular anyway.

“Are these all class-specific items?” I said.

We went through items for Painters, Minstrels, and Farmers. Even among the nonfighters, we were currently in the minor or unpopular job section. Next up was an item for a specialized class, Anglers. It was a lure that only attracted fish of low rarity.

After a few more items, a Sealing Stone, often used by necromancers, was put onto the auction.

“This is the Vengeful Spirit’s Sealing Stone! Starting bid at 150,000 G!”

As the name stated, the stone contained a ghost-type monster. By using the stone, the user could form a contract with the monster inside.

“Is this a monster for Necromancers?” I wondered aloud.

I have a bad feeling about this...

As I continued to watch with a sinking feeling, the stone was sold for a rather cheap 480,000 G. *I've heard that necromancers are less popular than tamers, so I can see why.* A few rows in front of me was a girl with bunny ears and an indigo bob cut, jumping up and down. I assumed she got the item.

Watching her look so happy was a wholesome sight, and I was overjoyed for a moment as summoner-class Contract Stones were presented on the podium. Like the Sealing Stones, contract stones allowed the user to obtain whatever monster was inside. The item up for grabs was a Bone Soldier's Summoning Stone. We had entered the summoning section.

The item sold for 960,000 G, most likely because Summoners were a popular class, with plenty of bids rolling in. After Necromancers and Summoners, next up was...

"I knew it!" I groaned. I couldn't help but rise from my seat as I saw the next item on the podium.

"Here's the next item!" the auctioneer announced.

"An egg?! Seriously?" The next item auctioned was a Tamed Monster's egg. *Why did I not think this would happen when I was bidding on the Painting Tools?! I'm so stupid!*

"A Poison Fujin's egg! Starting bid at 200,000 G!"

200,000 G right off the bat?! Ugh, this has to be a powerful monster! Wh- What should I do? I used all of my budget, but I still have some money saved up. I have around 600,000 G left, so I can use that, I guess... As I wrestled with my remaining money, the price started to rise. It was already at 400,000 G.

"I'll just go all in! My final gamble!" I said, placing a bid of 600,000 G. I was bluffing a little, but I hoped others would be terrified by the jump in price. My hopes were dashed in a millisecond.

"700,000 G! 770,000 G!" the auctioneer called out, as the price steadily rose. The final bid was 1,060,000 G, well beyond my limit.

"Darn..." I mumbled. I buried my head in my hands, thinking that I may have

been able to make the purchase had I not purchased the paint tools, but there was no use crying over spilled milk. I could only watch with sadness as the egg was carried to its owner. “Well, no changing the past.”

It didn’t make sense for me to be hung up about the auction, so I decided to remain positive. *I’m gonna have so much fun with painting, I’m not sad at all! “I need to go home and have my monsters soothe my soul...”*

As I desperately tried to hide my frustration, the auction began drawing to a close. I couldn’t even remember the last few items that were put on the podium. Just like previous events, this auction was to end exactly at a set time. I was waiting to be teleported back to my original location at 4 p.m. Since we had a few minutes to spare until then, I patiently waited in my seat. Suddenly, an announcement rang out.

“Players who have spent over one million gold in our first auction will receive the title Spending the Day’s Earnings by Night.”

Huh? I just received a title. And judging from the name, it doesn’t sound too good. What effects does it have? I thought. Upon analyzing the title, I found that it was just for show. It had no effects, though it did give me a bonus point and a thousand gold. *I guess joke titles exist too. This is my eighth one. I’m just playing how I please, so I don’t get how I’ve obtained so many titles.*

“I guess the auction’s over,” I murmured to myself. Things didn’t go as planned, and I had some regrets, but I felt like I had fun. As I reflected on the past few hours, my body started to glow, signaling that I was about to be teleported. “Finally, home free.”

The moment the words left my lips, I was standing back in my field. My monsters adorably came out to greet me.

“Mm-mm!” Olto clung onto my leg.

“I’m back, guys,” I said.

I opened up my inventory and took out the Sacred Tree Sapling I purchased from the auction, thinking it was perfect timing to hand this item over.

Name: Sacred Tree Sapling (Phytoplasma Disease)

Rarity: 4 / Quality: ☆1

Effect: Sacred Tree Sapling. Currently diseased due to evil effects.

Huh? Diseased? The auctioneer never mentioned anything of the sort, I thought. "Evil effects?" I wondered out loud.

I remembered an incident I heard from a different server, where the boss, the Sacred Tree, turned into a Tree of Evil, causing chaos. In addition, Phytoplasma Disease was what Sakura's Lakeside Tree had been affected by. I knew this was really bad. I knew that one could only be under this disease once in their life, though.

"H-Hey, Olto, Sakura, Olea. Is there anything you could do to cure this sapling?" I asked.

"Mm-mm..."

"..."

"Trrrr..."

It seemed like these three had no cure for the disease.

"Okay, let's just go to the Farming Guild!" I said.

"Mm!"

I ran out of my field, accompanied by Olto. These were the times I relied on the Farming Guild.

"Aye!"

"Fau? When did you get here?" I said as she rested on my shoulders. She must've hung onto the hood of my robe when I was leaving my field. "This is really important, so don't go playing around somewhere, okay?"

"Aye!" she nodded. She had a look of seriousness that I'd never seen before, and she seemed to have understood that I was in an emergency situation.

I ran straight towards the Farming Guild and called out, "Excuse me! Could anyone take a look at this?"

“Mm!”

“Oh, what’s up?” a man at the front desk asked.

“This sapling looks like it has Phytoplasma Disease.” I took out my item from the inventory and placed it on the guild’s counter. I saw that some dirt had gotten on the counter, and internally begged for forgiveness since I planned on cleaning it up.

The man, paying no heed to the dirt, looked at my sapling and groaned with a look of defeat. “Hmmm, you’re right. These spots also resemble the symptoms of the disease.”

“Is there no way to cure it?”

“You’ve already used the Elemental’s healing on this, haven’t you? Then I’m afraid we might be out of options...”

“Really? Is there nothing I can do?”

“I hear you, but we’re in a sticky situation. I’ve heard that there’s a medicine somewhere out there that could cure this disease, but I’ve never even seen it before. I don’t think we can obtain it easily either.”

“So I have to just wait for this to wilt?”

While this would be a waste of money, I was more frustrated that I couldn’t help this sapling. The man pondered for a moment and seemed to have an idea.

“Young man, I don’t think we can cure the sapling. But, I think you can raise it,” he said.

“Huh? But it’s sick.”

“Yeah, I don’t know if it’ll grow well. You and that small one over there aren’t good enough, but your gnome might be able to do it.”

Apparently, if I had Arboriculture, I could possibly raise diseased saplings. In addition, I learned that the Phytoplasma Disease would slow down the sapling’s growth rate. It was unknown if it would grow into a Sacred Tree, and was more likely than not to transform into a different species.

“Well, if this might be able to grow without dying...” I said.

“Yep. It’d be a pity if it died without a chance, so I wish you the best of luck.”

“I understand. Thank you for your advice.”

“Mm-mm.”

“Aye aye.”

Olto, Fau, and I bowed our heads in gratitude.

“I guess we should go home and plant this,” I said.

“Mm!”

I was worried about how this would turn out. The man at the Farming Guild told me that it might not become a Sacred Tree, but I wasn’t sure if that meant it would transform into a Tree of Evil. As I returned to my farm, I turned to my monsters.

“Olto, Sakura, Olea. Do you think you guys could raise this?”

“Mm.”

“...”

“Tiiii.”

The three grabbed onto the sapling and nodded. As I was told, I might be able to handle this thanks to Olto’s Arboriculture. However, they seemed a bit hesitant because they didn’t know how the sapling would turn out.

“It’s apparently under the effects of evil which caused the Phytoplasma Disease. If not grown right, it might transform into a monster called a Tree of Evil. You think we’ll be okay?”

“Mm?”

“...?”

“Tiiiiii?”

It sounded like Olto and the others weren’t sure if the tree would transform either. *Is it really okay to raise this sapling?* I wondered.

“Well, if it ever becomes a monster, I’ll worry about it then.”

I had many friends, and if things went awry, I was prepared to ask Kokuten for

help. *Yep, that should be okay.* I decided to leave the sapling in my monsters' capable hands, and went back to checking the other items I'd bought from the auction.

The Elementalist's Earrings were supposed to have one slot, so I decided to go to Lewin's later. If I was able to set a Tamed Monster's Orb in them, I'd be able to fight more freely. "But first, I should make Sakura's orb using the heart she gave me."

I had enough materials, and there didn't seem to be an issue. "Just the tea kettle and the Painting Tools now. Guess I'll check out the kettle first." I placed the item onto a table in my barn. It looked rather dirty, and I assumed it was originally black, but it was so rusty and the paint was so chipped that I couldn't quite tell. *Well, that's what makes it good though.*

"Yep, it's got personality to it." I didn't dislike my new kettle.

"Aye?"

"Chirp?"

"Huh, don't you guys understand how cool this is?"

"Aye aye?"

"Chirp chirp?"

Fau and Rick had their heads cocked to one side, and cocked it even further to express their confusion. I guessed my young monsters didn't understand the heart of wabi-sabi, an aesthetic of accepting the imperfections in the world. I held the kettle with my hands, and noticed that it was rather small, making it easier to place in my barn. It was smaller than an average clay pot, much smaller even than the normal kettle one would imagine when being told of the folklore of the tanuki and the tea kettle.

"A tanuki?" I said. It was at that moment that I realized that the extremely popular folklore about the tanuki and the tea kettle might imply that the kettle was a perfect fit for a yōkai. *Could this kettle also have a secret inside?*

"Hm, I guess things won't always go *that* conveniently for me," I said, after I used my Yōkai Detection and Yōkai Searcher to no avail.

Well, whatever. It's a cool interior item, so I'll just place it on the table. It would've been perfect if I had a hearth. "And my last item, I guess."

I felt like I overpaid for this, but I took out my most expensive purchase, the painting tools. I was told that I could paint my interior and household objects to my liking, but I had no idea how to use it. I laid it out onto my table. From large to small, there were four brushes of various sizes, and three types of paint: Vintage [Wood], Vintage [Metal], and Passing Time. I picked up the largest brush, and I heard an announcement.

"Would you like to use the Painting Tools? Because you do not have any skills, some functions, including the auto function, will be unavailable. Because you do not have any skills, the success rate of your painting will be halved."

I was apparently able to use this item as is, but I couldn't use it to its fullest extent without the proper skills. I didn't want to waste any paint since it was expensive, and decided to wait until I could use the item to the best of my ability.

"Skills, huh. What's good for this?"

As I was confirming the list of available skills, Painting seemed to be the most relevant. This was a beginner's skill for the Painter class, and I couldn't find anything else that I needed currently. I used four points to gain the skill.

"Seems like I was right," I said. I was now able to properly use the painting tools. I could change the setting from manual to auto, and was able to manually paint an item to my liking, but I decided to not use that for now. I wasn't a terrible artist, but I wasn't the best either, so I wasn't keen on starting off manually. I could consider doing so once I was experienced enough as a painter.

The auto feature was wonderful. A PC paint tool popped up, allowing me to paint as many times as I wished. The tool also allowed me to experience minute changes in real time, and actually see how the painted item would fit in with my surroundings. I was able to fiddle around with various textures as well, and I felt like I was able to paint items to my liking. The auto feature reduced some effects and used more paint, but I still thought it was worth it.

"I'll try painting a chair for fun, since I can't place this in a barn."

I decided to paint one of Sakura's handmade chairs. Her woodworking skills had gone up, and she was on par with a professional now. At the very least, if one of her chairs were lined up at a store, it wouldn't look out of place. However, it looked so new and polished that it didn't fit in with the atmosphere of this old barn. I decided to give the chair a weathered look with the paint tool so that it could blend in with the place.

"Hmmm, there's so many options." I decided to do a test run on the chair since testing didn't use any paint. I was able to fail without a worry. Out of all the options, I decided to give the most orthodox option a whirl. In the next instant, the chair on-screen looked aged, and gave a vintage vibe. It looked as though the chair had been used and treated with care for a few decades.

"Oooh! This is awesome!" The chair's effects didn't change, but I was more curious about appearances. This may have been a better item than I'd initially expected. "All right, let's try some other stuff!"

There were numerous antiquated vibes to choose from, like adding soot stains or moss, which let me experience a variety of different styles.

"Hm, guess I'll go with this for now," I said, going back to my initial selection, the classic retro style. After I selected my choice, I saw that some of my paint was used up, and the chair changed colors in an instant.

"Whoa! It looks super vintage now!"

I tested out a variety of styles on other chairs. There were a few styles that didn't seem to fit my barn, but I wanted to try it out to be sure. After transforming around twenty or so chairs and tables, I noticed I only had around half of my paint left.

"I was too focused on the chairs. I used way too much paint..."

I felt like the rest of my paint would be gone in a flash. I had around half of my Vintage [Wood] paint left, and had used about ten percent of Vintage [Metal]. I hadn't used Passing Time at all, but I didn't have much of that to begin with, and I feared that it'd be gone in an instant should I begin using it.

"Can't I just buy these paints somewhere? Or can I make them somehow?"

If I was to make odd items like these, I knew I needed alchemy. When I looked

over my recipes, I saw that a paint section had been added. It looked like I needed to mix water and certain minerals. The materials I needed seemed familiar to me, like Earth Ore, so I kept a mental note to purchase those later. However, these recipes only applied to Vintage [Wood] and Vintage [Metal]. The recipe for Passing Time simply had a ??? indicator.

I guess this one's special. When I analyzed the paint, I saw that the vintage paints had a rarity of three while Passing Time had a rarity of six.

"Huh? Rarity six?!"

Even the Magic Silver Sword had a rarity of five. This paint had a rarity of six?! Was this item more special than I'd thought? The retro paints I'd been using didn't seem to decrease Passing Time at all.

"So, that means I can only use this paint under special circumstances."

What does this paint do, I wonder? If I go by its name, it's supposed to pass time or age an object or something, right? Because test painting displayed the type of paint I would use, I decided to search for an item that required this special paint. However, none of the wood furniture I had required Passing Time.

"Can it only be used manually? Or maybe I can't use it on chairs or something."

I wondered what the issue was. Passing Time on chairs didn't seem like a good move anyways. I was sure it'd be fine if it aged ten years or so, but if I accidentally let fifty years of time pass, I expected it to just break down.

"Then it must be used on an item that requires time to pass."

Did I even have that kind of item? I thought.

"A plant?"

Was I able to age a plant by decades? If so, I could plant a sapling and harvest it the next day.

"All right, guess I'll see if I can use it on the Sacred Tree Sapling..."

No dice. I knew things wouldn't be so convenient. I couldn't even select plants to paint in the first place.

“Did I have anything else?”

What do I have that looks good when aged? I know antiques look better the older they are, so that means I need something like a vase or hanging scroll, maybe? I decided to just test the paint out on whatever I could get my hands on. Just like my plants, I couldn't select my weapons, armor, or accessories. I couldn't choose the moss ball that Sakura made for me before, or plates and cutlery either.

I started to look for more items, and finally found one that allowed the Retro [Passing Time] paint option to pop up.

“The tea kettle.”

I stared at my newly bought item. It already looks pretty old, but can I just make it older? I mean, it's the only item I can use it on, so might as well. I bought both of these from an auction, so maybe it's fate.

“Let's see what'll happen.”

Once I finished auto-painting the kettle, its appearance changed in an instant. It looked much older, and any black paint remaining had completely chipped off. The entire kettle looked rusty, but I liked the aesthetic. It seemed like a perfect fit for an old-fashioned, rustic house. I also observed a different change in appearance.

“It's more like a transformation than a change, though.”

The kettle had transformed. Into what, you ask? Well, a bushy tail was now sprouting from the item. It was round and fluffy.

“This must be...”

“Poko?” the kettle said.

A tea kettle and a tail must equate to a tanuki! I did it! With a poof, a tanuki's face and arms protruded from the kettle. There was no mistaking this animal.

“A-Are you a yōkai?” I asked.

“Poko!”

It apparently was as it nodded its head towards my question.

“You have befriended the Tea Kettle Tanuki. A number of skills have been unlocked.”

“Oh, so I don’t have to fight you to get you to be my friend.”

It seemed like I simply needed to obtain the tea kettle in order to form a friendly bond with the yōkai. It wouldn’t have popped up on my Yōkai Detection because the kettle hadn’t been a yōkai yet.

“I’m not an Onmyōji though...” I muttered. Had I been one, I may have been able to use this tanuki, but I just added it to my encyclopedia and unlocked a few skills.

I wondered if I should prepare an offering like with the Hanami Vandal.

“Hey, do you require food or an offering or something?”

“Poko.”

“Food?”

“Pom.”

“An offering?”

“Poko!”

I gave it some herbal tea, which clearly put it in high spirits. It took out a paper umbrella and juggled a mari ball on top of it while dancing. *Oh man, it’s so cute.*

Unfortunately, I didn’t receive any items in return like I did with the Hanami Vandal, but I got to see a cool party trick, so I decided to let it slide. I was happy to have a cute new roommate.

“What skills did I unlock?”

I saw that I’d unlocked Party Tricks, Tea Art, and Calling Blessing.

“I’m not familiar with any of these.”

Judging from the name, Party Tricks and Tea Art were probably in the same vein as Juggling and Card Magic. These abilities did have buffs, but I heard they were difficult to use during battle. I didn’t expect people to use card magic while fighting anyways.

I was left with Calling Blessing. It sounded like it would increase my luck, but I didn't see how it would differ from Olto's Luck ability.

"Hmmm," I muttered.

"Poko?"

"Right, I should prioritize you. Don't you need a name or something?"

As I looked it up, it seemed like I didn't require a name as I hadn't tamed it.

"Hey, how much can you move? Like, what's your range? I can't take you out onto the field, can I?"

"Poko?"

As though to respond, the tanuki jumped off the table and went outside.

"Ah, hey!"

I hurriedly chased after my kettle, only to see it standing outside at the edge of the fields, as though an invisible wall was blocking the way between the fields and the road. Since it was an interior item, I supposed that it could only move around in my home.

"I guess you can move freely amongst the fields, though. You can go wherever you like in those bounds."

"Poko!"

"But don't get into any mischief, you hear?"

"Poko!"

While the tanuki was investigating its active area, Olea came up to me questioningly. "Triii?"

It apparently wanted to confirm the newest addition to our family. Because Olea was always stationed on the fields, it seemed to have taken on the role of a guard.

"Olea, that's our newest friend, a yōkai called the Tea Kettle Tanuki. Be nice to it, okay?"

"Triii?"

“Pom?”

Olea and the tanuki stared at each other for a few moments. They then both smiled and high-fived each other. I wasn't sure what just happened, but it seemed like they accepted one another. These two would always be on the fields together, and I was glad they were buddies, since I didn't want them to get lonely.

“We're all your friends from now on.”

“Poko-pom!”

“Tiiii!”

The only problem was that my interior object now moved around. I wondered if I could buy some other household objects that would fit in this barn somewhere.

“Well, I still have some of that paint left, so maybe I should make something that fits and paint it retro.”

Wait, I should check up on those skills I just obtained. I didn't look into the details, I thought.

“Party Tricks and Tea Art.”

I assumed that Party Tricks would imitate what the tanuki just showed me, like juggling a ball on an umbrella or walking a tightrope. I guessed it was a buffing skill like with dancing and music, but I had never gone out of my way to gain such abilities. Tea Art was more of a mystery. I had heard of some tricks with tea before, like acrobatically pouring tea from a high place.

“But this is Tea *Art*. Hmmm.”

Reading the explanation, it seemed like it did have something to do with pouring tea. I didn't know how that differed from tea tricks, but it clearly had some sort of correlation with tea nonetheless, so I decided to leave that aside for now.

“This Calling Blessing skill is the one that piques my curiosity.”

The only explanation for this skill was that it distanced the user from calamities and called in luck. LJO didn't have a luck status, but anything that

raised luck was precious. Depending on circumstances, I was willing to learn this skill, but I decided to purchase some information from Alyssa first. I still didn't understand the difference between this skill and Olto's luck anyways.

"Poko-pom!"

"What's up? A tea kettle? Where'd you get this from?"

The tea kettle, which had transformed into a tanuki, suddenly took out another tea kettle that was similar to its own.

"Poko!"

"Huh? You're giving this to me?"

"Poko!"

I received another kettle, and this was no normal item either.

Name: Fortune Tea Kettle

Rarity: 4 / Quality: ☆10

Effects: After putting in water, after a certain amount of time, the water will turn into green tea.

It was apparently an automatic tea maker. I didn't have any way of making green tea leaves just yet, so I was happy to have some green tea.

"All right, let's try this out!"

I put the Fortune Tea Kettle on top of the table in my barn, and poured in some regular water from the well.

"So how long is 'a certain amount of time'?"

I waited for around five minutes, but the water didn't change.

"Fine, I'll leave it be for a bit."

I decided to transform a few more pieces of furniture with a vintage aesthetic. I would sell any extras I made. Because the materials required to make furniture, like brushes and weed water, were cheap, any furniture I sold never

etched a high price. However, now that they had been painted, I could raise the prices of those items.

“Uhhh... The highest I can sell this for is 3,500 G. That’s really expensive. Since the paint requires some minerals, I guess I should raise the prices accordingly.”

I made ten chairs, painted them, and registered them as Sakura’s Retro Chair.

“Should I go to Alyssa and buy some information? I have some to sell too,” I wondered out loud. *Wait, maybe I should finish experimenting with the Passing Time paint first. I feel like I could sell this info to her.* I went to check on my paint levels.

“Huh?! I’ve run out of Passing Time paint...”

A six rarity item disappeared after one use. *I-I mean, I got a new yōkai, so it wasn’t a bad trade, right?*

“Pom?”

“I got a cute tanuki and a Fortune Tea Kettle, so it was worth it,” I kept telling myself, trying to cope.

Ten or so minutes later, I was in front of Alyssa’s store.

“Excuse me,” I said.

“Oh, Yuto! Welcome! Anything you’d like to purchase today?” Alyssa greeted me.

“Yeah, just some information related to the auction.”

“Heh, how exciting. I heard through the grapevine that you bought some painting tools, but how are they?”

It figured that Alyssa was already aware of what I purchased at the auction. There were plenty of players there, so there was no use trying to sneakily bid on items anyways.

“I heard you were out in the open at the auction. How bold,” she said.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Oh, were you not aware? You see...”

“Huh? Really?”

According to Alyssa, there was a system to make yourself invisible to other players. This concealed you from other players during the auction, allowing you to bid anonymously. I wasn't aware that this feature existed.

“Almost all the famous players made themselves invisible before entering the auction. Well, I guess showing yourself suits your character,” she said.

I vowed to use this feature next time. However, I only happened to have a lot of money on me this time, but I most likely wouldn't have so much money that I'd need to conceal myself the next.

“Okay, first, I have some things I'd like to sell you. I have information about the Painting Tools, the tea kettle, the Elementalist's Earrings, and the Sacred Tree Sapling. Do any of these interest you?” I asked.

“I'm sorry. I've already got info on those four.”

“I see.”

Everyone was apparently thinking the same thing. The auction had been held in four buildings this time with the exact same catalog. Players who bought the items I did had come to sell Alyssa information first.

“I heard you bought the sapling for 100,000 G.”

“You know that much already?”

“Everyone was saying that buying that thing for that price is something only Silver-Haired could do.”

The sapling was apparently an unpopular item. There weren't many players with Arboriculture, and it seemed like only a few high-level farmers were finally obtaining the skill. The sapling was sold for 30,000 G on other servers, and I realized that the crowd was making a fuss because I offered such a high price.

H-How embarrassing. I'm positive some people were thinking, “Heh, why's that loser buying a trash item for 100,000 G?” I thought. I managed to mend my shattered heart and asked about the sapling's status.

“Um... The sapling is also affected by Phytoplasma Disease, but do you know if there's a cure for this?”

“Remember the Sequoia Healing Drop information you sold me before? That’s the only thing that comes to mind. I’d like you to sell me any info if you *do* find a cure.”

“I see...”

I gave up and decided to raise the sapling as is. *I’m a bit scared of the evil effect, so maybe I’ll sprinkle it with some Purified Water or something? If I can’t get any more info, I should ask my next question.*

“Do you have any info regarding the Painting Tools? Specifically the Passing Time paint,” I asked.

“Oh, do you not know how to use it?” she replied, as though she understood how it worked.

Someone before me must’ve sold this information to her. I thought I could sell this for a good price because a yōkai was involved, but I guessed I was late to the party. Information was on a first come, first served basis, and I was curious about the other obtainable yōkai. I hoped I could get information on how to get more of them.

“What did the people who sold you information use the tool on?” I asked.

“Hmmm. I think all the players who purchased the Painting Tools came to me to sell their information. You’re the last one, Yuto. They all sold me information on how to use the Passing Time paint.”

This implied that there were a total of four new yōkai created. I was interested.

“Huh. So could you tell me about the first person?”

“The first person is a famous Artist player. They purchased a vase from a dilettante NPC, and used the paint on it. The vase turned into an antique item and had a higher rarity.”

“Huh? That’s it?” *There’s something more important than that, isn’t there?*

“What? That’s amazing, isn’t it? The vase was initially sold for 200,000 G, and the same NPC bought it back for 2,000,000 G. If an NPC was willing to pay that much, it must actually be much more expensive.”

“Did it not turn into a yōkai?”

“Huh? A yōkai? What do you mean?”

What? Alyssa seems to be overreacting to the word “yōkai.” Did she not have any information about it?

“You received information about the Painting Tools, didn’t you? Did you receive anything about yōkai?” I asked.

“A-A yōkai?! Sorry, forget it! Forget what I just said!” she said, suddenly raising her voice.

“S-Sure.”

She put a hand on her chin and started muttering to herself. “I was caught off guard. This is Yuto we’re talking about. Of course he’s not here to sell me regular old information. Come on, Alyssa! Show your fighting spirit! Prepare yourself as though you’re going to fight a raid boss!”

“Excuse me?” I said.

“Ah, sorry about that. I was just pumping myself up. Don’t worry about it.”

“So, what did other people discover? There should be more people that sold you information, right?”

According to Alyssa, they all painted antique items, allowed time to pass, and raised the prices. These items all became expensive, but there were apparently no other special effects. This meant that not all items would turn into a yōkai. I was sure that some people preferred money and would choose profits over yōkai. To each their own.

“A-And? Wh-What happened in your situation, Yuto?” Alyssa stammered.

“Here, I’ll show you.”

“A video?”

“Yeah, take a look.”

I decided to show her the video of my tanuki instead of providing a verbal explanation. You know what they say, seeing is believing. I showed her a video I took when the tanuki started doing some tricks. It was short, but the yōkai

could be seen properly. Alyssa had her eyes glued to the video. Once it was over, she came close to me.

I'm already used to your antics, so I'm not taken aback anymore. I can't help but inch back a little though. Your eyes are scaring me.

"This was taken in the barn on your farm, right?" she said.

"You've got a good memory."

"I saw your place during the Hanami event. What's this tanuki all about? What's this video got to do with the Painting Tools? Tell me!"

"C-Calm down, please! I-I'll explain!" *I stand corrected. I'm not used to you at all.* "Ummm, I was playing around with the Painting Tools, trying it out on some chairs."

"Only someone like you would ever dare to say that you were 'playing around' with Painting Tools. And?"

"And I realized that the Passing Time paint hadn't decreased at all."

Alyssa seemed to nod along as though she was aware of this already.

"And I was trying to see what items I could use this paint on," I said.

"Thanks for your hard work."

"It really was. But I think it was worth it."

The moment the words left my lips, her eyes glimmered. I assumed she was able to put two and two together.

"The tanuki," she said.

"Yeah."

I explained to her that I bought the tea kettle at the same auction, used the paint on it, and found that it transformed into a yōkai. I told her that I used up all my paint, and a battle wasn't required to befriend the tanuki.

"The kettle at the auction! I see! So you think other Japanese household objects could turn into yōkai?"

"It's just a possibility. But everyone used up the Passing Time paint that was

sold at the auction, right? Or do you know of a way to obtain more of the paint?" I asked.

"No idea. It's a rarity of six. Generally, these items can only be obtained in Zone Ten or beyond."

A rarity of six was in a class of its own, and it was hard to even gather the materials for such items. Alyssa, knowing that she couldn't obtain the paint right away, seemed to give up for now and started asking questions about the tanuki.

"What's the yōkai like? You didn't have to fight it, right?" she asked.

"Yeah, we just formed a friendship bond, and that was it. No fighting involved. I did receive an announcement saying that I unlocked some new skills, though."

"What skills were they?"

"I wanted to ask you about this as well. I unlocked Party Tricks, Tea Art, and Calling Blessing."

"I haven't heard of any of them other than Party Tricks..." Even she wasn't familiar with the other skills.

"Party Tricks is a skill that I've seen on a few classes. It's similar to Dancing, and has a buffing effect. If you level it up, you can do stuff like knife throwing," she said.

So it is a buffing skill. It's probably similar to Singing or Musical Performance. I could apparently use this for combat too? Yeah, I don't think I'll be needing it. Party Tricks seemed like a fun skill to use, but I already had Fau as my buffer.

"How about Tea Art?" I asked.

"I have no idea. I do know of a skill that sounds similar though. It's called Iron Plate Art."

"What's that?"

"It's a skill used for cooking, and it's a very niche ability. You can only use it when you have a specific item and you're cooking on an iron plate."

Upon further questioning, I found that this skill was similar to the tricks that

chefs did at hibachi restaurants while cooking in front of an iron plate. The food created from this skill had buffing effects or was of increased quality.

“So you’re saying that it could be a tea version of that? Something closer to tea tricks then?” I asked.

“Could be.”

I wasn’t particularly interested in doing tricks while pouring tea, but I was drawn by the effects of increasing the quality of items.

“But since you only have herbal tea right now, I’m not sure how useful this would be,” she added.

“You’re right.” Alyssa’s concerns were rightfully so; there was no meaning in increasing the quality of my herbal tea. It would’ve been a different story had it simply buffed me, but there were no guarantees, and I decided to obtain a few more teas before attempting to learn the skill.

Well, I sort of got two of my skills. The last one is my main concern.

“How about Calling Blessing?” I asked.

“I’ve never seen anything like it before. I can’t even begin to imagine what that one’s about. I don’t see how it’s any different from Luck either.”

Even Alyssa’s stumped on this one... It only said that it would call in blessings, which isn’t much help.

“Hey, how many points do you need to obtain that skill?” she asked.

“Huh? Uh, give me a moment.” I hadn’t confirmed the required points yet, and I hurriedly opened the skill window. “Calling Blessing requires... Huh?! Ten points?!”

I couldn’t believe my eyes. I looked it over many times, but the number remained the same: ten bonus points were required.

“That’s a lot,” I murmured.

“Ten points? That means it might be a very powerful skill, or some kind of specialized ability.”

Normally, skills required anywhere from two to six points, and even advanced

class skills required only eight. When put into perspective like that, ten points was a hefty commitment. I had twenty-six points left, so I'd be using quite a bit of my savings if I wanted to learn it.

"I'm even more curious now, but ten points, huh..." I turned towards Alyssa. "What do you think I should do?"

"Are you asking me? Honestly, if you have points, I'd say go for it. I want the information anyways."

I knew she would encourage me to obtain the skill, but it was far too large of an investment to make. *But that means it might be a super useful skill, right? It might have an amazing effect. But ten points...*

After a brief silence, I asked her again. "What do you think I should do?" I couldn't find the courage to take the plunge.

She sighed. "You don't have any other skills you want to obtain, right?"

"Huh? No, I've got a lot. I want to learn a few more magic spells though, and I'd like to save a few bonus points for the future."

"Then don't do it."

"But I'm curious..."

After this exchange went back and forth a few times, Alyssa snapped.

"Argh! Fine! Let's decide with rock-paper-scissors!" she said.

"H-Huh?"

"Okay, so if you win, you'll learn the skill. If I win we'll give it up. That's fine, right? Okay, rock, paper..."

"H-Huh? Wait!"

"Scissors!"

"Wait!"

My body moved on its own, unable to hold itself back against Alyssa's momentum. I threw out rock, and she threw out scissors. I had won.

"Yay, you won!" she said.

“I-I guess...”

“Then let’s obtain that skill. Come on, you’re a man, aren’t you! Just do it!”

“O-Okay.” I didn’t really agree with how this had all turned out, but I decided to steel my resolve. *She’s encouraging me anyways.* “I’ll obtain the skill.”

I used up ten points, and Calling Blessing was added to my list of skills.

“So?” she asked.

“I don’t feel anything different.”

“Hm, guess this’ll be hard to experiment with. Sell me the information if you get any further details.”

“Of course. But if this was a skill to simply raise luck, I’m not sure if I’ll notice its effects.”

“I’ll wait for as long as it takes.”

Please do, I thought. If the effects are abundantly clear, I might be able to notice it right away. Honestly, I hope they are.

“Do you have any other information regarding the auction?” I said.

“Hmmm, well, we’ve got the new titles, haven’t we? Did you get one?”

“Do you mean the Spending the Day’s Earnings by Night title? I got it.”

“Knew it. I thought you’d have obtained one. You’re the thirty-third person.”

“There’s quite a few other people.”

“Well, the secret items made prices jump up. There were a surprising number of people who spent over a million gold at the auction.”

I remembered that there were a few items that single-handedly went for over a million gold. If there were players like myself who bought multiple items, it wasn’t odd to have spent quite a bit of money. There were also apparently leaders representing clans and parties who gathered money and purchased items for the group at the auction. Those people also spent over a million gold.

“So this title isn’t that rare, is it?” I said.

“Well, the announcement made it seem like it was limited to the first auction,

so there's no guarantee that you'd get it in the future."

I see. So that title might be limited. I guess it was worth spending a lot of money. I received a yōkai and a title, which were both rare.

"Do you have any other information?" she asked.

"Uhhh..." Alyssa had wanted to hear about the Elementalist's Earrings, so I told her what I knew, and it seemed like I couldn't offer any new information. Information that was both new and impressive was hard to come by. However, I still had one little nugget left.

"I do have an item called the Fortune Tea Kettle," I said.

"A tea kettle? I thought that became a yōkai. Or did it become a completely new item after transforming?"

"That yōkai gave me a new tea kettle, actually." I showed her a screenshot of the analysis results of the item.

"Interesting. Hey, so does it make green tea?"

"Well, I haven't had any yet. It might be done by the time I return. Would you like to stop by? You might discover something new if you see the tanuki for yourself."

"Yeah... I'm a little curious to see if that yōkai and I could become friends."

And so, Alyssa and I headed for my farm. I was a bit curious about her leaving her stall open, but apparently her clan members would take care of it.

"I haven't been here since the picnic, but I'm guessing that's the Sacred Tree," she said.

"Yeah. It's currently under the effects of Phytoplasma Disease though, so I don't know how it'll turn out."

"Interesting. I wonder. I saw these grow into a boss called the Tree of Evil during the event. If you do end up faced with a boss and you need any help, do let me know."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, of course!"

Yes, I got a friend to help out if this ever turns into a battle! That's reassuring.
As we were talking, my monsters greeted us.

"Mm-mm!"

"Hey guys."

Olto and the others had finished their work and were playing around, the tanuki amongst them. It already fit in so well with the group that you would have thought it had been with me from the start.

"Been making friends with everyone?" I asked.

"Poko!"

Alyssa looked at the tanuki, her eyes sparkling. "That cutie's the yōkai, Tea Kettle Tanuki, right?"

"Yes."

"Huh, according to the marker, it's an NPC."

As Alyssa had noted, the tanuki had a different-colored marker above its head. It was the same color as an NPC's, signaling that it wasn't a tamed monster. She crouched and shook the tanuki's hand and gave it herbal tea, but the expected friendship bond between them hadn't formed.

"I suppose that would be too easy," she said.

I led her into the barn, and as I'd hoped, a pot of tea was ready.

Name: Bizarrely Boiled Tea

Rarity: 3 / Quality: ☆10

Effect: For ten minutes, as with the effect of Calling Blessing, the probability of all noncombat attributes will be augmented.

"Th-This tea is amazing! Everything outside combat—does that include production too? Looks like we found the effects of Calling Blessing already," Alyssa gushed.

“Right. And according to this explanation, my Calling Blessing skill should have the same effect?”

“I think so. Off the top of my head, I’m guessing the success rate of production will increase, and the rate of failure will decrease. It might also help the production of Tamed Monsters’ eggs, or allow you to find good tamed monsters easier.”

“Oh, do you think?!”

The effects of Calling Blessing couldn’t be easily observed, but it seemed like I could gain a variety of good effects in the long run.

“I filled the tea kettle up to the brim, which seems to have made around two cups of tea,” I observed.

“I won’t ask you to allow me to drink some. If you have any leftovers, sell it to me though. I’ll buy it at a good price.”

“Well, if I have any leftovers, that is. If it affects production, I want to keep some if my monsters could drink it.”

“I understand. But I was able to obtain some interesting info!” she replied, her voice filled with satisfaction.

Before she left, she paid me a fee of 50,000 G. She apologized for being cheap, but I didn’t think 50,000 G was cheap at all. I had given her information about a yōkai which would be difficult for others to obtain, and the same could be said for my skills. I felt like she was overpaying.

“Well, let’s just say it’s thanks to the effects of Calling Blessing.”

Chapter Five: Heading South

Alyssa, who seemed satisfied with obtaining info about the tanuki, had left, but the auction wasn't over yet. There was still the OA. This auction had a system of allowing players to place bids repeatedly, and I had placed some bids on a few items immediately after logging in.

"I wonder how my bids are doing," I said.

"Pom!"

"Oh, are you telling me to drink up?"

Tea Kettle Tanuki is too long to say. I'll just call it Kettle, I thought as the tanuki offered me some tea.

"Oh, this isn't the Bizarrely Boiled Tea, is it?"

Upon analysis, the tea had the boring name of Cheap Green Tea. It was a luxury item like the herbal tea that just provided some flavor, but no effects. I slurped on the drink, and was surprised to find that it in fact tasted like green tea. I wondered whether it was thanks to the effects of Tea Art, or its ability as a tea kettle yōkai, that Kettle was able to produce Japanese-style tea. Either way, I was a little happy about this ability, and the tea was more than enough to satisfy my palate.

"Hey, will you serve tea for me whenever I ask you to?" I asked.

"Poko."

"No? Did you give this to me because I offered you some herbal tea, then?"

"Pom!"

I see. So it gives me green tea in exchange for herbal tea. Neither of them have any effects, so I guess it's an equivalent exchange.

"Okay, here. Could I have some more?"

"Poko!"

Guess not, I thought as it thrust out its right palm, signaling “no.” It seemed like some time needed to pass before I could give it an offering again.

“Well, even if it’s once a day, I’m happy to be able to drink green tea. Thank you, Tea Kettle.”

“Pom!”

I wanted to test out the Bizarrely Boiled Tea as well, and decided to compare the two. I took turns drinking the two teas as I stared at the OA screen in my barn. *Bizarrely Boiled Tea is also a long name... I’ll just call it Bizarre Tea. This is green tea too, it seems. And it’s pretty good. It’s a bit bitter, but that’s what I like. I prefer black coffee and bitter tea. The Cheap Green Tea tastes a little sweeter and lighter in comparison. I prefer Bizarre Tea, but I think normal people would like Cheap Tea.*

The most unfortunate part was that I couldn’t make a lot, so I couldn’t chug the beverage. I decided I would typically drink herbal tea, and drink green tea when I needed an extra punch. I felt bad for Alyssa, but I decided to hoard all the Bizarre Tea for myself.

“All right, let’s check up on the Tamed Monsters’ eggs.”

I had bid on two types of eggs, the White Chicken egg and the Black Rabbit egg. Out of the eggs listed for auction, they had the most expensive starting bids, going for 10,000 G each. Just to start, I placed a bid of 15,000 G on each egg. I expected to be outbid quickly, and I was willing to spend around 50,000 G each. My budget for the OA was 300,000 G, and even combining that with the 50,000 G I just received from Alyssa, I’d only have around 350,000 to spend.

“Let’s see...” I murmured, checking the auctions. “*PFFFT!*”

I spit out the tea I had in my mouth. *Green tea’s precious! But can you blame me? The prices of these eggs are sky high!*

“P-Pom?”

“Sorry, I was just a little surprised.”

“Pom.”

Kettle was looking at me surprised, retracting its limbs inside the tea kettle

and peeking only its head out. *It sure acts like a yōkai.*

“Why? They’re over 100,000 G...”

Five of each egg type were put up for auction, but each of them had soared in price.

“I don’t get it.”

These eggs weren’t of high rarity. The White Chicken egg most likely contained a monster called Doodle-Doo, which evolved from a birdlike monster called Chicky, found in Zone Two. Amimin had one, but her Doodle-Doo was unique. Though this egg was expensive, its starting price was a mere 10,000 G, so I assumed a normal monster would pop out of it. If so, 100,000 G seemed a bit too expensive. It might take a while, but anyone could just tame a Chicky and raise it into a Doodle-Doo.

The same could be said for the Black Rabbit egg. The monster within was probably the evolved form of a Rabbit, which could be obtained from Zone One. It wasn’t worth 100,000 G.

“It is what it is, I guess.” I decided to give up on these two and check up on the other eggs listed for auction.

“These are expensive too.”

But why? I thought, and decided to check the auction forums. It seemed like players who couldn’t get what they wanted at the auction had stopped giving a damn and decided to just throw all their money at the OA. In addition, rumors were circulating that the eggs listed for auction might be event eggs, meaning they would have unique Blood Skills. I did think it wasn’t likely that a normal egg would be listed up for auction. I guess it made sense that the prices had shot so high.

“I guess I’ll give up on the eggs... I wonder if the same thing’s going on with the other items.”

I first checked on the attribute crystals. I didn’t expect to get these anyways, but they were already crazy expensive. The cheapest was the Earth Attribute Crystal, currently going for 260,000 G. The Water and Wind Attribute Crystals were going for 330,000 G apiece, and the Fire Attribute Crystal had a bid of

450,000 G. Tomorrow was Fire Day, so I assumed everyone was thinking the same thing.

I was glad I had already gotten my required crystals through Alyssa.

“The other materials are also about as expensive as a house...”

All the items I had placed a bid on had become much more expensive than I’d anticipated. Even the cheapest item on my list, Rosemary Seeds, was going for 60,000 G. This was absolutely insane.

Rosemary sounds like a pleasant herb, but aren’t they weeds? Is the cheapest item in this auction a Bag of Tree Nuts or something? I wondered. I was referring to a sack of tree nuts that the devs put together. There weren’t any details regarding quantity, but it looked like an assortment of walnuts and blue acorns. It was currently priced at 10,000 G, and I assumed the price was low because twenty of these were put up for auction.

“Even so, 10,000 G is expensive.”

Under normal circumstances, 5,000 G was more than enough to buy plenty of walnuts and blue acorns. It seemed like buyers were considering the possibility of a potential Glowing Walnut mixed in.

“I guess I’ll place a bid for 20,000 G.”

If a Glowing Walnut was really inside, I would turn a profit, and if not, the bag would be a memento of the OA.

“But I really might be unable to buy anything. What should I do?”

“Poko?” Kettle chimed in next to me, peeking at the status window.

“I guess I should focus on one item and try to outbid other players.”

There were only a few minutes until the OA ended, and if I were to focus on one or two items, I was sure I could obtain them. *Should I go for the eggs or materials?* As I was thinking, Kettle piped up.

“Pom!”

“Hm? Did anything catch your eye?”

“Pom!”

Kettle reacted to a Japanese Teapot. *Makes sense for Kettle. I guess it reacts to anything related to tea. I've got a Western teapot, but not a Japanese one. Should I just buy one? Kettle might be happy if I offer this to it.*

"Hm, it's currently 30,000 G, huh."

It was expensive, but it wasn't breaking the bank for me. I decided to place a bid.

"All right, I'll get this for you!"

"Pokooo!"

After a few minutes of tapping numbers on my screen, I couldn't hide my shock. "Ugh! You're putting up a good fight, unknown player!"

I knew that the OA would become the most hectic during its last few minutes, but I didn't expect to fight this hard. I placed my sixth bid, trying to outbid my unknown opponent. The 30,000 G teapot had gone to 60,000 G, and my opponent finally stopped bidding. Thirty seconds passed with no counterbid. I couldn't feel at ease though, and placed another bid of 70,000 G just in case. I won in the end, and the Japanese Teapot was sent to my inventory.

Oh, looks like I got the Bag of Tree Nuts too. I apparently had won the bid for this item as well.

"I guess this is just a normal Japanese teapot."

It was the type where the handle was on the side, and though it cost me 70,000 G, it was clearly a cheap teapot. *Well, that's okay.*

"Poko!" Kettle said cheerfully as I offered it the item.

A Japanese Teacup came with the pot, but it was a plain white cup with no design. It was a little big, but I felt it was perfect for serving tea in.

"Hm? Could I offer both of these to you?"

"Poko!"

I could only offer one cup of herbal tea a day, but it seemed like I could offer both the Teapot and Teacup to Kettle. It felt more like a present than an offering to me.

“Hey, you’ll serve me tea using that pot and cup starting tomorrow, right?”

“Pom-poko!”

That seemed to be the case. I was looking forward to enjoying my tea more from the next day on.

“Now, let’s check the Bag of Tree Nuts. It’s filled with walnuts, blue acorns...and something else, apparently.”

“Poko?”

I pinched an odd looking green acorn from within the sack and lifted it up. It was clearly of a different variety, and upon analysis, I found that it was called an Acorn of the World Tree.

“Wait, that sounds like an amazing item.”

Name: Acorn of the World Tree

Rarity: 1 / Quality: ☆10

Effects: Greatly increases statuses for a certain amount of time. Cannot be eaten. Cannot be sold or given to others.

*So it **is** an amazing item! I thought. But a ten-star quality when the rarity is only a one? Would I be able to find this easily somewhere else?*

I checked the forums, and found some information. This was apparently obtainable at the Sequoia Dryad’s Altar, but since only a few people had managed to get it, the details on how to obtain this item weren’t clear. It was safe to say that currently, this acorn was a rare item.

“I didn’t think I’d get something like this. This was a total steal!”

I felt like I completely made up for the loss incurred by purchasing the Teapot and Teacup. However, it didn’t seem possible to bury it and raise it like a sapling. When I asked Olto and the others, they apologized to me with a sad look on their faces.

“Mm...”

“...”

“H-Hey, don’t look like that! It’s not you guys’ fault!”

The forums had also said it wasn’t possible, but I decided to ask anyway. The fault was all mine.

“I’ve only got one, so I’ll keep it for now.”

I’m never courageous enough to use rare items on a whim. Now then...

“The auction’s over, so I guess I’ll get back to adventuring.”

Next up was a trip to the Forest of Horns, located beyond the Southern Forest. Tomorrow was Fire Day, and the Fire Elemental Gate would open. The Fire Elemental Gate had already been unlocked, so I wouldn’t get the first-time bonuses, but I still wanted to get there early and explore the dungeons. I wanted to offer my Fire Attribute Crystal the moment the day changed, to maximize efficiency. To do so, I had to reach the giant torch located in the Forest of Horns. I had already gathered some information from the Quick-Eared Cats and the forums, and I was ready to head out as soon as I finished my necessary preparations.

“The preparations are the main issue here...” I mumbled to myself.

There was a specific item I needed to obtain somehow for the field boss in the Southern Forest.

“I heard you could make it with alchemy, but my level’s still too low for that.”

The only other option I had was to search for an alchemist.

“Guess I’ll head to Sawyer’s stall first.”

Sawyer was my go-to guy for alchemy-related requests.

“Hum!”

“Whoa, Reflet! Don’t grab me like that!”

“Hum hum!”

“Do you wanna tag along?”

“Huum!” she nodded, her eyes glimmering.

She was apparently finished with her work and bored. I decided to bring her along with me to Sawyer’s. I could feel others gazing at us—Undines were still quite rare. *Can’t be too shocked. An innocent beauty like Reflet stands out anyways.*

“Hi, Sawyer!” I said.

“Hum!”

“Yuto! I wanted to thank you again for the picnic,” he replied.

“Same here. Thanks for your help with the boss battle. Get anything good from the auction?”

“I got some materials. I was able to unlock more recipes with them, so I went all out on it. How about you?”

“Yeah, I even got the title.”

“Spending the Day’s Earnings by Night, right? Amazing. What did you buy?”

I told him about my haul from the auction, and how I obtained Kettle. He couldn’t hide his shock when he heard about the yōkai. I suppose it was the current “in” topic.

“That’s amazing. I had no idea such a combination existed,” he said.

“Hum!” For some reason, Reflet was beaming with pride.

Is it because I’m being praised right now? I wondered.

“Oh, I sold this information to Alyssa, so could you keep it a secret for now?” I said.

“Of course. I can meet this tanuki if I visit your fields, right?”

“Probably. I’m kind of letting it roam around my fields right now, so I’m sure you could see it there.”

“Then I’ll stop by as soon as I can!”

Since Sawyer was on my friend list, he could visit my farm whenever he pleased, and I hoped he would. I was sure that my monsters would be happy to

have a visitor. I was told that Ashihana, Amelia, and other players had swung by occasionally. Not that I had actually seen them there; I'd only learned about this secondhand.

Th-They're not avoiding me though, right? ...Right?

I usually logged out of the game at midnight to eat food and take care of other necessities. Other players generally logged in during that time, as that was when they were free. There was an automatic log of what happened when I was away, which any visitors would be recorded to. I usually took care of my monsters during the day, so maybe they were just feeling a bit shy. I even took the monsters out of the farm sometimes, so naturally, players would aim for the times I was away, namely at night.

"I want to visit the torch in the forest, but I haven't defeated the Southern Forest field boss yet," I explained. To get to the Fire Elemental Gate, I had to pass through the Southern Forest, through the Forest of Horns, and reach the giant torch that rests at its depths.

"Oh, so that's why you came to me," he said. I was glad he was so astute.

"I was thinking I might be able to acquire *that* item from you. Could I?"

"Hmmm. I'm sorry. I don't really work with bombs. I've got a few, of course, but none that could be used for the field boss in the South."

"Ah, I see..."

"Hum..."

The field boss in the Southern Forest was a unique one. It looked like a beehive, and was a troublesome boss to fight, able to summon an endless swarm of bees to attack a player. In the early stages of the game, it was said to be the most difficult boss to defeat, but there were now various methods to easily take it down. It was weak to AoE attacks and could be eviscerated with fire-attribute bombs. With a little money, even crafting-class mains could defeat this monster, and it was now known as one of the weakest bosses in the game.

"I do have water-attribute bombs, but..." Sawyer said.

"Do you know where I could purchase them, then?"

“Let’s see... Give me a moment.”

Sawyer’s awesome. He introduced me to Ashihana, and he said he didn’t have many friends, but he’s actually well connected. His social circle’s probably grown even more since. I’ve gained a few new friends myself, I thought.

I then heard him carrying on a brief exchange with someone. He came back to me with a smile; I presumed that things had gone smoothly.

“Um, let’s see, could you head to this location?” he asked me, pointing to a spot on the map of the Town of Beginnings. “They have to log out soon, but if you go there within fifteen minutes, they agreed to sell you bombs.”

“Here?” I said, staring at a normal alleyway on the map. “What’s here?”

“Nothing.”

“Huh?”

“Hum?”

“Well, there isn’t anything there, but my friend will be waiting for you. They’re a high-ranking Alchemist, but they’re shy and a little unusual. They said that they wanted to meet in an inconspicuous location,” he explained.

“So that’s why they want to meet in a back alley...”

“Yes. Their bomb-crafting skills are amazing, though.”

Meeting in a back alley seems like I’m trying to do some illegal trade... I mean, I’m trying to buy bombs, so I guess I am buying something dangerous though, I thought.

“In fact, they’re second to none when it comes to bombs, I think,” he said.

“Really? What’s their name?”

“Rikyu. Do you know them? They’re often called Pyro or Bomber.”

I have no clue who that is. I have almost no information regarding bombs. But if their in-game name was a historical reference, I understood that they weren’t a normal player.

“They have bad social anxiety and usually decline to meet others, but they said that they wanted to meet the ‘infamous Silver-Haired’ at least once,”

Sawyer said.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, but as I said, they’re a very unique individual, so please be careful.”

“Huh? H-How are they unique?”

“H-Hum...” Reflet said, looking worried when she heard Sawyer’s words.

“I’m sure there’ll be a lot of surprises since it’s your first time meeting them, but they’re not a bad person! Y-You should hurry! You don’t have time to waste.”

Sawyer was right. I didn’t have time to spare, and with a feeling of uncertainty in my heart, I decided to head to the meeting location.

“Please tell them I said hi!” Sawyer called.

“Got it.”

“Hum!”

Sawyer waved as Reflet and I parted ways with him. We raced through the town. Our destination was closer than I’d thought, and in a few minutes, we had arrived at the alleyway.

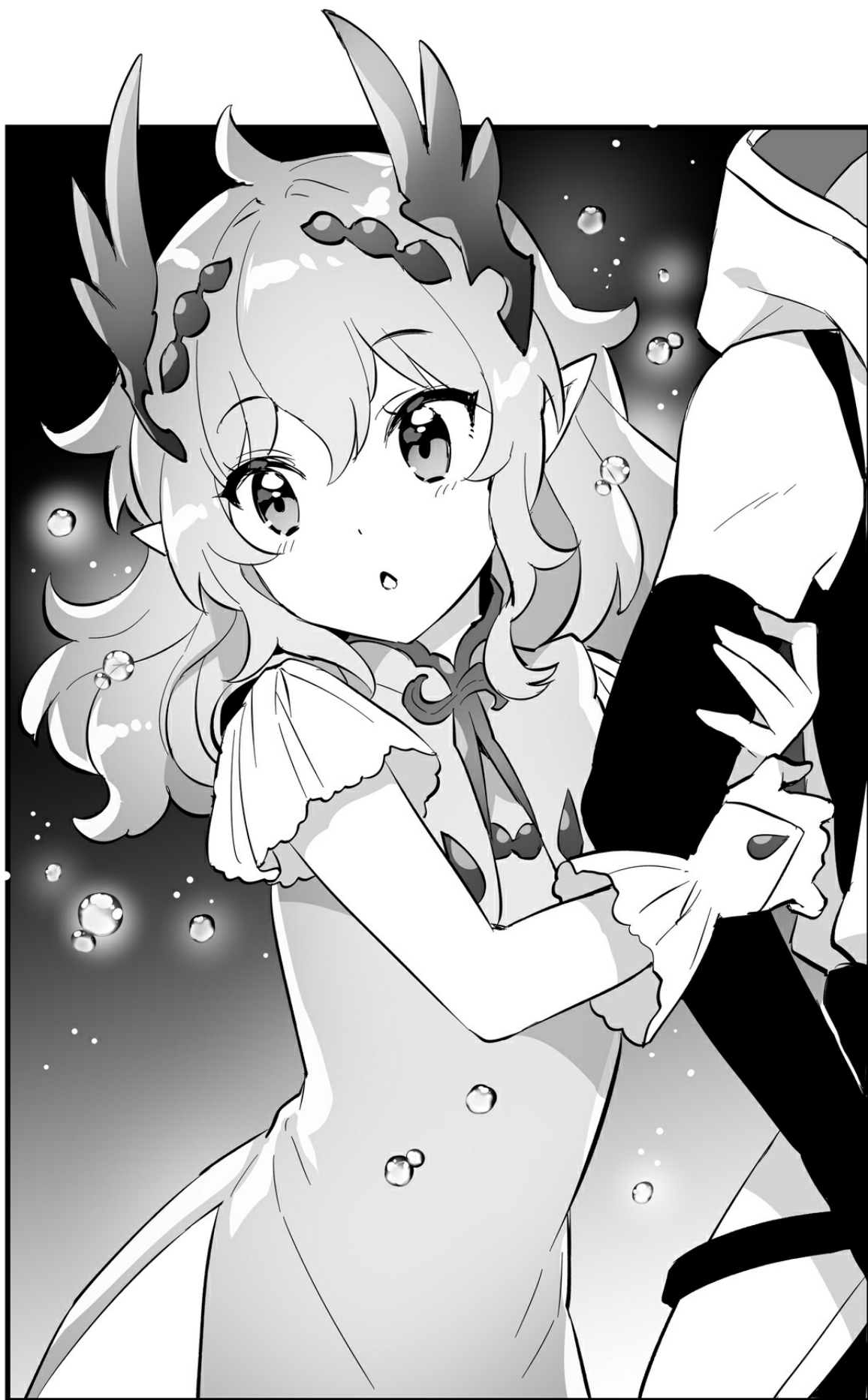
“I think this is the right place,” I murmured, but I still had one question. “What do they look like?”

I didn’t know the person’s face or appearance, or even what race they were, and I realized that I had forgotten to ask Sawyer about it.

“Crap, will we even be able to find them?”

I ventured inside the alleyway which was sandwiched between some houses. It was slightly dark and narrow. I had been here before, when I first started the game and took on a map-charting quest. I always thought that the place had a different atmosphere from the rest of the game. While the rest of the town was usually bright and cheery, here it wouldn’t be odd if an NPC who was secretly a member of the Bandits’ Guild or something approached me.

“Hum?” Reflet said, glazing around curiously as she grabbed onto my arm. Places like this must’ve been a rare sight for her.



We proceeded down the alley and saw a person. They looked extremely suspicious in their gray mantle and hood.

“Is that Rikyu?” I asked myself.

“Hum?”

Beneath their garb, I had no idea if they were a man or woman, though from their height I guessed they were male. I inched closer and the person spoke.

“Heh heh... So you’ve come, Silver-Haired,” the voice said.

“Huh?” I replied. The voice was a little husky, but unmistakably a woman’s.

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Rikyu. Heh heh.” She took off her mantle, and a beautiful, charming woman greeted me. She was over 170 centimeters tall. Her long, straight, magenta hair trailed down to her waist, and her bangs were long enough to cover the upper half of her face. Her golden left eye, peeking out from between her hair, left a stark impression. Her pupils were narrow and vertical like a reptile’s—half snake, perhaps.

She was wearing a Japanese-style robe that was draped around her arms, leaving her shoulders on full display. It was difficult to describe, but her attire resembled something that a courtesan would wear. Her garb was red and white, giving a shrine maiden feel, and for a moment I thought she was in the priest class, but she was carrying a long, spear-like object on her back.

Is this woman really a bombmaker? She doesn’t look like an alchemist at all... I thought.

I introduced myself. “You seem to already be familiar with me, but I’m Yuto, the tamer. I’m apparently also called Silver-Haired.”

“Pleased to meet you, heh heh...”

D-Does this woman always need to talk with that weird laugh? I had my guard up since Sawyer warned me, but she’s even more odd than I’d expected.

“U-Ummm... I heard that you make bombs...” I said.

“That I do, heh heh.”

She was apparently the one. *So this insane chuckling woman is the best*

bombmaker? I'm not surprised that she's called "Pyro." If this was a PvP game, I definitely wouldn't want to get close to her. She's clearly suspicious.

"I heard you were short on time. Thanks for meeting me," I said.

"Heh heh, don't mention it. I wanted to meet you and express my gratitude," she replied.

"For what?"

"I love tea."

"Okay...?"

What's she on about? But her in-game name checks out.

"Heh heh, my in-game name is a mix of my real name and the historical Sen-no-Rikyu."

So she really was a fan!

"I never expected to be able to drink within the game, though. You were the one that spread the creation of herbal tea," she said.

Huh? I'm taking credit for spreading herbal tea? If I recall, Herbal Tea Cultivation Set had been found, and I thought information about herbs would spread within a few days, so I just told Tagosack everything I knew. Wouldn't credit go to Tagosack, who wrote everything on the forums, or the players who discovered the cultivation set? I did sell some tea leaves at my farm stand, so I suppose I may have helped spread the awareness of herbal tea. I guess people thought I discovered it too...

"Are you satisfied with just herbal tea? Since you're Rikyu, wouldn't you like matcha and stuff?" I asked.

She cocked her head to one side and gave a vague answer. "Tea's tea, isn't it?" She didn't seem too hung up on the type of tea, and I was the same. I was grateful that I was simply able to drink something.

"Thank you. Thanks to you, I'm able to drink as much tea as I like, heh heh."

"S-Sure."

"I don't have much time, so let's get down to business, shall we?"

Whoops, she needs to log out soon. I was too focused on her personality that I completely forgot. “Right. I’d like to buy some bombs from you,” I said.

“Heh heh, I heard from Sawyer. If you have these, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Huh? Oh, thanks.”

She handed me some small, metallic balls. They had a black shine to them, and at a glance, they looked like shot put balls. Rikyu continued taking more out and tried to hand them to me.

“W-Wait a sec!” I said, hastily accepting the items and storing them in my inventory. The items were called Miniature Flame Bombs (The Rikyu Special). These were apparently bombs created from her original recipe.

“S-So these *are* bombs,” I murmured.

“Heh heh, you wanted these, didn’t you?”

She was right, but I didn’t expect her to hand them over to me right away. After I received four balls, I took one out and rolled it in the palm of my hand. They looked like simple iron spheres to me.

“How much power do these have?” I asked.

“It has about twice as much power and range than the ones normally sold in the Town of Beginnings,” she said.

“S-Seriously?! That’s amazing! The field boss should be a cinch!”

“Heh heh, it’ll be so easy it’ll feel just like taking out the trash.”

Th-These bombs are that amazing?

“The moment you throw these bombs, flames will expel from the item and form a beautiful fiery flower. It’s one of my masterpieces,” she said.

There was no friendly fire in this game, but it *was* possible to kill myself. Though this battle was dependent on the item, mishandling bombs would lead to more damage to my character. My hands trembled as I listened to Rikyu’s explanation. *I’m scared! I know that bombs won’t accidentally explode in the middle of town, but I’m still scared. Maybe it’s just the vibes?* Rikyu continued to explain her bombs with a smile as I stood there shivering.

"Is there anything I should be careful of?" I asked.

"If you're not a safe distance away, you'll kill yourself."

I knew it! I thought.

"Heh heh, I increased the damage taken when you hit yourself."

"Huh? Why'd you do something like that?"

"Because it also increases the range of the item. Besides, doesn't it make things more interesting?"

Ah, she's the type that chooses amusement above all! I'm sorta like that so I do get it, but don't play around with explosives, girl! Even so, it seemed like her bombs were powerful. This was an item created from a famous player's original recipe. I would use these bombs with both the utmost caution and full gratitude.

"Um, how much are these?" I asked.

"60,000 G for four."

What?! That's crazy expensive! I just blew so much money at the auction too! I buried my head in my hands.

"But, if you let me pet your monster, I can give them to you for free," she added.

"Huh? Free?"

"That's right, heh heh."

I was gripped with uncertainty as I heard her chuckles. I wasn't sure if I could allow her to touch my monsters. I was fine adding her to my friend list though, since Sawyer said that she wasn't a bad person, and she was a valuable crafter. *Now that I think about it, she does say some odd stuff, and she dresses funny, but that's it. She hasn't done anything weird, and in terms of suspiciousness, Murakage and Ayakage and Siegfried are equally odd.*

"Okay, that's fine with me," I said.

"Heh heh, you have my gratitude."

After I added her on my friend list, she started to immediately pet Reflet. I

was a little worried, but she didn't do anything bizarre—she just gently petted Reflet's head. After a bit, the woman started to shake my Undine's hand and poked her cheeks a little, but that was all.

In terms of treatment, Amelia and Ashihana were way worse, hugging my monsters and touching them all over. *I'm sorry I judged you based on your appearance, Rikyu.*

"I've only brought Reflet here with me, but if you come to my farm, I've got other monsters there," I said.

"You don't mind me visiting?"

"Go for it."

"Then I definitely will."

"If you want a higher chance of meeting my monsters, you should visit at night." I often took my monsters out adventuring in the daytime.

"Ah, I've gotta go. Heh heh, a pity."

"Thanks for the bombs."

"Likewise... Let's meet again, heh heh." With an odd chuckle, she logged out.

"Guess I'll go back to my farm," I said.

"Hum!"

I was exhausted, but Reflet seemed glad for the attention. I sighed, but she had a huge smile on her face. She seemed to have taken a liking to Rikyu; I supposed my monsters didn't really care about odd personalities in humans.

"Let's hope Rikyu gets to play with you again, huh?"

"Hum!"

"Oh, right. I have to set a Tamed Monster's Orb into my Elementalist's Earrings. Let's head to the weapon shop first."

"Hum hum!"

I later returned to my fields and decided to finish some chores before heading

out to the Fire Elemental Gate. If I had more time, I would have liked to experiment a little with the Otherworldly Cherry Blossom Petals that I received from the Hanami Vandal, but it was more important that I focus on the necessary preparations.

I didn't receive the item needed to challenge the Hanami Vandal to a rematch—the Hanami Vandal's Wrath—today, and I only had four Otherworldly Cherry Blossom Petals. Because I offered the Hanami Vandal the same quality of wine the previous day as well, I surmised that the items I could obtain from it were random.

"I've got my bombs and my potions. Next stop: the field boss in the Southern Forest!" I said. My preparations were complete. I just needed to defeat the boss and march forward.

I brought six monsters with me: Sakura, Rick, Bear Bear, Fau, Reflet, and Drimo. Olto, Olea, and Kettle were to stay at home. I should be able to defeat the field boss with ease, so the monsters I brought with me were mainly for leveling purposes instead of combat.

I could now summon monsters anyways, so if I needed a defensive monster, I'd call for Olto and exchange him for another monster.

"I'm off. Take care of the house while I'm gone!"

"Mm!"

"Trrrr!"

"Pom!"

The stay-at-home trio saluted me, and I saw that Kettle had fit right in with my other monsters, even though he was an NPC. My six on-hand monsters saluted back. They all looked serious, as though they were off to a major battle, but we were only going to kill one of the weakest bosses in the game.

"Olto," I said. "If I ever summon you, it means I'm in a pinch. You might be suddenly thrown out in front of a dangerous enemy. I need you to keep calm, no matter what."

"Mm-mm!"

He had a promising smile on his face. *Looks like he won't panic and freeze up in the heat of the moment*, I thought.

"Mm!"

"Trrrr!"

"Pom-poko!"

As they sent us off with a solemn air, we headed confidently to the Southern fields. We reached the boss and...

"Hmmm."

"Chirp chirp?"

"Aye?"

I sighed as I gazed at the beehive, disintegrating into balls of light. Rick and Fau, who were on my shoulders, cocked their heads to one side and looked at me.

"Sorry, it's nothing." I was so surprised by how easily I had beaten the field boss that all the strength seemed to leave my body. As Rikyu had implied, the monster felt more like a chore than anything.

"I didn't think the three bombs at the start would kill it..."

Though it was a boss battle, I hadn't even once felt threatened at all. Seeing the flames of the bomb come near me was the scariest part. I thought I had thrown it far enough, but the explosion was much larger than I'd anticipated. The beehive was the main target in this boss fight because it summoned swarms of smaller bees to attack. The bees weren't strong, but they were agile, and it was difficult to block their attacks. They could occasionally poison the player, which was hard to cure. In the beginning, before there were any proper guides, players apparently just brought numerous healing items to tank their way through.

Defeating the bees didn't affect the hive, and if a player were to aim for the hive, they would be wide open to an attack from the bees. It was an annoying boss to deal with. However, both the bees and the hive were extremely weak to fire, and attacking the beehive with it would guarantee a Blaze status. Those

afflicted with this status would keep burning and be dealt damage over time. Thus, using fire could defeat the hive rather quickly.

In addition, now that there were guides recommending using area-of-effect attacks to blow up both the bees and the hive, even beginners could easily defeat the boss. It was so easy to defeat that its drops had flooded the market, and were now incredibly cheap despite being boss items.

However, the hive wasn't called the *weakest* boss, because it could still kill the player if they let their guard down. Players could die if they were too close to the explosions, or might be unable to kill the boss if they tried to save their bombs. There were still apparently quite a few players that died to the bees once they went into rage mode and their attacks grew stronger.

"W-Well, I mean, we won, so let's move forward!"

"Growl!"

"Squeak!"

Bear Bear and Drimo marched in front of me, wagging their behinds. I felt like Drimo's tail possessed a different type of cuteness as it was completely different from Bear Bear's. The latter had a plump rear and a short tail which wagged from side to side alluringly, while the former had a large behind and a longer tail. The tail swished prettily. *Huh? What am I talking about again? Oh right, the cuteness of my monsters.*

"Hum!"

"...!"

"Yeah, I'm coming. No need to pull me," I said as Reflet and Sakura each took a hand and guided me forward.

Because the boss battle had ended so easily, it felt more like a picnic than anything, but I knew that the road ahead wouldn't be that easy. Zone Two was the Forest of Horns. There were large bug-type monsters and monsters with high attack stats. The Wimpy Goblins that would suddenly pop out were unfair, as they'd try to launch a surprise attack. True to their name, they were total wimps and even their critical attacks didn't do much, but surprise attacks would stun the player, leaving them wide open for attacks from other monsters. This

was one of the most common ways to die in this forest.

“All right, let’s stay vigilant!”

“Hum!”

“...!”

[Bidding is the Hell That You're Walking Into] Thread for the Auction Part 9

Bragging about items welcome.

Please provide any information for rare items.

186: Rasputin

I didn't think you could use the Painting Tools like that.

I saw the info on the Quick-Eared Cats' page.

187: Riverland

Ugh. I want to punch the me from a few hours ago...

Why wasn't I more careful when using this item?!

188: Rasputin

Hey, it wasn't for nothing, was it?

You sold it for a high price, right?

189: Riverland

But now that I've seen the tanuki...

What have I done?!

AAAAAAGH!

190: Rukkolian

What's going on?

Why're you acting like a main character in a tragedy?

191: Rasputin

We were just talking a little about the Painting Tools.

192: Rukkolian

Gotcha.

So you wanted the yōkai, huh?

193: Riverland

Ugh...

If I didn't get carried away and use all my paint, I may have been able to get the yōkai!

194: Revold

You got a boatload of money though, right?

Just think that you got your money's worth.

195: Riverland

I *did* think that!

Until I saw that tanuki!

The cuteness of that tanuki is priceless!

There's just some things you can't buy with money!

196: Rokuhara

Hey, do any of you have any info on the sapling?

My friend, China, got one, but it came with a disease.

Here's the image. The speckles on the leaves are apparently signs that it's sick.

197: Revold

Oh, I know about that. It apparently comes with

Phytoplasma Disease.

I think I saw on the Quick-Eared Cats' page that there was a method to cure that.

198: Rokuhara

Yeah, but apparently my friend already used up the item required for that method.

You can't use it numerous times.

Anyways, they planted the sapling and it wilted. They said they got wood, though.

199: Revold

Do you think a sapling that can't be grown would be sold? Or is it just wood fodder?

200: Rukkolian

Huh? I've seen a planted Sacred Tree Sapling though.

201: Rokuhara

If you have any Healing Drops saved, you could cure the disease.

Those that succeeded probably just grew the tree normally, right?

202: Rukkolian

Nah, it had the speckles like seen in the image in 196.

I can't give out any names, but it's a certain person's farm.

203: Rokuhara

Seriously? That same person who caused a stir when he

bought the sapling?

What'd he do *this* time?

204: Rasputin

Oh, I get who you guys are talking about.

But I'm not surprised if he found a way to raise the sapling while it was sick.

205: Rukkolian

Silver MVP~

206: Riverland

Silver MVP... Tanuki...!

207: Revold

Okay okay, switching topics.

There's so much more to talk about!

How about the titles? Did you guys get Spending the Day's Earnings by Night?

208: Riverland

...I bet that certain person got it.

The Painting Tools were expensive.

209: Rokuhara

LOLOLOL We can't escape him!

[Assemble, Fans of Silver-Haired] All Things Silver-Haired-Related Part 11

This thread is for people who are interested in Silver-Haired, the famously eccentric pioneer, and his monsters. Feel free to exchange information about them here.

Slander or abuse will not be tolerated.

Please treat sensitive information with care.

This thread may be deleted without warning should we receive a complaint from Silver-Haired himself.

662: Yang Yang

So that tanuki's a yōkai?!

663: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Didn't expect that you could use the secret item, the Painting Tools, like that.

Silver-Haired's amazing.

664: visitorfromanotherplanet

Did he screw up something again?

665: Yodel-Ay-Hee

There's like a ton of new information that the Quick-Eared Cats revealed.

666: Willow

And amongst them was some info on a new yōkai.

It's a tanuki type yōkai called Tea Kettle Tanuki, I

think?

They were selling info regarding how to obtain the tanuki and its abilities.

667: visitorfromanotherplanet

Gotcha.

So that yōkai's on Silver-Haired's farm, isn't it?

668: Yang Yang

Bingo.

A tanuki from a tea kettle appeared on Silver Haired's farm

Players who love cute things were shocked

Everyone flooded the forums to find what that was all about

The Quick-Eared Cats sold info on the Tea Kettle Tanuki

Ahhh, Silver-Haired has done it again. Everyone agrees

The people who love cute things seethe, crying, "Silver-Haired again? No fair!"

669: Yodel-Ay-Hee

And we're seething too, since we actually obtained the key item to get the yōkai, Painting Tools.

670: visitorfromanotherplanet

Oh, you got that?

So, all the retro furniture at the stand that Silver-Haired had was created with those tools.

671: Willow

There was a huge line in front of his farm.

But I didn't think he'd have all this info right after the Hanami event.

Are the Quick-Eared Cats okay? They won't go bankrupt or anything?

672: Yang Yang

They always have a huge line after Silver-Haired visits their stall. They're probably fine.

The line was flooded onto the square. I got Comiket flashbacks.

The Cats even borrowed some other clan members to help, but it took like thirty minutes to buy info.

The submaster wouldn't stop cackling. You could hear her laughing "Nya ha ha!" from a mile away.

673: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Huh?! That's adorable! The submaster's that cat-eared person, right?

Are there any images of her?

674: Yang Yang

She's super strict when it comes to images of herself.

If she ever finds out, she'll come for you asking for the usage fees and gratuity fees. She'll hunt you down and strip you naked.

675: Yodel-Ay-Hee

That's terrifying! But fitting for a submaster.

676: visitorfromanotherplanet

She has her own fan thread too.

With her permission, there's a few images of her posted there.

Of course, reposts are strictly prohibited.

677: Willow

Anyways, Silver-Haired and the Quick-Eared Cats' submaster make a good combo.

Silver-Haired is always up to something, and the Quick-Eared Cat gets dragged in.

That's what it seems like on the outside, but Silver-Haired is actually the heart of her wealth, so she sort of spurs him on to do other things.

678: Yang Yang

I do remember seeing a shipping thread where the Silver-Haired x Cat Ear Submaster was a popular OTP.

679: Yodel-Ay-Hee

I didn't even know that existed.

680: visitorfromanotherplanet

Silver-Haired's super popular there.

Until now, there were a lot of Silver-Haired x Monster ships, but these days, people think that Silver-Haired x Player ships are also viable.

It's usually just a gathering of fujoshi, so there's a lot of passion behind Silver-Haired x Guy ships.

681: Willow

RIP Silver-Haired's purity.

682: visitorfromanotherplanet

Also, Silver-Haired's best pal is his gnome, right?

So naturally, a lot of Silver-Haired x Gnome ships.

From there, it branched out to Silver-Haired x Bear or Silver-Haired x Squirrel, and then morphed into Silver-Haired x Siegfried, *etc.*

683: Willow

Then shouldn't there be Silver-Haired x Tree Nymph or Silver-Haired x Fairy ships too?

I guess Silver-Haired x Water Nymph as of recently.

684: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Silver-Haired x Water Nymph?! I won't forgive him!

685: Yang Yang

^^^ I mean, when female monsters are shipped, people like the above start crawling out of their den.

686: Willow

I see.

687: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Me x Water Nymph is the best ship!

688: visitorfromanotherplanet

I doubt Silver-Haired expected himself to be talked about to this extent behind his back.

689: Yang Yang

That's our Silver-Haired.

690: Willow

Lately, it seems like you just think it wraps everything up nicely if you say that line.

“Get ’em, Sakura!”

“...!”

“Stay back, Reflet!”

“Hum!”

“Good going, Fau!”

“Ayyye aye!”

My monsters, led by my splendid commands, defeated every monster that appeared before us.

“Now!”

“Growl!”

“Good job! Amazing!”

“Squeak squeak!”

“You can do it!”

“Chirp chirp!”

Sorry, I lied about my splendid commands. I felt like I wasn’t even needed here. My monsters knew their roles already, and fulfilled them perfectly. They were so strong that my magic wasn’t necessary either. Reflet was more than enough for healing, and Sakura and Fau could launch powerful ranged attacks. Rick and the others stayed vigilant while on the field, leaving me with nothing to do.

“Well, let’s think about this another way. If I die, everyone else has to retreat anyway, and bosses should always be able to stand back and watch their underlings with confidence.” *This has given me the time to confirm my drops from the field boss I killed earlier anyways*, I thought. There was something that bothered me among my loot.

“I keep double-checking this, but it definitely says I got ‘Royal Jelly.’”

This boss generally dropped honey, not Royal Jelly. The only way to rationalize this was Bear Bear’s Beekeeping (Advanced) ability. Players who had a high-

ranked beekeeping ability would all be of decently high level. There was a chance that most players would have fought the hive well before obtaining the skill. Since I had only obtained one, I guessed that the drop rates were low—even with an advanced beekeeping ability, there was no guarantee that this item would drop. In any case, I was grateful for this super rare item—even Bear Bear couldn't produce too many of these.

I had already requested Ashihana to build me a bee box, but that would take a few more days, so it was great to have something to offer Bear Bear in the meantime.

Meanwhile, my monsters continued obliterating the enemies that appeared. Without much to fight in this area, I really had nothing to do. As I began to question my *raison d'être* as a tamer, my party and I continued through the Forest of Horns. I was able to pick up a few items along the way, but none of the materials were new, and most of them could be purchased in the town.

"Oh, there's the torch."

"Hum!"

"Aye!"

Peeking through the foliage was a torch as big as the trees that surrounded it—the entrance to the Fire Elemental Gate.

"Let's look around here a little."

"Chirp!"

"Squeak!"

My monsters and I explored the area around the huge torch, but we couldn't find anything new. *I wasn't expecting much anyways.*

"Well, we've confirmed the location of the torch, so let's head to the Southern Town."

"...♪"

"Growl!"

I was already well prepared for the field boss in the Forest of Thorns, and I

wanted to register a Teleporting Circle in the Southern Town so that I could easily visit the Fire Elemental Gate next time.

“I have all the information I need for the boss here, and made the necessary preparations. We should be fine.”

“Chirp!”

“Squeak!”

“All right, let’s beat the boss and go to the Southern Town!”

Fifteen minutes later, I found myself eating my words, ashamed of my own hubris.

“Whoa!” I wailed pathetically, dodging the boss’s charging attack by a hair. *Remember when I said I was ready for this boss? I lied!*

“Why is this happening to me?!”

The boss of the Southern Forest was called the Rhinoceros Dragonfly, a monster that resembled a rhinoceros beetle with dragonfly wings. However, once every thirty minutes, a special boss would appear, called the Stag Dragonfly. *I heard rumors about it, but...*

“I didn’t think I’d actually go against it!”

I ran desperately from the creature, which was about the size of an ox, its wings beating fiercely behind me.

“How do I fight this thing?!”

While information about the Rhinoceros Dragonfly’s fighting patterns was readily available, not much was known about the Stag Dragonfly. It was a rare monster, meaning it was difficult to grind out, and it dropped the same items as the Rhinoceros Dragonfly. Few went out of their way to fight it. Some players that loved testing stuff out had been working hard to build a guide against this monster, but they hadn’t yet fully analyzed its patterns. Alyssa had told me that should I encounter the Stag Dragonfly, I should just give up on strategy and tough it out. The forums had told me the same, but had found information about at least some of its attacks. Unfortunately, I had no idea when they

would occur, and equally little clue about how to deal with them.

“Everyone, we’re already in this! Let’s just fight it out!”

“...!”

“Squeak!”

And so ensued our fight, but we were having a surprisingly difficult time of it.

“Chiiirp!”

“Rick, are you okay?!”

“Grooowl!”

“Not you too, Bear Bear!”

The Stag Dragonfly was much more agile than I’d expected, and as it was a beetle-type insect, it had high defense, making physical attacks ineffective. Bear Bear and my other physical attackers acted as shields as Sakura and I attacked with our magic, but the boss was strafing in a zigzag pattern, making it hard to hit.

“Ugh, missed again!”

“...!”

Our spells continued to fly clear past the monster. Before I knew it, we were left wide open, and even if I tried to counter with my magic, I wasn’t powerful enough to stop the incoming tackles. My only hope, Sakura’s Tree Magic (Advanced), also seemed ineffective. It looked like the Stag Dragonfly had some sort of resistance against tree magic. Ideally, I would have liked the front line to parry the boss’s tackle, stopping it in its tracks while Sakura used her Tree Magic (Advanced) to bind the monster: it would be left vulnerable, allowing Drimo and I to rain damage upon it. However, this plan wasn’t going well.

The front liners Drimo and Bear Bear were attackers, not tanks, and their attempts to block the monster’s strikes mostly ended in failure. As the Stag Dragonfly broke through our front line and aimed for us, Sakura and I had to quickly dodge its attacks, forcing us to stop our incantations midway. However, even the spells we did complete largely missed.

Regardless, we were of a high enough level to avoid death. We were well above the recommended level for this map, which was the only thing that gave us a fighting chance.

“We’re still in a pickle here though.”

Should any of us die, particularly Bear Bear or Drimo, our formation would crumble and we would be open to a fatal attack.

“...I should summon Olto.”

I had already planned on doing this, but the boss kept attacking us, making it hard for me to time a summon. I also wasn’t sure whom to swap out for him, but I now realized that Rick was the prime candidate. Rick had taken far too much damage, and my potions, medicinal herbs, and medicine were all on cooldown. It would be much more efficient to exchange him for Olto to stabilize our party, rather than expending any healing magic.

“Rick, thanks for your help buddy! Let’s bring Olto in!”

“Squeak...” he replied, wiping dirt from his face and giving me a thumbs-up.

Has he been picking up some of Drimo’s machismo? I wondered.

“All right, summon Olto! Return Rick!”

The moment I yelled these words, Rick started glowing before instantly disappearing, and Olto appeared in front of me. The summoning was a success.

“Olto, I need you to field the boss’s attacks. Can you do that?”

“Mm!” Olto swiftly saluted before he jumped out to the front. He wasn’t at all confused by the sudden summoning.

He used his hoe to guard against the Stag Dragonfly’s attacks. “Mm-mm-mm!”

A tank monster’s just built different! Oh no, he’s so cool and manly! I thought as I watched Olto stop the Stag Dragonfly in its tracks.

“You’re awesome, Olto! Everyone, let’s launch a counterattack!”

“Mm-mm!”

“...!”

“Growl!”

We all focused on attacking and ten minutes later, it was all over.

“We did it... Good work, Drimo!”

“Squeak squeak!”

With our tank’s help, taking down the monster was suddenly a cinch. Every time the Stag Dragonfly’s attacks were interrupted, it was stunned, which was a perfect opportunity to land some heavy hits. The combination of Drimo’s Tailwind and his powerful attacks managed to shave off a good chunk of the boss’s HP, and I decided not to acknowledge his two earlier fumbles. *A bit shocking to see him use his Dragon Blood Awakening skill and still fumble. I should tell him to not use Thrash while he’s using Dragon Blood Awakening, since that was pretty rough.*

Since I could clearly see Drimo fumbling and tripping, I debated whether I should save the video I took today, though it did contain a rare shot of my monster’s Dragon Mode. I decided to keep it for now.

“All right! We can head to the Southern Town! I’ll first need to register the Teleporting Point.”

“Mm!”

There were a lot of smith-related quests in the town, but none had anything to do with me. I didn’t have any place I particularly wanted to visit either, since it wasn’t much different from the Northern Town. *But since I’m here, might as well look at some stuff, right?* I thought. I decided to ask my monsters.

“Hey, where do you guys want to go?”

Fau replied by strumming her lute on my shoulder. I took it to mean that she didn’t have a place in mind.

“Squeak,” Drimo said, silently crossing his arms in front of him and standing tall. If I were to add my own subtitles, it would be something like, *Heh, you can choose where you like, son.*

“...♪” Sakura smiled as she put her hands together in front of her chest.

Bear Bear, Reflet, and Olto, the tiny trio, were left. Bear Bear was physically

large, but mentally young, I felt; a fitting part of the tiny trio. The three formed a circle and talked to each other.

“Growl?”

“Mm?”

“Hum?”

Bear Bear and Olto seemed to want to head to the center of the town, but Reflet was pointing in a different direction.

“Hum hum! Hum!”

“Growl?”

“Hum.”

“Mm?”

“Hum hum.”

Once again, she pointed to the west, indicating that she wanted to head in that direction. While I was wondering why she seemed so adamant, I received a friend call from Sawyer.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Yuto, how did things go?”

“That’s a vague question. Anyways, I safely arrived at the Southern Town.”

“That’s great to hear. So negotiations with Rikyu went well, I assume?”

I wasn’t sure about “well,” but I felt like things didn’t go too badly. I became friends with her.

“Were you actually able to have a proper conversation with her?” he asked.

Oh, we’re starting from there? I thought.

“Well, yeah, we were able to talk and stuff. She did laugh oddly, going ‘heh heh’ a lot. It was a little off-putting, but she wasn’t a bad person,” I replied.

“Huh? She went ‘heh heh’ from the start?”

“Huh?” *What’s he talking about?*

“Rikyu has really bad social anxiety, so she usually can’t even talk with people she’s barely met. She normally just responds with ‘hee hee hee hee’ laughs.”

“She wasn’t that bad with me.” *We were able to converse pretty well. In fact, I thought she was able to converse rather normally. This seems like a shock to Sawyer, though. I can’t see his face, but he sounds pretty surprised.*

“I-I see. That’s amazing!” he said.

“What do you mean by, ‘She went “heh heh” from the start?’”

“When she gets used to you, her laughs change from ‘hee hee’ to ‘heh heh,’ is all.”

What kinda biology is that? Is she a wild animal or something? Sawyer sounded dead serious, so I guessed that she really did change her laughs based on how much she trusted a person. I had him provide some more details on Rikyu’s inner workings.

There were apparently a few steps to notice her change in friendliness. Towards a complete stranger, she would laugh ‘hee hee,’ wear glasses, and keep her head down. Her laughter then changed to ‘heh heh’ when you got to know her, and when you were finally good friends with her, she took off her glasses as well.

“I was on her final stage of friendliness from the start,” I said.

“She was probably super excited to meet your monsters.”

I see. So if I didn’t have Reflet with me, I would’ve been stuck in ‘hee hee’ hell? Thank goodness I brought her along! If Rikyu did nothing but laugh at me, I would’ve left within five minutes.

“I’m glad you were able to get to the Southern Town,” he said.

“It’s all thanks to you. You introduced me to Rikyu.”

“No problem. I’m always indebted to you, anyways.”

I didn’t remember putting Sawyer in my debt, but I guessed we had a give-and-take relationship. After our call ended, it seemed like my monsters had finished their discussion as well. Reflet’s opinion had won everyone over.

“Hum hum,” she said, walking ahead of us.

“What’s over there?”

“Hum!”

Reflet seemed to be making some sort of gesture, but I couldn’t understand her at all. She outstretched both her arms to her sides and started making wavelike motions. I could only see an odd dance or a pantomime of a heartbeat monitor, an electrocardiogram.

“Hum hum!”

“Got it, got it. You don’t have to do that anymore.”

“Hum!”

I felt like I’d get the idea once I’d arrived. After a few minutes of following an excited Reflet, we reached a small riverbank on the edges of the Southern Town. I realized that she wanted to go to an area with water, and her weird dance was her attempt at mimicking the current. It was already night, but lights were set up around town, lighting up the entire area.

“Hum!”

“Mm!”

“Growl!”

With Reflet leading the way, my monsters jumped into a shallow area of the river and started to play. Most splashed their hands in the river playfully, while Sakura and Fau rested on the banks and kicked at the water with their legs.

“...♪”

Fau was softly playing the lute. The melody was calming and beautiful, resembling her healing music. The sky was twinkling with stars, and the beautiful lights illuminated the river. Moments like these were soothing, a good chance for us all to take a breather. *We’ve got a nice atmosphere here.* However, my moment of relaxation wouldn’t last for long, as I felt something cold splash onto me.

“Mm-mm!”

“Whoa!”

“Hum!”

“Growl growl!”

“Did you guys just splash me? Here’s payback!”

“Hum hum!”

“Take this!”

“Growl!”

As a water fight ensued, our splashes grew bigger and bigger, and we played until we were soaking wet. I was having so much fun that I continued to splash around with my monsters until it was time to head back to the torch. *Why is this so fun? I feel like I’m a kid again! I was a bit scared when Bear Bear jumped into the river and I saw Fau being carried away by the current though.*

“Aye! Aye!”

“Growl growl...”

I had seen Bear Bear prostrate numerous times, but I’d never seen Fau wear a reproachful look before.

Chapter Six: Open, Fire Elemental Gate

Around ten minutes before midnight, we arrived in front of the large torch once more.

“Ugh, it’s super crowded,” I said.

“Mm,” Olto replied, staring wide-eyed at the crowd.

I guessed this was due to the number of attribute crystals purchased at the auction. Many players were gathered in front of the gate, waiting for the day to change over.

“I guess we’re all thinking the same thing.”

“Mm.”

More than fifty players had gathered and at least ten people were lined up behind the torch. The other players had divided into groups around the touch, and were chatting or relaxing.

What’s going on? Why isn’t everyone lined up? I thought, and decided to ask the last person in line.

The last person was a male player, wearing heavy armor made from the materials dropped by the Stone Talus. He seemed like a stereotypical Heavy Fighter. I noticed that he carried a hoe on his back and wondered if he was a farmer. *His face through his stone helmet looks familiar, but I can’t quite remember. Am I just imagining things?* I thought.

His stony armor gave him an air of intensity. I mustered up my courage and spoke to him.

“Excuse me, is this line for the Elemental Gate?” I asked.

“Huh? That’s right— Oh, if it isn’t Silver-Haired!” a kind voice replied, putting me at ease. He turned around and looked at me with surprise.

*Wait, so he **is** an acquaintance of mine? Or does he just recognize me as Silver-Haired by my appearance or something?*

“I wanted to thank you for the picnic,” he said, proving my latter theory wrong.

“Oh, you were there?”

“Yep. We only spoke briefly during the event, but I’m the farmer Tsugarun. Pleased to meet you.”

He was apparently one of the farmers that joined the picnic along with Tagosack. I met a lot of new players that day, so truthfully speaking, I didn’t clearly remember most of them. He was apparently wearing cloth gear for farming, so he couldn’t blame me for not remembering his face. *He can’t blame me. He’s not mad, right?*

I cautiously peeked at his expression and saw that he was smiling. He apparently didn’t expect to be remembered by one brief meeting either, and I was glad that he seemed to be a normal person.

“What’s this line all about? And why are some not even lined up?” I said.

“Oh, well, you see...” he started to kindly explain.

What a good guy.

This line was apparently for party leaders waiting to go inside the gate. It didn’t make sense for the entire party to be lined up—that would be complete chaos. This was decided by the players who had seen the long line and fuss, and I felt like it was a good method to keep things orderly. Once their turn had arrived, the leader would call out to all the players in their party and enter the gate. While Tsugarun explained the process to me, the date rolled over.

“Oh, seems like it’s started,” he noted.

As he had said, a bright pillar of light shone in front us, signaling that the Elemental Gate had been unlocked.

“I’ll line up here, so you guys can do as you like,” I offered. I was actually not alone, and this wasn’t referring to my monsters. I only had Olto with me for now.

“Are you sure, Silver-Haired?” came a reply.

“We can line up, you know?”

“It’s fine. I called for you guys anyways,” I said.

“I feel bad.”

“Now now. Since Silver-Haired says it’s fine, we should just leave it to him.”

“I just saw a friend, so I’m gonna go say hi to them, meow!”

Once again I had formed a party with the players I helped at the Earth Elemental Gate: Amelia, Ursula, Ivan, and Eulenspiegel, along with Eulen’s friend, MorningStarMeow, a fellow tamer. MorningStarMeow was a young man that had a curious role-play habit of adding “meow” to the ends of his sentences. He was one of the few who had succeeded in taming the Tree Nymph. I wanted to see his monster, but due to party member limits, he hadn’t brought it along. *I hope I can meet that nymph one day*, I thought.

I had unlocked the Water and Earth Elemental Gates by myself, but attribute crystals were expensive, and it felt like a waste to go alone. I’d decided to gather a few people beforehand, reaching out first to Amelia. She accepted my invitation and told me that she’d gather the rest of the party. I let her do as she pleased, and she gathered the rest of her tamer friends.

Each of the party members paid me 30,000 G for the attribute crystal. I had only reached out to them because I thought it’d be a waste to go alone, but when I tried to decline the payment, they weren’t having any of it. As such, I decided to accept their money. In truth, 30,000 G was actually a bit too cheap, but since they were my friends, I didn’t mind.

“All right, we’ll wait over there then. Let’s go, Olto,” Amelia said.

“Mm-mm!”

“Hey, no fair, Amelia!” Ursula wailed.

Olto was as popular as ever, other female players gazing at him enviously as Amelia and Ursula fawned over him. Eulen and the rest were busy chatting with their friends, so I decided to spend some time talking with Tsugarun.

“So you’re looking for an apple, then?” I asked.

“Yep. I hoped it would be there at the auction, but it wasn’t in the catalog.”

His goal was to apparently make an apple orchard and produce the best

apples ever. When I asked his reason for doing so, he stated that apples were his absolute favorite food, but he was allergic to them in real life. I'd heard of tamers who chose the class because they were allergic to cats in real life and wanted to pet them in-game to their hearts content, and I felt like many people started this game for similar reasons. LJO was extremely realistic and immersive, making it hard to tell the experiences apart from reality.

"Please let me know if you find an Apple Tree Sapling," he said.

"Of course. You'll be the first person I contact."

Time flew by while I talked with Tsugarun. Players needed only to offer the attribute crystal and enter the gates anyways, so the process was fast. In the beginning, players were moved by the visual effects of unlocking the Elemental Gate, but on the fourth or fifth viewing, it was difficult to have much of a reaction, so the line moved along smoothly. Even the most beautiful view would get boring once you'd seen it enough times. When Tsugarun's turn was nearly up, his other party members gathered around him.

"Hey, it's Silver-Haired."

"Heyo."

His party members looked familiar, and they were probably farmers. What's more, they were all on my friend list, meaning they probably participated in the flower-viewing picnic. *I'll probably meet more people like this in the future, where I don't quite remember them, but they're apparently on my friend list.* Truthfully speaking, I already didn't quite recognize half of my friends.

It was now my turn to pass through the gates.

"All right, let's go in," I said.

"Okay!" Amelia said, calling the rest of my party members.

I offered the Fire Crystal to the giant torch as instructed by the announcement. The Fire Elemental Gate looked like a large pillar of fire. Normally, it would be terrifying to pass through the flames, but I'd seen dozens of people enter before me, and I walked through without a moment of hesitation. It was so mundane I honestly felt a little disappointed.

However, I saw that Amelia wasn't following close behind. While I was used to watching people pass through the flames, she seemed to be hesitant. After I bit, I saw Amelia and Ursula pass through the gates, being pulled forward by Olto.

"Oh, that was scary!"

"Me too! Thank you for helping us, Olto."

"Mm!"

Their voices were completely monotone. *Oh, they weren't scared at all. You guys just wanted Olto to hold your hands, didn't you?!*

"Olto, come over here," I said.

"Mm-mm!"

"Hey, Olto!"

"Wait up!"

The other guys soon passed through the gates, and as we met up, a being suddenly came into view. It most likely appeared after confirming that our entire party had entered the area.

"Welcome, liberators," the Salamander Chief greeted us.

So the residents of the Fire Elemental Gate are Salamanders after all. The chief appeared to be male, and had a traditional Eastern look, wearing a tight-fitting kung-fu top and a baggy set of kung-fu pants. He had red eyes, red hair, and copper skin. Standing around 150 centimeters tall with an innocent face, he looked more like a young boy, but he had the calmness of an old man, which gave him a mysterious air. I tried to organize some information in my head. So Salamanders are males and Undines are females. What are gnomes? They do look kinda androgynous, but if I had to choose, I think they're young boys. Are Wind Nymphs young girls then? I'm a bit excited to find out.

When we got to the Fire Elementals' town, I found that it had a different type of beauty from the Water and Earth Elementals' towns. The one thing they all had in common was how fantastical they looked. These were all views that couldn't be found in real life.

"Whoa," I murmured.

“Mm...” Olto said, his mouth agape in awe as he stood next to me, staring up at the breathtaking sight as well.

The Fire Elementals’ town was bright.

“Is this entire thing made from glass? No, that part over there isn’t...”

The entire town was built of glass and porcelain tiles in all colors and sizes, from frosted glass to opaque glass to crystal. The path to the town was long, the town itself far from the Elemental Gate. The vibrant glass-and-tile houses were lined up in a row within a large, mortar-shaped space. A pale light shone from above, as though the sky itself was covered in a sheet of opaque glass.

The ground was carefully leveled and lined with more tile and glass, arranged into a colorful mosaiclike pattern. I was a little worried about even setting foot into such a beautiful town, but other players were walking inside normally, and I didn’t have time to hesitate at the entrance. I knew that objects within the town couldn’t be destroyed, so there was nothing for me to worry about.

The streetlights were tall, cylindrical, transparent glass structures, which illuminated their surroundings in a pale blue light. The entire town was flashy, but not gaudy. There was almost a whimsical playfulness to it, like a town of toys. Just gazing upon it made me excited. I wanted to take my time here, but I knew that we had more pressing issues.

“Let’s go back,” Ivan said.

“You’re right,” I replied, returning to the Fire Elemental Gate with Olto.

My party and I had agreed beforehand to return to the Southern Town after the gate was open, as everyone needed to return with their own monsters. Amelia and Ursula looked obviously sad, but I steeled myself and dragged them out with us. I could’ve just removed them from my party, but I felt it would have made the return to the Southern Town more dangerous for them. Though they were high level, Tamers were a weak class, and I couldn’t guarantee the duo’s safety in Zone Two.

“We’ll return as soon as we can!”

“I’ll be back.”

“All right, all right, let’s go,” I said.

“Awww, you’re so pushy, Silver-Haired!”

An hour later, I returned to the Fire Elemental Gate with my monsters in tow.

“Chirp!”

“Aye!”

Even my monsters seemed entranced by the beauty of the Fire Elementals’ town. Rick and Fau were on either side of my shoulders, wearing the same expression that Olto had earlier.

“Hum...”

“Growl...”

“Squeak...”

Reflet, Bear Bear, and Drimo were next to me, all staring at the town of glass. The glittering lights seemed too dazzling for Drimo, who didn’t seem to be a huge fan of bright things.

It had been a bit of a struggle to choose my party members this time. The only three I had decided on from the start were Fau and Drimo (for leveling purposes), and the Undine Reflet, who had the advantage against fire-attribute monsters. I was most torn about whether to bring Sakura. She could fight on the front lines or support from the back, and she could even assist others with her attacks. She was the most reliable monster I had, but since we would be up against the Fire Elemental trial, that implied that there would be numerous fire-attribute monsters. Since Sakura was a plant-attribute monster, she was especially weak to fire.

Until now, there weren’t many enemies that used fire-attribute attacks, so I usually kept her in the party, but I knew things would be different at the Fire Elemental trial. After much deliberation, I decided to leave her behind this time. I wanted to bring her here once I was more used to this trial, since I was curious to see how effective her attacks were against fire-attribute monsters.

“All right, let’s tour the town first,” I said.

“Mm!”

As we toured the Fire Elementals’ town, we saw a few residents that were shorter than the Salamander Chief. I guessed that those were the pre-evolved Salamanders, and they indeed had the body type of a young boy.

Gnomes varied little with their facial structures and hairstyles, but Salamanders seemed to differ greatly from person to person. From cool-looking types to cutesy young boy types, there was a wide variety of males to choose from, and I felt like they would be popular amongst the female Tamers. *Even if you can’t tame them, with their looks I bet they’d be popular with female players in general.*

“Should we visit some stores?”

“Mm!”

We first set foot in a weaponry shop, but I found nothing to my liking. The gear pieces on offer were powerful but heavy, and I couldn’t equip them. However, I had expected as much, and I was more curious about materials and tools. I visited the general store next, hoping to find some seeds for my farm, but I found nothing new. The item exclusive to this town was the Firestarter Plant, a variation of the Medicinal Herb, which I’d already obtained before.

The next store I visited had some interesting items. Various glass objects and ceramics were on sale, from glasses and glass pendants to earrings to cups and cutlery.

“Wind chimes, huh. Nice and elegant.”

I knew I couldn’t use them in my barn, but I felt it would be a nice addition when I one day obtained a home.

“Tableware’s nice too...”

I gazed at the colorful glass items, the vibrant porcelain items, and the dark-colored pottery. Just looking at them got me excited, and I was tempted to buy everything.

“But I just blew so much money on the auction.”

I needed to save some money, so I chose my purchases carefully. I bought six

transparent glass cups, six porcelain teacups and saucers, and six dark brown Japanese teacups made from pottery. *I'm sure this will make teatime more fun for my monsters. These are all cheap, so it should be fine,* I thought.

"The pharmacy's next," I said, stepping into the next store. "Huh, this seems useful."

I found a Heat Resistance Potion (Weather), a medicine that would grant me resistance against hot environments. The first place that came to mind, of course, was the Fire Elemental trial. I was certain that powerful flames would appear in the dungeon, so it seemed like this might come in handy. I wanted to test things out in the dungeon anyways.

"Guess I'll buy three of these for now. All right, let's keep browsing!"

"Mm-mm!"

"Next up is our favorite place to shop."

We entered a household object store. One of these existed in every Elemental Town, and each had their unique atmosphere. *Every time we run into one of these I can't help but think how much fun they are.*

The store had a stylish glass greenhouse that could be installed on my farm. I was tempted by the heated tables and heated floors, which were probably rare items, but I didn't have the space for them.

"The other household objects are for smiths or glassblowers," I said, browsing a list filled with furnaces and kilns.

I wasn't surprised to see an extensive variety of such items in the Fire Elementals' town. There were also stone ovens for cooking, but I didn't have space to add these to my home. My farm only allowed me to place objects used for farming or producing materials.

"I guess I'll just buy the greenhouse for now."

I continued to walk around town, and ended up in the Central Square.

"Wow, it's so colorful here too."

In the square was a large, cylindrical glass object around twenty meters tall, fitted with various colorful glass. Like the streetlights, a bright fire flicked within,

lighting up its surroundings in a rainbow glow. Reflet and Fau looked up at the huge stained glass pillar, their faces filled with wonder.

“Hum...”

“Aye-aye...”

“We’ve walked around for quite a bit, so let’s take a break here,” I said.

“Hum!”

“Aye-aye!”

While the guys, including myself, sat down on a bench and started sipping on some juice, Reflet and the other female monsters took off towards the stained glass object. They apparently wanted to see it up close. Since they were humanoid in appearance, they seemed to be more moved by the glittering sight than we were. *LJO has some pretty realistic AI settings.*

“Are you guys fine staying here?”

“Chirp?”

“Well, I’m fine if you are.”

Bear Bear and Drimo seemed to be enjoying the beauty of the square, but Rick didn’t seem to be interested at all. After stuffing his cheeks with some tree nuts, he used his tail as a pillow and went to sleep.

“Dumplings over flowers, huh,” I murmured, but I felt these actions were true to his character.

After touring the town, we headed for the Fire Elemental trial.

“Everyone, this is our first time entering this dungeon. It’s time to get pumped, but remember to stay vigilant and careful!”

“Mm!”

The first thing that I noticed as we marched forward into the trial was what a pain it was to navigate. The dungeon was a cave around three meters high, but true to its motif, the walls, from the entrance to the deepest room, were enveloped in flames. Parts of the floor were red and glowing as well.

“If I touch that red floor or the walls at all, I’d definitely end up taking some

damage, right?" I asked aloud.

"Chirp," Rick replied in agreement as he narrowed his eyes and gazed at the floor. He tried to get close, but was scared by the heat and rushed back to me.

"All right, let's start by checking on the floors."

"Growl?"

"What am I gonna do, you ask? Well, I've gotta touch it directly, don't I?"

"G-Growl?!"

Bear Bear looked surprised and growled, as though they were saying, "F-For real? Huh? You're touching *that* thing?" I was always pleased to see their great reactions.

"Bear Bear. Sometimes, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."

"Growl..."

"Just watch."

"G-Growl!"

With Bear Bear cheering me on behind me, I headed towards the glowing red floor. *Just a little step.*

"Slowly does it... Hot!"

I didn't feel any pain, but the moment I stepped on the red floor, I felt a tingling sensation on the bottom of my foot. It was a similar feeling to putting my fingers too close to a stove and losing sensation in my fingertips.

"Received one point of damage, I guess. I should stay on it for a bit longer. I'll try touching it with my hands next."

I bent down and touched the red floor. This time I stayed calm, laying my palm flat onto the floor for around five seconds. A small trail of smoke started to appear; I was impressed by the detail of the effects.

"Hum hum!"

"Aye-aye!"

"Oh, my bad. I didn't mean to surprise you. I'm fine."

My younger monsters looked at my hands with worry. I suppose that probably did look a bit extreme to them. I took my hand away and noticed my palm was glowing red. I assumed this was the visual effect for taking damage from the heat, but the glow faded quickly, and didn't seem to inflict the Blaze status effect. Reflet and Fau, still apparently worried, blew air on my hand.

"Thanks, guys. I'm fine now."

"Hum?"

"Aye?"

"Yup, it's not hot anymore."

I took five points of damage that time—one point per second. I tried different methods of touching the floor, but I seemed to take damage regardless. Whether I touched the floor with my bare hands or stepped on it with my shoes, I was dealt a set damage of one point per second. I most likely needed gear that would decrease damage taken.

"Well, I'm glad it doesn't give me Blaze though."

It would've been tedious to cure this status effect over and over again, and though pouring water over the area would cure Blaze, I only had Purified Water and a bit of Well Water on me. Water from the well was free, but I was hesitant about using Purified Water.

"Hum."

"Hm? What's wrong?"

Reflet couldn't help but worry about my hand after all my experimentation. She furrowed her brows, covered my hand in hers, and started rubbing my palm gently.

"Hum hum."

"Thank you. But I'm really fine."

"Hum!" she replied, as though she was saying, "No!" to me. She put her left hand on her waist, pointed her right index finger at me, and puffed out her cheeks.

I like how she's slightly bending her waist and gently leaning forward. Yep, she's cute. That's all I've got for her. She's angry with me though, so I should apologize.

"Sorry. I'm sorry. Don't be so angry," I said.

"Hum."

"But I needed to experiment a little. I still haven't tested the walls covered with flames yet."

"Hum hum!"

"Don't get so angry. In fact, if things go awry, I'm relying on your water. Okay?"

"Hum," Reflet said, shaking her head. She seemed to have given up on stopping me.

Since she gave me her permission, I decided to test it out.

"I'm a little scared, but I've got to experiment," I said, slowly reaching out to the burning wall. It was realistic and gave off an air of intensity.

"Chirp chirp!"

"Squeak!"

"Growl growl!"

Rick and the others were behind me, cheering me on as Fau played a valiant song to hype me up.

"Ragh! What's a man without courage?! Aaaaah!" I yelled, reaching for the walls. "Hot! It's hotter than the floors! And the flame won't go out!"

Just touching the walls would apparently inflict the player with Blaze, and I was scared as I stared at my hand, covered in flames.

"Hum!"

"Whoa!"

Reflet immediately poured water over my hand as I panicked, putting the fire out. *Yep, a cute and excellent tamed monster is a great thing to have.*

“Y-You saved me, Reflet.”

“Hum!”

This dungeon was becoming more difficult than I’d thought. I would need to constantly have a supply of water available since relying on Reflet all the time would drain her MP.

“Five points of damage... I think touching the fire was three points, and the rest were from Blaze.”

I needed to focus more on navigating my environment than on monster battles. If I were to get damaged from my surroundings or be inflicted with Blaze during combat, I would be in big trouble. I was looking forward to using the item I purchased at the pharmacy.

“I’ll use the Heat Resistance Potion (Weather).”

The usefulness of this item depended greatly on the degree of heat I could tolerate. I needed to know if the medicine allowed me to stay cool in hot places, or decreased damage taken from hot attacks. Currently, my surroundings weren’t too hot. Of course, since I was surrounded by fire, it was a little warmer than normal, but the heat could easily be ignored. Thus, I felt like this item was used to shield the user from terrain damage. Since it was sold in the Fire Elemental Town, I assumed it would aid us in traversing this dungeon.

I gulped down the potion in one go. It had a refreshing taste, like ramune, the sort of thing that would be the perfect beverage for a hot day. I saw that I received a heat resistance buff.

“How are they even emulating this taste? Are there any secrets hidden within the creation of this potion?”

I couldn’t help but be curious. *Ramune, right? This is soda, isn’t it? If I could create this, could I also make different fruity flavors of ramune?*

“Right, I should test it out before the effects wear off. I’ll try the red floor first.”

“Mm.”

I headed for the ground, and Olto and my other monsters held their breath. I

could feel their stares on me, making me nervous as well, even though there was no reason to take this so seriously.

“Hm...looks like I’m okay.”

I stood on the red floor for around ten seconds, but I didn’t take any damage. The medicine had done its trick. I then reached for the fiery walls.

“The damage decreased, but I still got still inflicted with Blaze. W-Water!”

I hastily took out Well Water from my inventory and splashed it onto my hand. At once, the flames were extinguished. *Whew, I’m still not used to fire.*

“I haven’t taken much damage though.”

I only took one point of damage from touching the flames, but I still received the same amount of damage from Blaze.

“This is great! It’ll help us beat this dungeon! Raise your hand if you can drink this potion!”

I was followed with complete silence, not a single reaction from my monsters. *Pity. Guess I need to keep a careful eye on their HP. This dungeon is making me more nervous than ever.*

“Okay, experiment time is over. Let’s go on ahead.” I stopped. “Wait, based on the pattern so far, there should be a secret room hidden in the first room.”

Both the Water and Earth Elemental trials had a secret room with a treasure chest which contained a necklace. I felt like there was a good chance that some sort of room and treasure chest would be hidden somewhere in the initial area.

“Olto, did you find anything?”

“Mm?”

“No? How about you, Rick?”

“Squeak squeak?”

Both Olto, who was knowledgeable about caves, and Rick, who was good at searching for items, turned up nothing. If Olto hadn’t noticed anything, there was no use digging through dirt in hopes of finding hidden treasure.

“Hmmm, so maybe it’s beyond the flaming walls.” A fiery veil had surrounded

the room, and there was a possibility that the flames hid a secret passageway.

“All right, then.”

I picked up a rock by my feet and threw it into the fire. Behind the flames was a wall, and with a clatter, the rock bounced off. I decided to continue this process until I hopefully found a hidden passageway. My monsters, watching me carefully, seemed to have understood my plan, and pitched in to help. Only Fau remained on my shoulder without throwing rocks as she continued to cheer us on.

Rick picked up a large rock around the size of a softball with both his arms. He spun around like a discus thrower and aimed for the walls. I guessed it was thanks to his Throwing skill. He looked pretty cool.

I was grateful for their help, but since they were all throwing rocks, I couldn't tell which sound belonged to which thrower. I tried to think of a plan, but Fau, apparently sensitive to changes in sound, immediately picked up on any changes that sounded odd, and gently slapped my cheek.

“Aye aye!” she said, pointing in a certain direction.

“Are you saying that there isn't a wall over there?”

“Aye!”

“Growl!” Bear Bear said, throwing a rock in that direction.

I didn't hear the rock bounce back as it disappeared beyond the flames. *There must be a passageway behind that patch of fire*, I thought.

“All right! Good job, Fau!”

“Aye!”

“Growl growl!”

“You did well too, Bear Bear! Nice!”

“Growl growl!”

Now that I've found the hidden passageway...

“How do I get past the flames?”

The fastest way was to simply run through the fire. I would take some damage, but it wasn't deadly, and I could use my water to cure my Blaze status.

"But it decreases the durability of my gear, and I don't want to take any unnecessary damage."

After thinking for a moment, I decided to see if I could put out the flames with my water magic. I used Aqua Create to create a fresh supply of water and poured it on the fire.

"Oh, it looks like the flames are dying out! Reflet, let's continue to throw some water on that area!"

"Hum!"

Together with Reflet, I proceeded to pour water over the fire a few more times. The flames started to die out until we were left with a portion of the wall completely extinguished. As I'd guessed, there was a small room beyond the flames.

"Okay, let's go."

"Hum!"

I went into the small room with Reflet and found a single red treasure chest sitting there. My Trap Detection skill didn't react, and as I'd expected, the chest contained a necklace that would aid us in the dungeon.

Name: Extinguishing Necklace

Rarity: 3 *Quality*: ☆9 Durability: 200

Effect: Defense +4, slightly increases rate of healing from Blaze

Weight: 1

This was a good item, but it didn't feel that useful to me. Reflet and I could use water magic, and since I put an emphasis on production, I had more water available than other parties. I decided to equip the necklace just in case. Feeling a little disappointed, I left the room, when I suddenly heard a loud *fwoom*

sound behind me.

“Whoa!” I yelped.

“Hum!”

Reflet had followed closely behind me, and we turned to see that the wall of fire had suddenly reappeared without warning. Had we been a few seconds late, we would surely have been surrounded by flames. The game wouldn't allow us to be burned to death, but I was positive that something terrifying would've occurred nonetheless.

“I guess those flames reignite in three minutes or so. We should be careful. That was close.”

“Hum!” Reflet mimicked my actions, wiping sweat from her brow.

Because of the characteristics of her species, she would only take half damage, so even if she was enveloped in fire, it would be more startling than anything. She seemed to be enjoying the thrill though, so I was fine with that too.

“Let's move on!”

“Hum!”

With Olto leading the way, we entered the next room. I thought about placing Reflet in the front, but she was more important for fighting and absorbing enemy damage, rather than fielding the terrain, I just went with my usual formation.

“No traps in the passageway.” The walls and the occasional sections of red floor felt like traps enough to me anyway.

“Okay and the next room is...empty.”

I peeked into the round room from the passageway. In the center was a hole, around a meter wide, with flames roaring out of it. It wasn't a pillar of fire, but it was certainly larger than a bonfire. No enemy monsters in sight. However, my Presence Detection signaled that monsters were nearby, and I guessed that they were hiding within the fire. Not being able to identify the monsters beforehand made me a bit nervous.

“But there’s no use hesitating now, so I guess I’ll just go for it.”

“Mm!” Olto said, raising his hoe. He seemed eager.

“I’m glad I can always count on you, Olto. I’ll leave the front to you, okay?”

“Mm-mm!”

“Squeak!”

“Growl!”

My three front liners dashed into the room. They glanced around, staying wary of their surroundings. Suddenly, something popped out of the flames.

“Something appeared! Wait, is that a bird?”

A small bird around the size of the palm of my hand appeared. It was surrounded by flames instead of feathers, but it was clearly a weak enemy. The monster was called a Fire Lark—a fire-attribute monster, presumably.

“Only one? Let’s see if I can tame it...”

I couldn’t. Just like with the Pond Turtle from the Water Elemental trial and the Stone Snake from the Earth Elemental trial, the Fire Lark was only available to summoners.

“I guess I’ll just defeat it then. Everyone, let’s first try attacking without using water magic.”

I could probably clear the room in one blow if I used water magic, since there was only one of it, but I wanted to save my magic for later enemies, and to test out if we could fight without water.

I found out that this little bird wasn’t as weak as it looked. First, it was extremely quick. Second, it was flying. The combination of the two made it difficult to land our attacks, and if the Fire Lark was in the air, we had to jump to hit it, making it an annoying and tedious foe. Its attacks were also a pain to deal with. It had two types of attacks: pecking with its beak, and Fire Sparks. Its beak wasn’t too big of a deal; though it was difficult to dodge, it didn’t do much damage. It would be bad if I took that attack, but Olto and Bear Bear could easily tank the hits. Fire Sparks was more annoying—it wasn’t a powerful attack either, but there was a chance that it’d apply the Blaze status effect.

“Growl growl growl!” my monster cried, flailing, their body enveloped in fire.

“C-C-Calm down, Bear Bear! A-A-A-Aqua Create!” I stammered in a panic, managing to extinguish the flames with my water magic.



“G-Growl...”

Based on appearance, Bear Bear seems like they'd be extra flammable. Not that they'd take any more damage than I would, though. Phew, that scared me.

“Squeak squeak!”

“Your head's on fire, Drimo!”

“Squeak!”

“E-Everyone! We gotta defeat that bird quickly!”

“Growl growl!”

“Chirp chirp!”

Bear Bear managed to land a critical hit on the Fire Lark with a jumping attack, and it plunged towards the ground. We proceeded to strike the agile bird while it was down, finally defeating it. *We struggled so hard against this one little monster...*

“Next time, we should prioritize defeating the bird with water magic.”

The bird would become an even bigger nuisance should I get into a battle with more powerful monsters. Blaze would also break the concentration of my monsters, and seeing them on fire wouldn't do wonders for my mental state either. We proceeded down the passage, remaining vigilant, until we arrived at the next room. As I'd expected, or as I'd hoped, there were monsters awaiting my arrival.

“Deranged Fire Elemental, huh?”

The monster shrieked. Like the Deranged Elementals I'd faced before, it resembled a Salamander, but had a terrifying face. On its thin, haggard-looking face were three holes, the sort seen on bowling balls. It had no nose, and its eyes and mouth were replaced with the terrifying dark spots. *It has no eyeballs, but I feel like it's glaring at me. Is it because I'm scared?* I wondered.

“I-I can never get used to how creepy these look,” I muttered.

I couldn't imagine it turning into a cute nymph either.

“Well, it's not like it's unique, so I guess we can just fight it.”

Luckily, there were no other enemies, and it felt like a perfect opportunity to experiment with a few things. Fighting the creature revealed that it was surprisingly easy to deal with. First, the Deranged Fire Elemental attacked using fire magic or close-combat moves, but Reflet's and my Aqua Shield basically nullified all the magic damage. We weren't able to completely negate its attacks, but we managed to block a good chunk of the damage, and the spell also had the effect of blocking the Blaze status effect, protecting my front line from burning up. This was a huge find, and utilizing this spell correctly would make beating this dungeon much easier.

When it came to close-combat moves, Olto was able to almost completely block the Deranged Fire Elemental. It was slower than the Fire Lark and much larger in size, allowing Bear Bear and Drimo's attacks to make contact. I had Fau use her Fire Summoning against the monster, but it did almost no damage. It was able to stop the enemy for a short while, but since that was it, it was best she save her MP for Musical Performance.

"We can fight against the Deranged Fire Elemental with you here, Olto."

"Mm!" he replied, inspiring confidence as he flexed his arm muscles.

"I'm counting on you to prioritize your Aqua Shield, okay, Reflet?"

"Hum!"

We proceeded to the next room as I praised everyone for their good work. There we found two Deranged Fire Elementals and a new monster. *Wow, talk about a difficulty spike.*

"It just looks like a boulder, but it's apparently called a Wandering Rock."

It was a gray ball of stone about the size of a balancing ball. Upon closer inspection, it seemed to be glaring at me through a face resembling a namahage demon. Judging by its size and color, I was terrified it might just self-destruct.

"Olto, stay wary of the Wandering Rock. Bear Bear and Drimo, prioritize defeating the Deranged Fire Elementals. Rick, try to catch the Wandering Rock's attention."

"Growl!"

“Squeak!”

“Chirp!”

“Fau, use Musical Performance and focus on raising defense! Reflet, use Aqua Shield on Drimo and the others!”

“Aye!”

“Hum!”

I wasn't sure whether the boulder was truly willing to self-destruct, but since I'd never seen the monster before, I wanted to see its moves. I decided to trust Olto's defensive capabilities, focusing instead on using my water magic. I wanted to focus on the Fire Elementals first before attacking the rock.

The Wandering Rock attacked by rolling and charging forward. The attacks were intense, but Olto was able to block them safely.

“All right, I'm leaving the Wandering Rock to you, Olto! We'll get these Fire Elementals out of the way!”

But I spoke too soon.

“Roll!” the monster cried.

“Mm?”

Olto was blown backwards, apparently having sustained a critical hit. He had resistance against Blow Away, but still flew back to the wall of the room. In normal dungeons, I would just need to wait a moment for Olto to return, but that wasn't the case here.

“Mm-mm!”

“Olto! I'll put that fire out right now!”

I had prioritized Bear Bear and Drimo for this fight, so Olto hadn't received an Aqua Shield, and ended up afflicted with Blaze when he collided with the wall. Olto, in a panic, ran towards me, and I immediately poured some water over him. *So this enemy makes use of the dungeon's gimmicks!*

“M-Mm...”

“Phew, that scared me!”

I couldn't get used to the sight of my monsters on fire. While Olto and I were occupied, the Wandering Rock launched another attack. Rick, who had just finished an attack, was temporarily stunned, and in an unfortunate timing, was struck squarely by the monster and blown back a great distance. He was small, lightweight, and had no resistance against Blow Away.

"Chiiirp!"

"Ahhh! Rick!" I called out.

Watching Rick on fire was the worst so far, his entire body going up in flames.

"Here's some water!"

"Chirp..."

As I poured water over Rick, I instructed my gnome.

"Olto, I need you to hold off the Wandering Rock for just a bit more. Aim for the stun, Rick. You can use the White Pears for your Nut Bomb ammo."

When Rick used White Pears for his Nut Bomb, it would damage the enemy and have a small chance of stunning them. White Pears were precious items, but it would be all for naught if we died here. I didn't mind using as many as needed.

"Mm-mm!"

"Chirp chirp!"

A beautiful salute! I'll try to deal with the Deranged Fire Elementals in the meantime! My monsters and I spammed Aqua Ball and defeated the two Fire Elementals. Reflet was able to tend immediately to Drimo when he got afflicted by Blaze, allowing me to focus on attacking.

"The Wandering Rock's next!"

I turned towards the enemy with gusto, but it was already almost dead. Rick's Nut Bomb had stunned it, and we were free to launch a barrage of attacks. Like its form would suggest, it was tough to damage, but since it was stunned, Drimo's Tailwind and Thrash made short work of it. He needed to simply keep Thrashing until it hit. It even seemed to be weak to the tree attribute, and my Tree Magic was able to deal quite a bit of damage.

“But these dumb old rocks are a pain to deal with...”

I would need Olto to take care of the Wandering Rocks. He had been unlucky enough to receive a critical hit during the initial attack, but barring that, he could easily defend against the monster. For the other two monsters, I decided to prioritize the Fire Lark in the future, before moving on to the Deranged Fire Elementals. I was satisfied with this plan and decided only to tame the Fire Elemental should it have something unique. I didn't want to push myself too hard in this dungeon, and had already decided on exiting after gathering a sufficient haul.

“I haven't gathered many good items yet.”

So far, I'd only gathered Firestarter Plants, Fire Ores, and Copper Ores. I was able to obtain higher-quality Firestarter Plants from my farm, and the Earth Elemental trial had better Copper Ores. Fire Ores were probably good items, but I didn't have any use for them other than to sell them, so I wasn't crazy about them. *I was hoping to gather some materials for the Heat Resistance Potion (Weather), but I wonder if I've got any already.*

“Wait, Copper Ore could be used for paint, right? Could Fire Ores be used too?”

I looked it up and found that it was a necessary item to create Fire Resistant Paint. I didn't care much about Fire Resistance since I was only interested in painting everyday necessities. The color was a beautiful marbling of red and orange, and I felt like it was worth obtaining just for that.

“Hm... Guess I'll keep a few Fire Ores, then.”

We made our way slowly through the Fire Elemental trial. I didn't want to push myself, and if I used up too many items, I would return to town, restock on Heat Resistance potions, and even rest up a little.

I repeated this process and eventually made my way to a room that contained a plant called the Foaming Tree. Its surface was slightly smooth, reminding me of a crepe myrtle. From the tree, I was able to obtain wood and Foaming Tree Fruit. This fruit was one of the items needed to create the Heat Resistance Potion (Weather), and judging from its name, it seemed like it was the base for bubbly drinks. I was excited.

Past this room was the mini-boss. I knew this because I had exchanged some information with other players in the Fire Elementals' town.

"The mini-boss is the Fire Elementals' Guardian. It might share some similarities with the Earth and Water Elementals' Guardians."

The mini-boss was apparently a beast-type monster that expelled balls of fire from the hole on its back like a volcanic eruption. Each attack was heavy-hitting, and the parties that defeated the boss said that their tanks' shields broke. What would I do, you ask? Not challenge it, of course.

We continued to search for a unique Salamander as we traversed through the dungeon, and we ran into a few dangerous situations. The worst was when we were met with three Wandering Rocks. Since they only had rolling attacks, I thought I could handle it, but I never expected them to chain their attacks, rolling into each other like billiard balls, which allowed them to freely change their trajectories.

Thanks to that, I couldn't dodge in time, and Bear Bear and I were blown back. We were forced to play defensive, and we were stuck in an unfortunate loop of extinguishing the flames while someone else got blown away. Without Reflet, I was sure that we'd have taken much more damage from Blaze. I had plenty of potions so I knew I wouldn't die, but I wanted to save them for more dangerous fights. *I should be careful when there's more than one Wandering Rock.*

"Hmmm... The Fire Elemental trial is the most annoying one to date."

"Aye."

"You agree, Fau?"

"Aye."

Even my monsters seemed to be tired of the Fire Elemental trial's gimmicks.

"We gathered quite a bit of materials, so I guess we can just head home."

The moment those words left my lips, something caught my eye.

"There it is!"

“Chirp chirp!”

Finally, a unique Salamander appeared before us. *Perfect timing. Wow, I guess my daily good deeds blessed me with this luck!* I thought happily. I planned on taming this monster and returning home before heading to the Earth Elemental Gate later.

While normal Salamanders had orange hair, unique ones, like the Salamander Chief, had red hair.

“All right! I’m gonna tame that Salamander, so don’t defeat it! Be careful, especially Bear Bear and Drimo.”

“Growl!”

“Squeak!”

My two monsters, as though offended by my words, put their hands on their hips and pouted. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust them, but their attacks could accidentally defeat the Salamander, and I wanted them to be careful. *That’s what I initially thought, but...*

“Chirp?”

“Rick! Did *you* just do that?!”

Rick had thrown a Nut Bomb, defeating the Salamander. I did tell them to fight how they pleased to weaken the enemy, but I didn’t expect him to use the newly obtained Foaming Tree Fruit as ammo. Not only did this fruit damage the enemy, but it added an exploding effect as well. With a rarity of three, it was much rarer than the fruits I’d used so far, and had much higher attack. Had the Salamander still had full HP, a critical hit with that would have halved it in one shot.

“Rick, you *did* do that, didn’t you?”

“Chiiirp!”

“Why’re you blushing?! I’m not praising you! You know I didn’t mean it like that!”

“Chirp?”

“You’re playing dumb, aren’t you?”

“Chirp... Chirp chirp.”

After I gave him an accusatory stare, he walked over to me, put his right hand onto my leg, and hung his head regretfully.

“Where did you learn that kind of pose?”

“Chirp chirp.”

“D-Don’t give me those doe eyes! You’re trying to use your cuteness to weasel your way out of this, aren’t you?!”

“Chirp chirp!” He looked the other way and made the motions of whistling, though not a single sound came from his lips. It was pathetically cute.

“It seems like you haven’t reflected on your actions. You don’t have enough sincerity, Rick.”

“Chirp?”

“Sincerity, I say. Are you not aware of what this means?”

“Chirp?” He cocked his head to one side.

“Heh heh heh. You don’t understand, do you? I’ll show you!”

“Chirp!”

“Mwa ha ha! You’ll need to repay your sins with your body! Let me nuzzle you!”

Whenever I felt down, petting my monsters never failed to cheer me up. I grabbed Rick and nuzzled him with my cheek. He was so adorable with his fluffy fur rubbing against me.

“Growl!”

“Hum!”

My monsters, thinking that I was playing around with Rick, gathered around me. Another monster could’ve respawned, but I couldn’t help myself playing unguardedly with my companions within the dungeon.

“All right. I feel better now. Time to search for another Salamander. Rick, be

careful, okay? Don't use the Foaming Tree Fruits."

"Chirp chirp!"

Three hours later, I found my second unique Salamander.

"Found one!"

"Chirp chirp!"

If I let this one go, I didn't even want to imagine the time it'd take to find another. I needed to capture this monster.

"Let's tread carefully, guys! And Rick, only aim for stuns!"

"Chirp!"

The unique monster was powerful, and when it spammed its area-of-effect fire attacks, I had no choice but to continuously heal. With teamwork, we managed to stun the Salamander, and the only thing left was to fire some weak Aqua Balls, lower its HP, and tame it.

"Tame! Tame!" I shouted.

I had quite a bit of MP left, and I wanted to successfully tame the Salamander before the stun wore off. I continued to yell the command word.

"Tame!"

On the seventh attempt, the Salamander's body glowed white, indicating a successful tame.

"Yes! I did it!"

I managed to successfully tame the Salamander surprisingly quickly. My level and Taming skills had risen, so I assumed my success rate had also gone up.

"Hm?" A cute, red-haired young boy was standing in front of me. He was wearing a tightly fitted kung-fu top. It was sleeveless and tied together at the front with a yellow string. His pants were more loosely fitted and though they looked baggy, they narrowed at the hems and didn't restrict his movement. He looked like he belonged in a Shaolin temple.

Name: Himka *Race: Salamander* Base level: Lv. 15

Master: Yuto

HP: 50/50 MP: 4848

Strength: 13 *Endurance: 13* Agility: 7

Dexterity: 14 *Intelligence: 11* Sanity: 8

Skills: Glassblowing, Metalworking, Smelting,
Malletworking, Pottery, Fire Magic, Fire and Heat
Resistance

Equipment: Fire Elemental's Mallet, Fire Elemental's Work
Bag

The suspicions I'd had when I was touring the town were confirmed, the monster appearing to be a glassblower and potter. I wished he had some blacksmith-related skills, but I was at least able to create my own tableware. I was a little excited to see what he could make. The only issue was supplying him with the necessary facilities. I decided to worry about that later when I figured out their prices, so I would need him to make do with cheap gear at first. Furnaces and kilns looked expensive.

"So you're Himka. Nice to meet you."

"Hmmm!" He raised his hand with great energy as a response. He was probably as energetic as he looked.

My party was full, however, and he soon started to disappear. He was being sent back to my farm.

"I'll go pick you up later, so wait for me, okay?"

"Hm!" He waved his hand in reply, smiling from start to finish.

"All right. We need to go pick up Himka, so let's head home."

"Mm-mm!"

Epilogue

“Chief, is this about that player again?”

“Ugh, Deputy Chief!”

“What do you mean by ‘ugh,’ sir?”

“N-Nothing. Ha ha ha!”

“He’s just a single person... I think it’s unwise to be so attached to one player.”

“B-But look at this.”

“Oh... He purchased the Sacred Tree Sapling, has he? His monsters have Arboriculture, don’t they?”

“Yep. He’s even got Farming (Advanced).”

“I see. So it’s possible that he can raise it without it wilting. He’s already used the Healing Drop, hasn’t he?”

“Yeah, on the Lakeside Sequoia.”

“Then the Sacred Tree won’t become a Guardian Beast, will it? I believe the bear, squirrel, and mole could unlock that route.”

“It won’t. It’ll probably become a Tree of Evil. At least he’ll get some wood out of it, right?”

“The Lakeside Sequoia, and now the Sacred Tree—I mean, the Tree of Evil. If folks didn’t have it out for him already they will soon.”

“That’s why we need to keep a good eye on him! Right?”

“...”

“T-Teehee?”

“Please don’t give me that disgusting laugh, sir.”

“Then don’t glare at me like that! It’s scary!”

“He even found a yōkai and obtained that special tree nut, right?”

“Y-Yeah. He got both of them from the auction.”

“...There isn’t anyone within our company leaking him information, is there, sir?”

“No. I don’t think so. I was checking up on his bidding intervals on that bag of tree nuts, but he really just got lucky there. He was really after the Japanese teacup and teapot. We were planning on selling those items for 1000 G later too.”

“First the Hanami Vandal, and now the Tea Kettle Tanuki. He discovered the difficult-to-obtain yōkais first. I suppose that’s fitting for him.”

“Agreed! In any case...”

“Wh-What? Why are you smirking at me like that?”

“Nah, I just thought that you’re rather knowledgeable on Silver-Haired too. Even more than me, perhaps. Could you have possibly...”

“I-I’m only checking up on special players, as I should! I’m not gathering information for fun like you are, sir!”

“Awww, are you feeling a little embarrassed?”

“Please stop smiling like that!”

“Ha ha ha! Your face is red! My, my!”

“You’re really getting the wrong idea. I’m definitely not just checking up on him because his monsters are adorable or anything!”

“Oh, you’re after his monsters?”

“Wh-What?”

“So, you have the capability of finding cute things cute, do you? I’m happy to hear that.”

“H-Hey! Stop patting my shoulder!”

“Now, now. Let’s look at some new videos. I’ve got so many cute images and videos for you. In fact, I was thinking of using clips of Silver-Haired’s monsters

for our promotional video.”

“...J-Just for a bit, okay?”

“Ah ha ha ha! Come on now, sit down! Here you go!”

“Beer? Didn’t you have a bottle of wine in your locker, sir?”

“H-Hey! I can’t give you that! It was expensive!”

“Why are you keeping such expensive alcohol in your locker?”

“Oh, my wife gets angry if I bring that home...”

“She hasn’t forgiven you yet?”

“Oh, it’s gotten worse. She’s totes pissed. No cap.”

“Please stop trying to force slang into every conversation. Also I’m pretty sure those words are already outdated.”

“Wait, for real?”

“Yes. In any case, I could definitely go for some wine. I can even prepare some cheese for us.”

“No! Please, no! Here’s some beer! Come on, this stuff’s delicious!”

“I’m not a huge fan of beer.”

“But...”

“Sir.”

“Wh-What? No means no, even if you glare at me like that.”

“Your previous actions and words are tantamount to sexual harassment.”

“Huh?”

“Sexually harassing your young subordinate, your wife’s anger, and your daughter’s scornful glares... It’ll only lead to divorce and the inevitable alimony...”

“I’ll prepare the wine right away, ma’am!”

“Could you also bring the canned foods you’ve hidden in your desk drawer?”

“...Hey, can I not have this thing called ‘privacy’?”

“This is what you get for going out drinking with the Sales division and never coming back. I needed to get into the Reference Room, and dug through your desk, looking for the key. Ah, right—you apparently took the key with you, and we had to pull an all-nighter because of that.”

“H-Ha ha ha... I’m sure you need a can opener too, don’t you? I’ll get you one.”

“Oh, please start the Silver-Haired video before you leave.”

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Laid-Back Life

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A Late-Start Tamer's Laid-Back Life: Volume 5

by Yuu Tanaka

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Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by MICRO MAGAZINE, INC.

This English edition is published by arrangement with MICRO MAGAZINE, INC.

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Ebook edition 1.0: January 2023

Premium E-Book