

A LATE-START TAMER'S LAID-BACK LIFE

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A Late-Start Tamer's
Laid-Back Life

Chapter One: The Air Elemental Gate and the Sylphs

“Hmm, this is where we were supposed to meet, but...”

After clearing the Mayoiga and visiting the Lakeside Sequoia Dryad’s Altar, we arrived at the square in the Town of Beginnings.

This was our scheduled meeting place, but there were so many people that it was difficult to spot the others in the crowd.

“Maybe I’ll give her a call—”

“Hey, over here!”

Right as I was about to call to say I’d arrived, a voice called out from beside me as Ursula, a fellow Tamer, came into view.

She wore a dominatrix-style black leather outfit and fought with a whip; she had the kind of look that made you want to call her “Mistress.” I mean, not to her face, though. According to Ursula, Tamers and whips went hand in hand.

But she didn’t have her monsters with her now. Instead, she was accompanied by two other people.

“Sorry, am I late?”

“Nope, you’re right on time. Oh yeah, Amelia’s waiting in line.”

I was joining up with Ursula and the others to unlock the last Elemental Gate: the Air Elemental Gate. They were the ones that had the air crystal necessary for unlocking the gate, and here I was not even holding our place in line. I felt bad for mooching off them, but they were the ones that had invited me in the first place.

In the upcoming big update, the harassment block would get stricter. Soon, there would be restrictions on touching even the monsters and mascots that your friends had tamed. Before doing anything, you would need to get the Tamer’s approval, and you would no longer be able to enter other people’s farms the way you’d been able to before. Plus, excessive physical contact would

be prohibited.

This was a huge shock for Ursula and the others, who loved playing with my monsters.

So, in exchange for inviting me along to the Air Elemental Gate, they asked me for permission to play with my monsters. Well, I lost nothing out of the arrangement, so I didn't really mind... I guess my monsters' cuteness was a sin.

Plus, we weren't just unlocking the Air Elemental Gate; the girls were also securing our place to be the first in line to do so. Right now, Amelia was standing in line for us.

"So, these two will be coming with us to the Gate."

"Heh heh... Long time no see."

"Yeah, been a while."

Among the two people Ursula introduced, one of them was someone I knew.

She was a beautiful woman with long, magenta hair, and she was wearing a Japanese-style robe that exposed her shoulders. It was Rikyu, aka Pyro. She was peering at me from behind her bangs, which were long enough to cover the upper half of her face.

"Thanks for inviting me."

"Heh heh... Didn't want to waste the extra spot."

The air crystal that Ursula's group had was of a five-star quality, so the most people they could bring to unlock the gate was five. However, one of the members of the party planning to come with them had some family stuff they had to take care of, so they couldn't log in today.

And so they ended up discussing inviting me at the last minute. I felt bad for Rikyu's friend, but I guess it was lucky for me.

"Well, it's because of your shyness that we didn't have very many people to choose from, Rikyu."

"Ah..."

"Heh heh... My bad," apologized Rikyu lightly.

Rikyu, who had severe social anxiety, didn't have many people with whom she could have a proper conversation, so there must not have been many other people they could invite. After all, she wouldn't be able to hold a conversation with a stranger.

"Heh heh, thanks for accepting our terms..."

"Yeah, thanks a bunch!"

The grinning, beautiful girl next to Rikyu shot her hand up and introduced herself.

"Nice to meet you! I'm Kurumi, a friend of Rikyu's! Can I send you a friend request too?"

"U-Uh, sure. Nice to meet you too."

Kurumi had fairly eye-catching, charming features. Well, most of the avatars in this game were attractive, but her features weren't just attractive, they were pretty distinctive too. She had fluffy, red hair. Actually, I was tiptoeing around it; it wasn't so much "fluffy" as it was a full-on afro. A red afro. Way too funky. She seemed like a human-cow hybrid, as I could see black horns poking out from either side of her do.

A cow with an afro. A combination you'd only see on a certain Devil Chojin—but red.

As for her equipment, she was wearing sturdy-looking metal armor. While the parts around her joints were made thin for ease of movement, it was pretty much what you'd call Western-style armor, except instead of a helmet it looked like she had earrings equipped.

Her most standout feature was the large wooden hammer she had slung across her back. The head of the hammer was about the size of a small bale of rice. Since it was made of wood, it was probably lighter than an iron hammer, but...Kurumi was short. She had to be barely 140 centimeters tall. Seeing such a small girl carrying such a gigantic hammer on her back was bizarre to say the least.

It was probably a bit of a joke. I bet she knew exactly what she was going for when she went for that look.

“I’m looking forward to this!”

She was pretty sociable, so much so that I wouldn’t have expected her to be a friend of Rikyu’s. Though I guess you had to be like that to become Rikyu’s friend in the first place.

With our party of four people including Kurumi, we set off for the object known as the Whistling Stone, located in the Forest of Talons.

Kurumi was not only distinctive but considerably strong too, so the journey there was a piece of cake. The only thing was, it seemed like she had an unmatched love for squirrels, and there was a moment where she wasn’t able to attack a Gray Squirrel. If she couldn’t fight against squirrels, wouldn’t she have a hard time as we kept going? Rats, however, were apparently not a problem. As Kurumi put it: “Rats are rats, and squirrels are squirrels!”

I sort of understood, but I also sort of didn’t.

Also, Ursula didn’t try to touch Olto, not even once. She only patted his head for a few seconds at the start. According to her, this was her way of preparing for the update. Apparently, she was training herself, since it would be dangerous to have to quit clinging to Olto cold turkey.

“Y-You’re good with just a pat?”

“Yeah, that’s enough...!”

“Well, good luck.”

“Yeah...”

As we tried to cheer up Ursula, who looked on the verge of tears, we arrived at our destination.

It was a small clearing in Zone Two. Smack-dab in the middle of the clearing sat a large, donut-shaped rock with a hole in the middle. Since it emitted a high-pitched noise when wind blew through it, players called it the Whistling Stone, which meant this open space was simply called the Whistling Stone Square.

We arrived at that very square to see that more than fifty people had already gathered there.

“Wow, lots of people here, huh?”

I could hear the party that arrived in front of the Whistling Stone about the same time as we did mutter, “Aw man, guess we can’t be the first.” I guess everyone wanted to get to the front of the line to try and obtain a title.

The atmosphere in the square felt oddly tense somehow. The fact that there were so many people gathered was sure to make things hectic, but evidently that wasn’t the only reason.

“Heh heh... Seems like a fight.”

“Now that you mention it...”

Following the gaze of the other players, it seemed like something was going down around the Whistling Stone. We moved closer and saw about a dozen players arguing over something.

Thanks to the harassment block, things weren’t escalating into a physical fight, but because of that they were throwing around some pretty harsh words instead.

Moreover, we weren’t exactly uninvolved.

“I *told* you, they’re coming later!”

“And *I’m* telling you that’s cheating! Coming later just means they’re gonna cut in line!”

“Yeah, you tell her!”

“But the other gates had a rule that only one member of a party had to wait in line!”

In the middle of the kerfuffle was Amelia, whom we were here to meet up with. What was going on? We asked another onlooker for some details.

“Looks like they’re fighting about which of ’em gets to unlock the Air Elemental Gate first.”

Apparently, the party that came after Amelia had picked a fight with her in line.

“Who cares about the other gates!”

“Yeah, who cares!”

At first, the guys who had lined up behind Amelia had asked her to give up her place in line for them. They tried to tempt her with in-game currency and rare items, but when that didn't work, they'd offered to pay her with straight-up cash—that is, real-world money. This was a clear violation of the game's rules, so of course Amelia refused.

When she did, they started threatening her loudly, saying stuff like “We got your face memorized!” and “Our clan's huge!”

But when, despite all that, Amelia just gave them a cold stare, they started making a racket about how adding your late-coming party members was the same as cutting in line, hoping to get other players involved.

“Ohhh, what should we do?”

“Those guys seem like a pain, but we have to help Amelia.”

“You're right. It's kinda our fault too.”

“Hang on, is that Silver-Haired? And Bomber, and even Red Cow... Whoa, what an amazing party... Those assholes really picked a fight with the wrong people.”

The player who had just told us about the situation was muttering something under his breath while we furtively discussed among ourselves what to do. As much as I didn't want us to have to wedge ourselves in the thick of it, we couldn't abandon Amelia, so we decided to head over to back her up.

“Um, excuse me? We're her party members.”

“Huh? I didn't invite you!”

“No, no, she invited us.”

“Hey! You think you can cut in line?!”

Hmm. I could kind of understand why he would feel like we were cutting. After all, we were arriving late and heading right to the front of the line. But since we were entering the Air Elemental Gate as a party, these guys wouldn't have had a chance to enter first anyway, whether Amelia was alone or with a group. I would've thought they understood that, seeing as they had compliantly lined up in the first place, so they must have just felt like they needed to vent

their pent-up anger and frustration for missing out on being first in line.

“What’s with that hair, anyway?!”

“Huh?”

“So lame! You Silver-Haired wannabe! Aha ha ha ha!”

“Wha?”

“As if copying his appearance would make you anything like that top Tamer with his endless stream of discoveries!”

What the? He was mocking me, but I was kinda happy. A top Tamer with an endless stream of discoveries? Even though he was bringing up Silver-Haired in order to diss me, he was actually praising me. Maybe this guy wasn’t so bad... No, scratch that.

Amelia and Ursula, and even Rikyu, hearing the guy’s jeers, grimaced, looking like they wanted to get mad but couldn’t. After all, the person he was talking about was right there.

They were probably in shock that I was being called a top Tamer. No matter how you looked at it, Amelia and the others were much stronger, and were the ones rising to the top. Or maybe they could tell I was just a bit delighted at his words? Maybe they were just appalled that I was standing there smirking at a time like this. How embarrassing!

In any case, even a second more of this would be too painful for all of us, so I had to clear up the misunderstanding. But if I just went ahead and said, “I *am* the Silver-Haired Pioneer! Heh heh!” it would be way too embarrassing. Maybe guessing what I was feeling, Kurumi spoke up first.

“Y’know, this guy *is* Silver-Haired.”

“Huh? What the hell’re you— Wait, are you Red Cow?”

“Bro, that’s Bomber over there! No doubt!”

“Wh-Wha—? So then, are you Silver-Haired for real?”

Finding out I was Silver-Haired really threw him for a loop. Well, he did just say, “You Silver-Haired wannabe! Aha ha ha ha!” to the person in question. If it

were me, I would've been so embarrassed I would've wanted to die.

At any rate, it seemed like Kurumi was famous. I overheard the crowd around us talking about her.

"That's Red Cow? She stands out as much as the rumors said."

"Rumors?"

"A kid with a giant hammer on her back and a red afro. I heard she keeps a bunch of weapons in her hair."

"I heard she keeps candy in there."

"I heard that when she drinks a red energy drink, she unleashes her 10,000,000 Power."

"Huh? But I heard that that afro is actually a wig and it just comes right off."

The crowd's eyes converged on Kurumi. The guys we'd been arguing with also looked a little intimidated once they realized she was famous. But they didn't seem like the types to simply back down just like that. They then immediately started glaring at us, in fact.

Normally you'd expect people in this situation to smooth things over and then walk away, but that didn't seem like it would be the case. We'd have to keep dealing with them until the date changed. What a pain...

As I was thinking that, another party approached the one that was picking a fight with us. More entitled douchebags?

However, it didn't quite seem like that was the case.

"Heya. You going in with a party of five, Silver-Haired?"

The elf at the front of the party who looked like their leader was being a little overly familiar, but he was smiling at us amicably. Maybe he was here to back us up?

"Huh? Well, seems that way. I didn't bring the air crystal so I can't say for sure. Amelia?"

"It's a five-star air crystal."

The attribute crystals that were sold by NPCs at the auctions didn't have a set

quality rating. There were some that even had a two-star rating.

“Well then, how about this? Why don’t you use our six-star air crystal?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you were planning on using a five-star crystal, so you only have five people, right? So if you take our six-star one, you’d have a slot open. I figured I could then join your group.”

“I see.”

It was an interesting proposal. It was true, that was a possibility. We wouldn’t lose anything, and this guy would be able to get a new title. If it weren’t for this situation, it would have been worth considering.

But there was no way that entitled douchebag would let that slide. Just as I thought, he started kicking up a fuss.

“You gotta be kidding me! You’re cutting too?!”

“I heard you complaining earlier about them cutting in line or whatever. I couldn’t stand listening to you shout about that irrelevant crap. C’mon, why don’t you just cut it out?”

“You gotta be kidding me! You line-cutting asshole!”

“The fact that you keep repeating yourself is just proof of how dumb you are.”

The elf ended up starting an argument with the jerk. I was grateful he seemed to be on our side, but wasn’t he going a little too far?

“You bastard...! Besides, if he’s gonna put anyone in his party, it should be me! That much is obvious!” said the first man.

“The hell are you saying? You were just sniping at Silver-Haired’s party, and now you think you can do something like that? You really are dumb.”

It seemed like the elf guy really didn’t like guys like him, but all he was doing was adding fuel to the fire. He was free to rant at him all he liked, but I wished he wouldn’t drag us into it too...

Well, I guess his haughtiness suited his elf character. Maybe he was just role-playing as an arrogant elf? No, that couldn’t be it...

“Hey, what do you think, Silver-Haired?”

“Don’t ignore us!”

“Whatever you do, there’s no way you guys are going in ahead of Silver-Haired’s party, so why don’tcha shut up already?”

“It doesn’t make any sense that the first people to line up should be given priority in the first place! That’s not even an official rule, so why should we follow it?!”

“Because it’s basic manners!”

“Like I care! No one says I gotta follow that!”

I wondered why he’d even started talking to Amelia in the first place if that was his stance on this, but I realized he must have just been getting heated going back and forth with the elf guy, not really putting much thought into what he was saying.

Besides, he did have a point.

The notion that Amelia, who was first in line, had any right to open the Air Elemental Gate first was purely a matter of etiquette. It was just an unspoken agreement among players. In LJO, players in the same area tended to make up firm rules in a short amount of time.

But it wasn’t as if there were laws people had to obey.

For other games with similar event dungeons, it wasn’t rare for players gathered at the entrance to all use the key item simultaneously at the start of the event, and then let the player that was acknowledged as being the fastest to do so go in ahead of the others. Or maybe a PvP battle would start, and the surviving party would go in first.

Well, other players could do something similar here. It was possible that someone would get a jump on Amelia, run up to the Whistling Stone, and present their own air crystal first as soon as the date changed. While those players might get some backlash for going against etiquette, there were no PvP battles in LJO, so they wouldn’t suffer any major retaliation.

“Besides, look who’s talking! *Basic manners?* It’s bad manners to cut in line!

Bad manners!”

“You just keep bringing up that crap... Is making a scene and intimidating people all you know how to do? *That’s* bad manners!”

“Shut up, shut *up*! You’re the one being rude as hell!”

“You all really have no common sense, huh? Look in the mirror! You’re idiots without any shred of social decency! Just get the hell out of here!”

“What the hell? You asshole!”

Their argument had escalated to a complete shouting match, both so heated that they’d reached a point where they felt they couldn’t back down. They’d both gone past arguing about who was the rude one; they just each wanted to be the one to have the last word.

I wish they’d cool it down, though...

“Silver-Haired agrees with me, right?!”

“Huh?”

Why are you bringing me into this?! Don’t get me involved!

But, manners, huh? That was a hard one.

My mind wandered as I remembered how I’d recently unintentionally made someone upset by going against etiquette. An older lady in my neighborhood had gotten mad at me for not greeting her while I was taking out my trash. From her point of view, I must have seemed like I had no manners. Greeting others while taking out the trash was common knowledge for the people living in the apartment building. But since I didn’t know that, I just told her to stop being so self-involved.

So basically, the older lady who got mad at me for being rude was the elf guy. Well, I was probably included on that side too. And the entitled jerk was just like me, who had, on that day, shot back at the older lady: “I’ve never heard of that kind of rule!”

Wait, that made me think both sides had their bad points. Each side had some things they should reflect on.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve threatening that girl over there!”

“No, *you’ve* got a lot of nerve for cutting in line! I’ll kill you, you show-off!”

“Hah! Don’t you know there’s no PvP in this game? And besides, letting your party members join you later isn’t cutting in line! Don’t even bother playing the game if you don’t know how it works, idiot!”

They were both going against etiquette at this point by hurling so much abuse at each other.

Hmm, had I acted just like them...? All right, I had decided. Next time I took out my trash and passed by someone in my building, I would give them a bright, cheery hello. And if I saw that older lady, I would apolo— Okay, maybe I wouldn’t go *that* far, but I would at least give her a slight bow in greeting.

Manners were important, right?

“You *bleeeeeep*!”

“What’d you call me?! You’re the *bleeeeeep* here!”

“I’m writing about you on the forums!”

“No, *I’m* writing about *you*!”

Then, as soon as their mutual verbal abuse reached its peak...

“You son of a—”

“Listen here, you—”

The players right in front of me suddenly disappeared.

“What the...?”

What happened? I looked around, but they were nowhere to be seen. They’d vanished without a trace, as if teleported.

“Huh?”

The only ones left behind were us, the other onlookers, and just a few people from the parties that had been fighting. The players from the entitled jerk’s and the elf’s parties who hadn’t disappeared must have been the ones trying to stop the argument.

Meanwhile, everyone who had been shouting insults was all gone.

“Seriously?! Our leader’s an idiot!”

“Ugh, this sucks!”

The players who had been left behind somehow seemed to know what had happened. They were clutching their heads in their hands.

“Um, just what happened?” I ended up asking them without thinking.

I immediately regretted what I’d said, afraid they’d get mad, but evidently I didn’t need to worry about that. Teary-eyed, they explained.

“Our leader did something similar before too and got a warning from the devs. Looks like this fight got him penalized for real, though...”

“Same with ours...”

“Ahh, I see.”

Basically, they got their accounts temporarily suspended for repeated use of abusive language and breaches of etiquette. One of the onlookers must have reported them. Or maybe Amelia had secretly done so? Well, either way, the dispute got settled.

But now an uncomfortable atmosphere remained for all the players who had been left behind. That was to be expected, though. This had all happened right before the Air Elemental Gate was about to open. It felt as though someone had thrown cold water on everything.

“Uhhh, what should we do? You guys got the air crystal?”

“Nope, our leader had it.”

“Same with us.”

There were thirty minutes left until midnight. It would be hard for them to get their hands on an air crystal in time. Maybe understanding that, they stood and with knowing faces said, “Well, time to go.”

“Yeah, think we’ll do the same.”

They didn’t seem like they wanted to make any more trouble. In fact, they started bowing to us ingratiatingly as they made to leave.

“We’re leaving that clan, by the way! We’re over it!”

“Oh yeah, same! I definitely didn’t mean to be hostile towards you, Silver-Haired! I mean it!”

“Huh? Ah, I understand.”

I can hear you without you yelling loud enough for everyone to hear, y’know...

Well, I suppose both parties were so mad at their leaders they couldn’t help but yell.

As this went on, midnight drew nearer.

“Hey, so...you don’t mind if we go in first, do you?”

“Not at all, go on ahead!”

“No problem. Heh heh heh.”

We were all nervously laughing like idiots, as if subconsciously showing off to the devs that we weren’t the ones using any abusive language. We’d just witnessed a large group of people have their accounts forcibly suspended, after all.

At the surrounding players’ urging of “Go on ahead!” the girls and I stood in front of the monument. The whole thing kind of left a bad aftertaste. We weren’t trying to do anything underhanded...

I need to pull myself together. We’re at the Air Elemental Gate!

As we neared the Whistling Stone, the entirety of the large rock emitted a green glow.

“Would you like to offer an air crystal to the Air Elemental’s Altar?”

Hearing the announcement, Amelia took out the air crystal and walked forward.

“All right, here I go!”

As she held the air crystal up to the hole in the rock, the glow became even more intense, and we heard the unlocking announcement.

The rock, enveloped in the light, was remarkably dreamy and beautiful. The

players around us also began letting out cries of surprise at the sight. There were probably a lot of people here who hadn't seen an Elemental Gate's unlocking before.

"One of the Elemental Gates has been unlocked."

"As a bonus for unlocking the Air Elemental Gate, you will be awarded one random skill scroll."

"All four Elemental Gates have been unlocked. The players who were the first to unlock all four gates will be awarded the title 'The Firstcomer.'"

Title: The Firstcomer

Effect: Acquire 30,000 G and four bonus points. Increased encounter rate for unique elemental monsters.

So we did get a title after all, huh? And it even came with an effect that increased the chance of encountering unique monsters. That seemed really useful, but I wouldn't be able to experience the effect personally. Well, the 30,000 G alone was enough for me.

"Whoa! Awesome!"

"I got a title!"

"Heh heh..."

Anyhow, it seemed like our whole party acquired a title. Maybe everyone getting a title would mean less attention on me?

"So, this is the Air Elemental Gate."

"Isn't it kind of scary?"

"You think so?"

What appeared before the windhole in front of us looked almost like a tornado. The vortex was about five meters high and issued a thunderous, booming sound.

This one wasn't nearly as frightening as the pillar of fire at the Fire Elemental

Gate. It was just wind, after all. The noise it was making was kind of scary, but that was all.

Ursula and the others turned their gazes on me. I was the only guy, so I figured this was my moment to do something cool.

“I’ve got this.”

I slowly stuck my hand in the tornado. Despite its intense appearance, the wind had about the same pressure as an electric fan blowing against my hand. As I made my way in farther, I felt a brief sensation of wind caressing me before I emerged on the other side.

I found myself in a small, familiar-feeling room. Then, just as had been the case with the other Elemental Gates, one of the elemental monsters came to greet us.

“Congratulations on making it here, you who have unlocked the gate. I am the Leader of the Sylphs.”

Whoa! A pompous little girl!

Was she even shorter than Olto? She was somewhat androgynous, but compared to more boyish gnomes, she looked more like a little girl. She was even floating a little. Of course she was, she was a sylph!

So basically, gnomes and sylphs were in the young-child age range, while salamanders and undines were more in the young-adolescent range. I guess that made things balanced.

The Sylph Chief had long, white hair that reached to the floor. It was the very definition of “beautiful as silk.” She was wearing an oversized white blouse with green embroidery over green bloomers—a super adorable look. She also held a long, sturdy metal staff, so I couldn’t decide whether she had a dignified presence or not.

While I was in awe of the pompous little girl, my party members crossed through the gate one by one...and all had the same reaction as me.

She was a floating, white-haired little girl acting high-and-mighty and wearing an opulent outfit, but also bloomers. There was so much going on with her

appearance that it was hard not to react.

“I shall guide you. Come, follow me.”

She began floating down the pathway at around the height of our heads, her hair not once dragging along the ground.

“Okey dokey!”

“Heh heh...”

Kurumi and Rikyu walked on ahead, following after the Sylph Chief.

The towns of the Elemental Gates were all beautiful, magical places. I was excited to see what kind of place this town was. Feeling pumped, I followed after the chief. She soon after turned around.

“Behold!”

Ahead of us was a townscape that was different from the other elemental towns but just as dreamlike.

“Wow, so pretty!”

“It’s stunning...”

“It looks so whimsical!”

“Are those cocoons? Fascinating.”

If I had to describe this town, I’d say it was a creation of thread, cloth, and cocoons. The theme of the entire town was green, the tones unifying a sense of both vibrancy and tranquility.

Among all that, the first thing to jump out at me was the cocoon-shaped tents. The tents were held together by several pieces of fabric sewed together like patchwork. They were green, but the hues ranged from deep green to emerald, with varying shades in between. Thanks to that, it didn’t feel monotonous despite being otherwise monochrome.

Threads from all directions connected the tents to pillars of unknown material. It seemed that the tents were being held up by those threads and pillars. These fabric cocoons must have been the sylphs’ homes.

Since the ceiling was considerably higher compared to other elemental towns,

combined with the green, shining, crystalline object covering the sky, the town didn't feel at all claustrophobic.

"Well? Beautiful, is it not? You may walk around as you please."

And so, we decided to explore the Air Elementals' town. The entire area was a meadow, so it was incredibly easy to walk around.

"Let's find a shop first!"

"Heh heh... I wonder if they have any bomb ingredients..."

Kurumi and Rikyu had started walking at the lead, so the rest of us ended up following them. They weren't trying to show off their leadership or anything. Kurumi was just impatient, and it seemed like Rikyu just got caught up in that.

"Is this pillar made out of threads?"

"It's super pretty up close."

Ursula and I had our interests piqued by the mysterious pillars that were supporting the threads holding up the tents. Their height and thickness were about the size of a telephone pole. From up close, they were clearly formed of hardened, wound-up threads. The ropes holding up the tents were likewise actually hundreds of thin threads twisted together into thicker supports. Several more of those were wound together to create even *thicker* ropes.

No matter how you thought about it, it didn't seem very durable, but this was a fantasy world, as well as a game. Some mysterious power must have been at work here.

"This is definitely the kind of structure you'd never see in real life."

"I wonder if you can buy these?"

"You mean like to make it your home base?"

"Yeah."

Ursula seemed pretty intrigued by these cocoon-like tents. They did have a very interesting appearance, so they must have been irresistible for someone interested in unusual objects. Amelia also looked pensive.

"Maybe they sell them in town?"

“They’d probably be in a household objects store, right?”

I was also curious about the shops. More than weapons, what I really wanted to see were the stores that sold ingredients and objects. Of course, since all the buildings were tents, it was hard to tell from the outside which ones were shops.

Based on the inn we’d discovered as we were walking, they would have a sign hanging at the entrance. So we probably wouldn’t be able to know which other ones were shops without checking their entrances first.

Whatever the case might have been, we had been planning to make a complete round of the town anyway, so it wasn’t a big deal.

As we walked, we finally noticed a difference between normal tents and shop tents. They seemed to be different sizes. The shop tents were about twice the size of the sylphs’ dwellings. Based on that, we would be able to tell from afar which ones were shops.

Afterwards, we checked out a few of the stores, but there was nothing of particular interest to me.

I didn’t have any need for weapons, and the food items were all things I could obtain elsewhere. They had a lot of ingredients that seemed useful for clothes and leather, but again, they were all things I didn’t have much use for. I did, however, discover something interesting in the household objects store. They didn’t have any cocoon houses, but they were selling objects that I could set up on my farm.

“A Tower Mill and an Aeroponic Fence?”

The Tower Mill used the power of the wind to turn a millstone to grind crops and minerals into a powder. Although it took more time than manual grinders, there was no loss in quality. It could be used in Cooking and Concocting, so it was an incredibly useful structure.

The Aeroponic Fence looked like one of those wisteria trellises with narrow gaps between the rods. Between each rod hung something that looked like fine mesh netting. This must have been an installation for growing air plants. Those types of plants, which didn’t need soil to grow, existed IRL too.

Well, the ones in the game were probably completely different from real air plants. Anyway, I hadn't found any air plants yet, so buying the Fence now would be meaningless.

But considering that there had been aquatic plants that could grow in a hydroponic pool in the Water Elementals' dungeon, then there was a high possibility that air plants would be in the Air Elementals' dungeon. The plant I'd found in the Water Elementals' dungeon had been a useful ingredient in helping me clear the dungeon.

So maybe this time there'll be some helpful air-type plants?

"Hmm, maybe I should just buy both for now."

If I entrusted them to Olto, he should be able to put them to good use. I was kind of leaving a lot to him, but since that was also what I'd done with the farm, which had turned out well, it was probably fine to do this.

"But I still just can't get used to it."

"Heh heh... Same."

"Oh, you too, Rikyu?"

"Heh heh... It's weird."

"Right? It is!"

It was a beautiful, mystical, pristine place. There was no doubt it was a wonderful town. The problem was its residents.

It made sense, being that this was the Air Elementals' town, but everyone living here was a sylph—which meant they were all children.

The place was filled with floating little girls making their way around the town. The shopkeepers were also all little girls. Little girl salespeople and little girl waitresses. Chefs and real estate agents. Everywhere you looked were floating little girls.

I wasn't necessarily saying that was a bad thing. They were adorable, after all. But my uneasiness just wouldn't go away.

Seeing Kurumi and the others completely unbothered made me realize my

own lack of adaptability. It seemed that Rikyu felt the same way.

“Heh heh... They’re very carefree.”

“Y-Yeah. We’re the normal ones here, right?”

“Heh heh... We’re the sensible ones.”

“Yeah, we are.”

That was the first time I felt like Rikyu and I understood each other. Who knew we would bond in a place like this...

We continued walking through the Air Elementals’ town until we reached the start of the Air Elementals’ trial.

The appearance was similar to the other Elemental Gates’ dungeons. It looked like a regular cave entrance.

“But I don’t think it’ll be easy to clear.”

“Heh heh... The other trials were tricky.”

“Meaniiiiing, this will be tricky too!”

Rikyu and Kurumi looked like they were having a blast talking about how difficult it was going to be. They must have been drawn to that sort of thing. Personally, I preferred when things were easy. But we hadn’t come here to clear the dungeon today. We were just going to check out what it was like real quick and then head back.

Considering the fighting power of our party, we’d have a hard time. Three of us were Tamers, the job class with the lowest solo combat ability, after all. Then again, scoping out the first room wouldn’t be that troublesome. We’d just come here to get the lay of the land anyway.

“All right, let’s go!”

“Heh heh... How exciting.”

With Kurumi leading the way, we made our way into the Air Elementals’ dungeon. However, the strangeness of it immediately made us stop in our tracks.

“Eek! What the heck is this?”

“This seems like it’s going to be a pain.”

“Heh heh... Very interesting.”

“Are we floating?”

“Hey, don’t push me, Amelia!”

The dungeon we stepped into was every bit as peculiar as the other three elemental dungeons. Actually, it probably surpassed the other three in terms of strangeness.

The first thing that caught my eye was the flashy, colorful floor. The ground was rocky and had a green-and-white marbled pattern. Several different shades of green were layered on top of each other, from emerald green to viridian to light green. It looked so nice that I hesitated to step on it.

Also, there weren’t any walls. Never mind walls, there wasn’t even a ceiling.

I stood at the edge of the floor and peered down, where I saw the wide maw of a deep valley. A white fog filled up half of the valley, obscuring the bottom of it. It seemed terrifyingly deep. I threw a rock down there but heard no sound of it hitting the bottom.

“That’s gotta be sudden death if we fall, huh.”

“Yikes! That looks deep!”

Kurumi was leaning forward on her hands and knees to look down below. I was kind of worried about her; her big afro made her seem unbalanced. She looked like she was on the verge of falling over.

After looking around the room, of course, I realized this place wasn’t actually floating in midair.

On the right and left sides of the rooms were thin, tall pillars extending from the valley to the sky. It seemed that those were holding up this lump of rock.

The white fog wasn’t just in the valley but was also surrounding the rock we were standing on, as well as covering the sky. It was as if the fog was a replacement for the walls and ceiling. There was a pathway that stretched out ahead, but the fog made it so we couldn’t see very far forward. It was a narrow, rocky corridor suspended in midair, which extended out into a dense fog. That

was this gate's dungeon.

"This place must be the first room of the dungeon, just like in the others."

"Then there's gotta be a loot box, right?"

"Let's go find it!"

I felt there was only one place to hide a loot box in a room like this. But contrary to my prediction, there was nothing right underneath the mass of rock we were on. Amelia had tied a rope around a pillar to check, risking it all, so I was positive about that. Afterwards, we all searched the room, finding the loot box instead on top of the right pillar.

The left pillar extended all the way up into the fog-covered sky, so we couldn't see what was at the very top of it. Meanwhile the right pillar only reached just underneath the fog.

It was a big help having Kurumi with us, since she was an agile climber. She had reached a hand up from the pillar and touched the fog, but she said it just pushed her back and she couldn't move any farther up. The surrounding fog must have been acting as the walls.

Kurumi opened up the loot box and we all obtained its contents. I checked my inventory and saw that I'd received an accessory, as expected.

"Lessee... Ooh, a Windproof Necklace."

Name: Windproof Necklace

Rarity: 3 *Quality*: 9★ Durability: 200

Effect: +4 Defense, reduces vulnerability to gale damage

Weight: 1

It was an accessory that reduced one's susceptibility to wind in the field.

"Which means there are probably wind traps up ahead."

Ursula was probably right. The fact that this accessory was supposed to be useful in clearing this dungeon must have meant there was some gimmick that

had to do with wind damage.

“We even got a gem as a bonus for finding the hidden loot box! Nice!”

“Heh heh... Lucky us.”

Oh right, that was a thing. I checked and saw that I had received a Black Jade.
All right! I'll use this later to make a Tamed Monster's Orb.

“Well then, should we head back for now?”

“Yeah, let's go.”

This was as far as our temporary party would go. Later, we would all be coming back with our own respective parties.

Amelia and the others approached me very closely once we had exited the dungeon. “All right, so you'll set things up the way you promised, right?”

“S-Sure. But once the update happens, you'll only be able to pat their heads... And if you do it for too long, the monsters will start to dislike you.”

“That's better than not being able to get close to them at all!”

“Besides, the sight of your orchard will be enough to heal that pain...”

As long as Amelia and Ursula were fine with it, I didn't mind.

“Okay. Once I've updated my settings, I'll let you know.”

“Sounds good, thank you!”

“Well, see ya later!”

“Heh heh... 'Til we meet again.”

After giving one last bow of their heads, they took their leave. All we had done was open the Air Elemental Gate and take a look around, but I was strangely tired.

“I'm gonna head back to the farm too.”

My monsters would make me feel better. Plus, I wanted to set up the objects I'd bought as soon as possible.

After parting with everyone and returning to the Town of Beginnings, I decided to install the Tower Mill and Aeroponic Fence. I walked through the

farm with Olto, discussing with him where to place them. Even though he couldn't speak in words, he could communicate with his gestures and vocalizations.

"It'd be nice to put the Tower Mill next to the barn, if possible."

"Mm, mm-mm!"

"Hmm, yeah. Is here good?"

"Mmm!"

The Tower Mill appeared right in the middle of the farm, offering an impressive sight.

"It definitely gives a Western feel. I think it really enhances the fantasy vibe of the farm."

"Mm!"

It was a small, slender windmill made of brick and wood. It was maybe around ten meters tall, its blades turning at a constant speed despite the lack of a strong breeze. Only in video games, am I right?

I checked out the inside of the Tower Mill and found a large stone millstone there. It was about a meter in diameter and was turning in tandem with the windmill's axle.

"So I can grind up items with that?"

When I approached it, a window popped up asking what I wanted to feed into the millstone. However, I couldn't actually select most of the items I had on hand. This structure might be harder to use than I'd thought. I bet if I deposited something that couldn't be made into a powder into the millstone, after some time it would just spit out trash.

"First, I should try grinding something I know will work."

I decided to try making edible grass into a powder. When I'd tried to make powdered grass myself, it ended up bringing the quality down quite a bit. How might it turn out with this millstone?

I selected the edible grass I'd dried using Alchemy and fed it into the

millstone.

“Whoa! It’s actually grinding up the grass!”

“Mmm!”

Olto and I peered into the millstone, where we could actually observe the item being crushed up. Why were we so drawn to watching this? It was like watching the drum of a washing machine. Maybe the secret was in the rotation.

Anyway, we could leave the millstone to its job for the moment.

“All right, the real problem is this Aeroponic Fence... What do you think, Olto?”

“Mm...”

Sure enough, he didn’t have anything we could grow using this fence. Which meant we could expect those kinds of plants to be beyond the Air Elemental Gate.

“Well, we’re going to go explore it tomorrow. I’ll do my best to collect some air plants there!”

“Mm-mm!”

The next day, I was fired up. After logging on, I decided to check on the Tower Mill first.

I stood in front of the mortar inside the Tower Mill and a window popped up displaying the item name “Edible Grass (Powder Form).”

Amazingly, it’d produced just the item I’d been expecting. Its quality was also just a little higher than what was sold in the special event village. And compared to my own powdered edible grass, there was a world of difference.

“I bet this’ll raise the quality of the things I cook.”

I decided to try it out immediately. I headed towards the barn and called out for Reflet.

“Reflet, you got a sec?”

“Hum?”

“Could you put some water in here?”

“Hum!”

Reflet waved her finger and a ball of water appeared in midair. She slowly lowered it down into the pot, not letting a single drop spill.

“Great job as always, Reflet!”

“Hum!”

I gave her a firm pat on the head as I proceeded with the preparations.

Along with Reflet’s high-quality water and the powder I’d collected from the millstone, I also added in honey and a blue acorn to make a cookie. It was just a simple, quickly made cookie, but it had a whopping eight-star quality.

“Oho! How’s it taste?”

I tasted the freshly made cookie. *Mm, delicious.* To be honest though, I couldn’t taste a difference from the lower-quality cookies. This one was as tasty as the others.

“I can’t taste the difference with my palate... But if it were a food that gave a buff, it’d probably increase its effect.”

When the quality of a food was raised, it also augmented the effects of the buffs that came with it. If I used this powder to make some useful meals, then it was sure to help on my adventures.

“That millstone turned out to be just as intriguing as I thought.”

What should I grind up next? Powdered edible grass was definitely useful, but I wanted to try out other items. After deliberating, I decided to try grinding up a blue acorn. Acorn powder existed in the real world too, so I felt like there was a low chance of it turning into garbage. I deposited a blue acorn into the millstone, and I heard the grinding sound of it being crushed up. If I waited a bit, the blue acorn powder would be ready.

“Next, I need to decide which party members to take to the dungeon.”

I was going to have to explore the dungeon if I wanted to get new materials. This time, I wasn’t planning on taking my reliable tank, Olto, along.

“Olto would be super weak to air elements.”

Monsters had various weak points. There were elemental weaknesses to earth, water, fire, and wind, and physical attack weaknesses to slashing, piercing, and bludgeoning attacks, *etc.* But having an earth attribute didn’t absolutely mean that the monster would have a weakness to air. That was different for each monster.

Among them, it was known that gnomes were weak to air. I didn’t find that out on my own, though—Amelia told me. No matter how good Olto’s defense was, he probably wouldn’t do so well in an air-centric dungeon. The gimmick had to do with wind, and the monsters that appeared would also have the air attribute.

“All right, it’s decided. I’ll go with Sakura, Himka, Reflet, Bear Bear, Rick, and Fau!”

Drimo was also going to sit this one out. From what I briefly saw of the trial, monsters with better maneuverability would have an easier time fighting.

“Hm? I got a message? Ah, it’s from KingOysterMushroom.”

As I was leaving the farm, I noticed I’d received a message from my friend KingOysterMushroom. He was thanking me for the dungeon and the festival, as well as giving me an update on the delivery of the information.

The long and short was that I’d decided to leave the handling of the information on the Mayoiga and other stuff that we got together to KingOysterMushroom and the others. I didn’t really think I had anything worth hiding, but they’d apparently deliberated over what information to sell and what to keep secret. So, I’d handed over my screenshots and logs, leaving the decision fully up to the rest. My priority was simply getting to the Air Elemental Gate as quickly as possible, after all. They’d grumbled a bit about wanting me to go with them, but I exercised my right as the leader to excuse myself.

“You’re the one with the most information, Silver-Haired. It kind of feels like we’re stealing your achievement.”

“Aren’t you worried we’ll swindle you out of the information fee?”

“Speaking of which, splitting it four ways is out of the question, you know.”

And so on and so forth. KingOysterMushroom, Blanche, and General Frost were all persistent until the end, until they finally resigned themselves, saying, “We’d never oppose our leader!” *Heh heh*. If they were going to force me to be the leader, it was only right that they do what I asked.

“Wait...my share is 200,000 G?”

KingOysterMushroom and the others seemed to think I should get the bigger share. They’d kept insisting they would give me eighty percent, and it looked like they really had.

“Even though I told them I’d be fine just splitting it four ways...”

Well, I could talk to them about it next time we met. What was more important right now was making my way to the Air Elemental trial.

“Oh, right. Before that, I should open up my skill scroll.”

I’d forgotten that I’d received a random skill scroll as a bonus for being the first to open the Air Elemental Gate. If we’d opened the scrolls there, we would have been able to get information on what everyone else got. But we all had on our minds on seeing the Air Elementals’ town and dungeon and nothing else, so everyone forgot.

“All right, no time to waste. Here we go!”

When I opened the scroll, my body was enveloped in light. Then, after checking my stats, I saw I’d acquired the skill just like that. Easy peasy.

“‘Engraving (Wind)’? What’s that? I’ve never heard of it before.”

I didn’t even know whether it was a combat skill or a crafting skill. I went ahead and tried to activate the skill, but...

“The skill won’t activate without a target, huh? Reflet, do you know how to use this skill?”

“Hum?”

“Guess not.”

Reflet tilted her head, looking just as unsure as I was.

“Looks like it must be an active skill.”

Unlike when using passive skills like Calling Blessing, which were always activated, I was able to select a target. There was no doubt it was the type of skill that produced some sort of effect on a target the player selected.

“But since I can use it in town, it’s gotta be a crafting skill.”

I walked around inside the barn, trying to find something I could use as a target for this Engraving skill.

Finally, I was able to find one.

“A wooden teacup?”

It was a teacup Sakura made. But after I selected the teacup, a message popped up saying I needed to select a tool, so I ended up not being able to use the skill after all. It seemed like the skill would allow me to engrave something on an object by way of a tool.

“Hmm, I’ll verify that after I come back from the Air Elemental dungeon.”

“Hum!”

“You’re pretty motivated too, huh, Reflet?”

“Hum-hum!”

I called for the other monsters to join Reflet and me, forming up the Air Elemental dungeon exploration team.

“All right, let’s go!”

“Hummm!”

And with that, I returned to the Air Elemental dungeon and stepped inside the first room. It was as captivatingly beautiful as ever. The beautiful green walkway stretched forth into the white fog.

“Hmm, it’s going to take a good amount of courage to move forward...”

However, it wasn’t just pretty.

The pathway was barely two meters in width. Not only that, but there weren’t even handrails on either side, so if you missed a step, you’d plunge headfirst into the valley. The light breeze blowing up from below brought a sense of

realness to the fantastical scene.

I didn't even have a fear of heights, but still I was hesitant to take a step forward.

"Pretty narrow path, huh?"

With a space this narrow, walking side by side felt dangerous. We'd have to walk forward in a single file, just like in the RPGs of old.

"Hm..."

"Hum..."

"Growl..."

Himka and Reflet were clinging to Bear Bear's arms, peering down below fearfully. Their previous zeal had disappeared, replaced with clear trepidation. Bear Bear looked like they wanted to take a look down too, but if they moved now, it'd be dangerous for the monsters clinging to them, so they patiently waited.

"Everyone, be careful not to fall."

"...!"

"Chirp chirp!"

With Bear Bear in the lead, we walked forward as if we were pretending to be a train. Himka, however, seemed like he couldn't help but be curious about what was up ahead; he suddenly poked his head out to the side.

You're gonna lose your balance if we get attacked while you're doing that!

"Hmm..."

We continued walking cautiously until we slowly came to the end of the passage and into a room that was similar to the first room. It had a slightly wider foundation than the walkways, and fog that acted as its walls.

The only clear difference was the presence of monsters.

"A Breeze Kitty? I-It's so cute!"

"Meow!"

The monster that had been lying in wait for us in this room was, no matter how you looked at it, a kitten. An adorable white kitten with green tiger stripes.

It was less of a “big, scary monster,” and more of a “biiig, scawwy monsteerrr!”

“I-I want...”

I need to tame that kitten! I felt like I suddenly understood Amelia and the others’ obsessions. *I wanna hold that kitten in my arms, scritch its little chin, and make it purr! I wanna make it jump around and chase a cat toy!*

But all my hopes were immediately dashed away.

“I can’t designate it as a target...?”

That kitten must have been exclusive to Summoners, just like other monsters in the other Elemental Gates: the Pond Turtle, Stone Snake, and Fire Lark.

“D-Dang...” I was in utter despair. I even forgot that I was in front of an enemy. I fell to my hands and knees and yelled. “NOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

As I was lamenting, Rick hopped onto my shoulder and started knocking on my head. This must have been his way of comforting me.

“Chirp?”

“R-Right. I have you guys. Ahhh, so fluffy!”

“Chirp?”

I picked Rick up and buried my face in his soft belly, which helped calm me down a bit. *Mm, so fluffy!*

“Fluffy, sooo fluffy! This is great...”

“Chirp.”

If I couldn’t tame it, I couldn’t tame it. We could just use this area to gain some experience.

“All right everyone, let’s roll!”

With this party setup, Bear Bear was the attacker, along with Sakura.

“Growl growl!”

“Meow!”

“...!”

“Meeow!”

Oho. It's pretty fast. I suppose it is a cat, after all. But it also seemed kind of weak. Sakura, aiming for the spot the monster landed, sent it flying with a hit from her whip. I followed up as usual with my Aqua Ball, and that was that. But the true threat of this dungeon wasn't its monsters. The most terrifying aspect was in fact the dungeon gimmick itself.

“Aye?”

“F-Fau!”

It happened right in the middle of the long, narrow pathway leading to the next room: a crosswind blew right at us.

The wind itself wasn't very strong, and since I was wearing the Windproof Necklace, I wasn't affected by it much. But the whooshing wind blew at us unexpectedly, so I was caught off guard.

Fau, who had been sitting on top of my head, had also been caught unawares; she lost her balance and toppled over. The wind had also set her slightly adrift, meaning instead of falling onto the pathway, she started falling towards the valley below. I instinctively reached my hand out to her, but I just missed her.

“Faaauuuuuu!”

“Ayeee!”

Fau slipped through my fingers and plummeted below.

She stared up at me, her eyes wide open.

“Fau!”

At this rate, she'll—

“Aye!”

Right, Fau could fly, so there was never any issue. I'd gotten so panicked in the moment that I'd clean forgotten.

“Th-That was nerve-racking...”

“Aye.”

Fau was making a gesture like she was wiping the sweat from her brow. She had been falling with her legs still crossed until she was halfway down. Had *she* also forgotten she could fly? She looked genuinely panicked.

“You okay?”

“Aye!”

“Fau may be fine, but the rest of you be careful, okay? Especially you, Rick. You weigh next to nothing.”

“Chirp!”

There are probably even stronger winds up ahead, so we need to move carefully!

“Chirp!”

“Wha— You just agreed to be careful!”

The wind on this pathway seemed to blow at certain intervals. As we were preparing ourselves to go to the next room, this time it was Rick who was swept away. He was sent flying even farther than Fau. *This is it—*

“...!”

“Chirp!”

“Th-That was dangerous. Nice one, Sakura!”

“...♪”

The moment I’d lost hope, Sakura immediately flung out her whip. Rick clung to it desperately, managing to evade having to respawn.

“Rick, I told you to hold on tight!”

“Chirp!”

Don’t wipe your brow like you’re saying, “Phew, that was a close one”! This dungeon was *not* good for my heart.

“This time for sure...let’s progress carefully!”

“Chirp!”

“I don’t know why you’re raising your hand up so confidently like that.”

“Chirp?”

Before the next gust blew, we booked it into the next room, the layout of which seemed pretty troublesome. The room was shaped like a donut, with a giant hole in the center. Three monsters were lying in wait there. Two of them were the same kitten monsters, the Breeze Kitties, that had been in the earlier room.

Plus, there was one more. How should I put this... It kind of looked like a flying murder doll? A little girl, with a terrifying face that reminded me of a certain orange-haired killer doll, was floating in midair.

It was terrifying as heck, but it was precisely the monster we’d been looking for. Well actually, what I really wanted was the unique form of it.

“Looks like a Deranged Air Elemental. Be careful not to fall, everyone!”

“Chirp!”

“Especially you, Rick!”

“Chirp?”

I really was worried about him. But after I spoke, the monster noticed us! The Deranged Air Elemental looked our way and unleashed a scream.

“Screeeeech!”

“Urgh, the deranged elementals are creepy in every trial...”

The Deranged Air Elemental felt more frightening than other deranged variants since it looked like a small child. It was oddly powerful and gave off a strong horror-movie vibe.

“This walkway is too narrow to move around much, so let’s go with a long-range attack!”

“...!”

“Chirp!”

I joined in by attacking the Deranged Air Elemental with an Aqua Ball. I instructed Himka and the others to keep the Breeze Kitties from getting close, but apparently that was a mistake on my part.

“Meow!”

“What the— No fair!”

To my surprise, the kittens could fly. Actually, it would be accurate to say they were kicking off and running on the air. That made sense—they appeared in an air dungeon, so they had to have an ability that made it so they wouldn’t fall.

Before I knew it, they were right behind us, placing us in a vulnerable position.

“Meow meow!”

“How can you charge at us while looking so adorable?! Urk!”

They were making use of the tailwind, so the impact was intense. It was clear their attacks were aiming to make us fall rather than deal us damage.

“This dungeon uses way too many dirty tricks!”

We at least managed to avoid falling down, defeating the monsters with long-range attacks. But it seemed like we would have a hard time against bigger groups of monsters going forward.

The actual combat ability of the monsters here was probably lower than that of the monsters that appeared in the other elemental dungeons. Their attack and defensive power also weren’t that great. But on top of having high evasion, they could fly. Also, their attacks could inflict Blow Away. These features made them far more annoying than even stronger enemies.

It would only be a matter of time before we eventually fell down and died.

“Hmm, maybe we should wrap up our exploration and get a sylph. Then we can go home.”

“Aye?”

At my words, Fau was making a gesture as if asking, “Why?”

Fau evidently liked this dungeon. She had fun being swept away in the air. It must have held some appeal for her.

“Well, the rest of us can’t fly, y’know?”

“Aye.”

Look disappointed all you want, I’m not prolonging our stay here.

We spent another hour in the Air Elemental dungeon, somehow surviving and managing to achieve something out of it.

“We got some materials.”

“Chirp!”

“Aye!”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. It’s all thanks to you guys.”

The air plants I wanted to get in this dungeon were growing in some hard-to-reach places, like on the underside of the rocky foundation. We were able to collect them safely thanks to Rick’s climbing and Fau’s flying abilities.

“This one’s a Windproof Plant, and this one’s a Gale Plant. They look alike, but they’re named differently.”

Among the plants we collected, we got seven Windproof Plants and one Gale Plant. Both types had a rarity of three, but it seemed that Gale Plants were the rarer ones in this dungeon.

“The problem is the ores.”

Since we didn’t have Olto with us, we hadn’t done any mining. Although it seemed like the mining nodes were also under the foundation, Fau and Rick couldn’t mine, and I would have to put my life on the line to get all the way down there.

“But it seems like a waste to come all the way here and not do any mining...”

I have no other choice. I’ve gotta try.

“You’ll all help me, right?”

“Growl!”

“Hm!”

What I had to do wasn’t particularly difficult. I just had to tie a rope around a

pillar and tie the other end around my torso. Then, with my monsters pulling the rope tight, I would lower myself down towards the mining node. I was basically rappelling. But I didn't have any other gear besides the rope, so I had to rely on my monsters to adjust the height.

I was really counting on Bear Bear and Himka, who both prided themselves on their strength, to do their best.

"All right, lower me down slowly!"

"Aye!"

"Chirp!"

"...Bear Bear, Himka. I'm counting on you two."

Fau and Rick were the first to raise their hands to volunteer, but what were *they* so confident for? I could only see a future where they, being unable to support my weight, just got dragged down with me. *Please, just don't get in Bear Bear and Himka's way!*

"Growl growl!"

"Yeah, just like that! Lower me a little more!"

"Hm-hmm!"

"Whooooaaa!"

This is twice as scary as I thought it would be! There's nothing below me and I'm swaying in the wind!

"Aaaah! Rick! I told you not to get in the way!"

"Chirp?"

Hearing my shriek, Rick scurried down the rope to me.

I appreciate the thought! I really do, but—!

We're swaying! Every time Rick moves, we sway like crazy!

"J-Just come here for now. All right, can you stay still for a bit?"

"Chirp."

I placed Rick on top of my head and told him not to move. This was a

terrifying situation. Normally his silly behavior was cute, but I wished he'd learn how to act according to the situation.

Afterwards, I was lowered even farther, looking out for a mining node. Finally, I spotted it.

"I see the mining node!"

Right underneath the foundation was a shining spot. Without a doubt, that was a mining node.

"But my pickax won't reach..."

I'd been lowered down vertically, so I was still about three meters away from the mining node. Even stretching out my arm that was holding the pickax, I couldn't reach it.

"Chirp?"

"There's a node at that rock that's jutting out a bit over there."

"Chirp!"

"Whoa?! I told you to stay still!"

As I was thinking about what to do, Rick once again moved along the rope ladder, returning back up it. *Man*, he really just couldn't settle down.

But it turned out Rick hadn't just been playing around.

To my amazement, he came back with Fau barely a few seconds later.

"Chirp!"

"Aye!"

As if under Rick's orders, Fau moved behind my back and started shoving against me. Even though she didn't have the strength to lift me up, it seemed that she could make me swing while I was dangling like this.

"Wait, Fau! What're you doing?! You're shaking me!"

"Aye!"

"Chirp chirp!"

But there was no end to their tiny insanity.

Fau pushed against me in time with Rick's shouts. Little by little, the length of my arcs increased, and the swaying motion became even more intense.

I didn't understand what they were going for at first, but I soon caught on to their plan. They were trying to make me swing wide enough to reach the mining node.

Not a bad strategy...if I weren't the one being pushed! But now that we'd reached this point, we couldn't stop.

"Urghh! There's no going back now! Just a little farther—!"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Aye!"

"Aaaarrrrrggghhh!"

As I swung back and forth as though I were on a trapeze, I slammed my pickax towards the mining node. It was a brilliant success. Bear Bear and Himka must have heard my celebratory cry; they slowly started pulling me back up.

Man, that was terrifying! This must be what people meant by barely escaping with their lives. And for mining a single spot, it had taken a lot of time.

"...Mm-hm. That's enough mining for now."

Excited, I checked my inventory, but the only thing I'd received was a low-quality Iron Ore.

Based on my experience, I'd thought I'd get a Wind Ore... Maybe my low chances of finding that had to do with my Mining level. That really had been a waste of time.

As expected, I needed Olto to do any mining.

But it would be difficult to summon Olto here, since all of the monsters that appeared in this dungeon used wind-based attacks.

"Maybe I'll summon him to do a little bit of mining on the way back. But for now, we should prioritize getting a sylph."

We continued on for another four rooms, in the last of which we ran into a

unique Deranged Air Elemental.

“All right! Finally!”

I thought I’d be able to run into it more easily with the title I’d gotten, but it still took a good bit of time. Well, the more you want something in a game, the less likely it is it’ll appear, after all.

The ordinary Deranged Air Elementals had green hair, but the one in front of me had white hair, just like the Sylph Chief had. This undoubtedly had to be the unique version.

“All right, let’s make sure not to kill it so we can tame it! Restrain it, Sakura!”

“...!”

“Everyone else, take care of the other monsters!”

“Growl!”

“Chirp!”

We all enthusiastically threw ourselves into battle, but it ended up being so difficult I wanted to cry.

I used Aqua Ball with my Hold Back skill to bring its HP down, but Sakura was having a hard time restraining a flying monster. She was persistent at least; she repeatedly used her tree magic ability “Flowering Paralyzer” to grow flowers that spread a paralyzing pollen around. That managed to stop the deranged elemental’s movements.

“Nice job!”

“...!”

The monster was paralyzed in the perfect position too. The ground was right beneath it, so it wouldn’t fall into the valley.

“Now all I need to do is tame i— Huh?”

“...”

Sakura and I couldn’t help but glance at each other. The Deranged Air Elemental had died right in front of us. What happened?

“...Oh right, maybe it was fall damage?”

“...!”

Since it had been paralyzed in midair, the Deranged Air Elemental had fallen from a height of about one meter. But falling from that height shouldn't inflict fall damage...

Maybe it had to do with how it landed. It had fallen right on its head, after all. I'd only made things worse by bringing its HP down to 1 with my Hold Back skill.

“We got an air crystal, at least. That's good, I guess...” I told myself so I wouldn't cry. “Oh well, not much we can do about that. Next time, let's paralyze it before reducing its HP.”

“...”

As I consoled Sakura, who looked dejected, we continued moving forward.

Another two hours later...

“I summon thee!”

“Tra-la-la!”

I summoned the sylph I had finally managed to tame from the ranch, swapping out Rick for her.

Name: Eine *Race: Sylph* Base Level: Lv. 15

Master: Yuto

HP: 38/38 MP: 6060

Strength: 8 *Endurance: 10* Agility: 15

Dexterity: 13 *Intelligence: 12* Sanity: 8

Skills: Yarn Spinning, Wind Magic, Collect, Cultivation, Weaving, Float, Sericulture

Equipment: Air Elemental's Sewing Needle, Air Elemental's Hunting Robe, Air Elemental's Satchel



“Tra-la?”

“Aww, you’re so cute!”

Eine was a unique sylph. She looked exactly like the Sylph Chief. The only differences were that she looked a little younger and she wasn’t holding a staff; her clothes were also a little plainer. But the base look of having white hair, a white blouse, and green bloomers was the same.

In addition to that, her skills seemed pretty interesting. I’d been expecting her to have a skill that let her make leather clothing, but she instead had only more preliminary skills. With the skills she did have, she could probably make yarn and cloth.

“Sericulture, huh...”

I was sure that skill would have its own requirement, like how you needed a beehive for Beekeeping.

“I still have some things I’ll need to gather, then. Glad to have you on the team, Eine!”

“Tra-la!”

“Well, we’ve completed our goal here, so should we head back?”

“Tra-la-la!”

With the new addition to our party, we made our way back towards the dungeon’s entrance, checking out Eine’s abilities on the way. I also summoned Olto so he could do some mining for us at the same time.

“You’re not so good at attacking, huh, Eine?”

“Tra-la.”

This was despite her holding a sewing needle that was about thirty centimeters long. At that length it looked like a rapier, but it was named the Air Elemental’s Sewing Needle. It seemed like it could do some damage if it stabbed an enemy, but Eine didn’t use it for attacking. Just like the other elemental monsters, she could only defend in battle.

The same could be said for her wind magic, since she lacked any offensive

moves. It would also probably be difficult for her to be a tank with her small frame. Among the four elementals, she seemed like she'd fare the worst in battles.

To make up for that, though, she had excellent collecting skills. Since she could fly with her Float skill, she could gather items from even more spots than Rick could. Also, thanks to her surprisingly fast movement speed, she could probably act as a decoy during fights.

"Float doesn't seem to take up much MP, same as Fau's ability."

"Tra-la!"

"Aye!"

The two of them were having a blast chasing each other around in the air. They seemed to match each other in speed. Also, it didn't look like her MP was decreasing at all. Even while she was constantly floating, she only used as much MP as was automatically recovered. As long as she didn't use up all her MP during fights, there'd be no issues.

That was good. Why, you ask? Because if she wasn't floating, her white hair would touch the ground. Her hair was shorter than that of the Sylph Chief we met at the entrance of the gate, but her hair was still about as long as she was tall. If she walked, the tips of her hair would probably brush lightly against the ground.

"Oh, my staff skill leveled up from that last battle. I got a new art... Meditation?"

Meditation was an art that would allow me to slowly regain MP if I stood motionless in one spot and focused my mind.

For a rear guard like me, a skill that allowed me to replenish my MP even in the middle of battle was very handy. Of course, it wouldn't replenish a crazy amount of MP, so it wasn't as if I would be able to endlessly shoot off powerful attacks. At best, the amount of MP I'd recover would be about enough to allow me to use Aqua Ball a few extra times.

I was growing up too. It nearly brought a tear to my eye.

“I think I’ve got a good understanding of what you can do now, Eine. Let’s head back for now.”

“Tra-la-la.”

The small, white-haired girl floated ahead of me, leading the way. *Mmm, I just know the cuteness-obsessed crowd is going to lose their minds over her too.*

Chapter Two: Tatami, Kotatsu, Verandas, and More!

“So basically, it just needs to be installed on a farm or in a home.”

“Tra-la!”

While on the way back to my farm from the Air Elemental trial, I did some quick research about Sericulture. Instead of looking stuff up on the forums, I just asked Sawyer. He was actually pretty knowledgeable about the subject. Naturally, it was completely different from real-life silkworm raising.

First, I needed a Silkworm Box and feed. I wondered how I would get the silkworms, but apparently they appeared on their own when someone who had the Sericulture skill used a Silkworm Box. It was the same principle as bees and the Beehive skill.

Also, unlike real silkworms, the ones in LJO ate more than just mulberry leaves. They could be fed other plants as well, and depending on what you fed them, the qualities, attributes, and types of silk they produced might vary. I was looking forward to experimenting with a bunch of different things.

“All right, next all I have to do is set it up on my farm.”

I had actually already gotten a hold of a Silkworm Box and mulberry leaves. They were being sold in the Air Elemental town. That did make sense, since it was the sylphs’ town, after all.

“Where should we put it?”

“Tra-la!”

Immediately after returning to the farm, I asked Eine where we should place the Silkworm Box. She looked around a bit and then pointed to a spot.

“Tra-la-la!”

“Here?”

The spot she’d pointed out was right next to the beehive.

“Is it better for it to be in the shade?”

“Tra-la!”

Apparently, the position of the box also affected the quality of the silk. Also, having it near the beehive would make managing both easy enough.

“Bear Bear, you’re fine with the Silkworm Box going here, right?”

“Growl.”

At my question, Bear Bear raised both their arms and made a circle above their head. *I’ll take that as a yes.* The Silkworm Box’s location probably wouldn’t affect the beehive much.

As for Eine, since she could float, she didn’t need a step stool or anything, so there was no problem there. I placed the box on the farm, and after some quiet chanting on Eine’s part, the installation was complete.

“All right, should we wait for the silkworms to produce their silk?”

“Tra-la.”

“Growl.”

Next to Eine, Bear Bear was also peeking into the Silkworm Box. They seemed interested. At any rate, the scene of a floating little girl with long, white hair and a yellow bear standing amiably next to each other and peering into a box gave me a super strong fantasy impression. It almost felt like a scene out of a picture book.

“Growl?”

“Tra-la!”

“Growl growl.”

Incidentally, the silkworms’ silk could apparently be collected from their cocoons without killing them. They never reached their pupa stage to begin with. At that point, these weren’t really silkworms, were they? Well, this was a game, after all.

As I was examining the inside of the Silkworm Box, I heard someone call out to me.

“Yuuutooo!”

I turned around to see a familiar female player running over to me—though her eyes were trained solely on Bear Bear.

“Hiya! Long time no see!”

“That was fast, Ashihana.”

“Heh heh, I was interested in the Silkworm Boxes they were selling in the stores. Also, I have something to give you.”

I had also contacted Ashihana to get some advice about the Silkworm Box. Or rather, since she had been with Sawyer, she’d made it her business too.

“This is the Silkworm Box?”

“I just set it up. What do you think?”

“Hmm, yeah. I think I can make something better. But I have to gather the materials for it, so you’d have to give me a few days.”

“That’s fine. You don’t mind making me one? How much is the commission fee? And I’ll pay for the materials, of course.”

“Can you not give me the same deal you gave Amelia and the others?”

“The deal I gave Amelia...?”

“Yeah!”

Surprisingly, she told me I could just cover the cost of the materials. In exchange, she said she wanted permission to pet my monsters and enter my farm after the update took effect.

I knew the update would make it so people couldn’t enter my farm without me present or pet my monsters like they could now, but was that really okay? Well, if it was good enough for the top woodworker to make me a priority, custom-made item, then it was good enough for me.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course! Even if we can’t touch, it’s worth it just to see them in the flesh!”

She seemed fine with it. She’d said that with such earnestness, after all.

“Right, I have to give you this! Here you go!”

“Wait, why are you giving me money? I’m pretty sure I’m supposed to pay *you*?”

“Huh? Did you forget? It’s payment for the figurines! We decided I’d pay you twenty percent for the sales.”

“Oh right, I was supposed to get a cut... Hang on, are you sure this is *just* twenty percent?!”

“The Silver-Haired’s Adorable Critter line is super popular, you know.”

“No, but really... *1,200,000 G*?”

Ashihana, isn’t this way too much? Though if people were buying them, I guess that meant they were being sold at a fair price? They were just wood-carved dolls! They didn’t even do anything!

“This is the sum for the first three rounds of sales. Also, here. As promised, this is for you.”

“O-Oooh...”

To my surprise, Ashihana took out a wooden figurine and set it down. It had a proper stand to keep it up.

“Whoa, it’s just as awesome as I was expecting!”

“Isn’t it? I’m pretty proud of it too, if I do say so myself!”

I would definitely display this once I had a house.

“Ah! I have to go!”

“Huh? At least let me make you some tea.”

“Sorry! I’m nearing my log-in limit! At this rate, I’ll be forcibly logged out! Oh, but, I have something else to ask you!”

“What is it?”

“A screenshot! Let me take a screenshot of your monsters!”

I assumed she wanted to take some screenshots for her own interest, but apparently she wanted some references for the next figurines. In that case, I

didn't mind her taking as many screenshots as she wanted...

"Yaaay! So cute! This is the best!"

No, she's definitely taking screenshots just for fun. Well, that's fine too.

Afterwards, Ashihana quickly took her leave, saying she was running out of time.

I was looking forward to her next finished product, but what should I do with the one she'd left behind? I didn't have anywhere to display it.

"I really do want a proper home..."

Then, immediately after I muttered that—

Ding-dong.

"Oh? A notification?"

When I checked the window, I saw that I'd just received a message from the devs. Three messages, in fact. The title of one stood out to me.

"They're setting up a residential area, and introducing a mascot system?"

That was some timing. *Are the devs watching me...?*

"There's one more... What's this?"

It was titled "Apology from Management."

I was interested in the residential area, but I first opened up the short apology email to have a quick skim. The contents were about the players who had been causing a nuisance from earlier.

Taking into account their repeated etiquette breaches, the elf guy and his crew had their accounts suspended for one week in real-world time. They would also be monitored as blacklisted players.

The guy who had started the shouting match in the first place had meanwhile gotten his account deleted. He *had* proposed to engage in real-money trading with Amelia, so there was probably no avoiding that.

The devs' response time was super quick. It was exactly what you'd call "immediate action." I had no complaints.

The remaining messages were regular announcements sent to all players.

“All right, lessee here...”

There was an announcement for a large-scale update planned for tonight and various messages related to that. This was all information that could be found on the official website, but this must have just been for the sake of disseminating that info to those who didn't care to check it themselves. When I checked the messages, I saw several interesting announcements mixed in there.

“A bonus item pack for new players, huh?”

Starting tomorrow and lasting for a few days, new players would receive a single-use item set. This was probably to give a boost to the second wave of players.

The terms and conditions at the start of the game had specified that they would give bonuses to the second wave of players to bridge the gap with the first wave, so I had no objections there. That was the norm for online games these days.

The bonus item set would also be made available to existing players for real currency. I was already aware of this, since that had also been announced previously, but this message listed the specific contents of the pack, which included some pretty interesting items.

“As I was expecting, there's an EXP-Up ticket, and a guaranteed rare drop ticket, but...an incense that makes unique monsters appear in an area? Is that like what I used”

I had used an incense to attract Rick to me when I tamed him. I had only been able to use it around the Town of Beginnings, but this item seemed like it could be used anywhere. In exchange, from the moment you obtained it, you had a ten-day limit to use it.

“This looks pretty good too.”

It was an item called a skill ticket. Skill scrolls were items that gave you the skill sealed inside, but this particular item allowed you to choose a skill from a list. They were all basic skills, but it would allow players to conserve their points, which was much appreciated.

“There are one-thousand-, three-thousand-, and five-thousand-yen packs... And you can’t buy them all, you have to just pick one.”

I had to go with the five-thousand-yen pack, obviously. It looked like I could preorder it, so I went ahead and bought it.

One more interesting thing related to the new players was the announcement of a mini event. They were going to hold one-hour-long mini events over the course of several days. There were going to be a total of twenty mini events, so I planned on trying my hand at least one. The prizes—potions and money—were pretty lackluster, but they would make nice keepsakes. Players couldn’t participate multiple times, but with those prizes, there wasn’t much merit to doing so anyway. Most people probably wouldn’t want to participate in the first place.

“Next is the implementation of the residential area and mascot system.”

The residential area, as the name implied, would be a new area composed only of player houses. It would be like a neighborhood, so to speak.

Players could warp from the Town of Beginnings and Zones One through Five at no cost using the teleportation circles, but teleporting from other areas required a fee. That was how it had been with the event village.

Along with that, they were also making it so you could teleport from the event village to Zone Five and back without having to pay. The game would continue to make changes as things progressed.

“A home, huh? I want one, but my farm is pretty convenient right now.”

The barn on my farm was a simple home, so its functions were pretty limited, but I was really grateful to be able to open the door and immediately be at my farm.

“Though I would like to play around with the interior more.”

What should I do? Go with the cheapest home? It seemed like I’d be able to change up the interior design, so I wanted to try displaying my figures and other decorations. Also, what was this mascot system?

“Hm-hm... They seem like my yokai.”

It was a feature in which cute mascots could be residents of your home, allowing you to shower them with affection. You wouldn't be able to walk around with them out in the field; they could only stay in your home or a clan home you belonged to. You could also take them out within the residential area.

It looked like you could pick one for free from a list of several options when you purchased your home. However, mascots didn't have any special abilities. They just existed for the sole purpose of doting on them.

Although, there did exist mascots that had special abilities. Apparently, if you welcomed those mascots into your home, they would bring you some benefit.

"A home comes with one mascot. But then you can increase that number to have a maximum of six, huh?"

Two could be bought with in-game currency, but the message said you could add three more with IRL money. That made one that came with the house, plus two, plus three more, totaling six.

The starter mascots included ten varieties: dogs, cats, rabbits, mice, pigs, bears, frogs, owls, rhinoceros beetles, and koi fish. Rather than their usual sizes, each one was distorted into about the size of a basketball—their bouncy, floating portraits were attached to the message, looking like balloons.

Going forward, if you completed certain actions in game, the titles and items you obtained would make your list of potential mascots increase.

It was a feature that was sure to please the players lamenting over the new limit on touching monsters.

But still, mascots, huh...?

"All right, I'll get a home, and those mascots too!"

I had a lot of cute monsters, but mascots had a different type of cuteness. I had no choice, really.

"Applying for a home... Guess I can do that by going to the residential area?"

The selling of homes would start along with the unveiling of the residential area. Unlike the homes that existed in the towns so far, there would be a rich

assortment of home types in the residential area, such as cheap apartments, detached homes that came with a yard, and more. The residential area itself seemed very convenient too, so I was anticipating it to be popular.

“I’ll go check it out.”

“Chirp!”

“Aye!”

“Sure, sure. You guys won’t get in the way, so come on.”

The residential area would probably be crowded. If I brought a bunch of my monsters there, they’d probably get in the way of other players.

“Stay on my shoulders.”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Aye!”

When we arrived at the residential area, it *was* insanely crowded, just as I thought. But instead of lining up to apply for a home, most people were noisily discussing with their friends about what type of home they should buy.

As I weaved my way through those players, a stylish, glass-paned store came into view. At a glance, it looked like a modern café, but the tinted glass obstructed my view of the inside.

According to the map, this was the reception desk.

“This is the reception desk? No one’s lining up here, though...”

Well, I’d find out after going in, I thought as I entered, only to see that the inside was just a regular local real-estate office, nothing fantastical about it. The outside really didn’t match the inside...

After passing through the entrance, I saw that the reception area was divided into individual areas. That was probably to make sure the reception process went smoothly as well as to protect individual players’ information.

“Welcome in, sir!”

The NPC’s words of welcome were just like something stereotypical real estate agents would say. He was plump and wore a white button-down shirt

and black slacks. His hair was parted to the side in typical fashion, and he wore black-rimmed glasses as well as a sleeve garter. I couldn't help but think that this vibe was exactly what the devs were going for.

"Are you looking to buy a home?"

"Oh, yes. What kinds are there?"

"Allow me to explain. First, please take a look here."

The real estate agent abruptly held his hand up over the table and a window appeared before my eyes. This place really had abandoned any and all fantasy elements. This was a total sci-fi world.

The real estate agent was showing me a chart of all the types of homes.

Apartment complexes, detached homes that emphasized livability, homes with yards, high-end luxury homes, mansions, farmhouses, workshops, and so on and so forth.

"For someone living alone, I would recommend the apartment complex or detached home. For those who do crafting work, the farm homes and workshops would be best. For those, you can furnish them with crafting facilities suited to your needs from the start."

"So I can choose the layout to a certain extent?"

"Yes. Of course, you can always make renovations in the future as well, and you may add a crafting facility as an annex onto a residence's property. So there's no need to make a decision on that right here and now."

So you could use it as a residence or as a space to craft, but you could also decide on which you wanted to put importance on later.

What should I focus on?

"Hmm. I'm a Tamer, so I want to pick something prioritizing my monsters. Is there something with a yard that I could add a crafting workshop to?"

"Yes, certainly. This, for example, is a home for Tamers and Summoners, which is furnished with a space for monsters."

"Oho."

“Also... Ah, yes. I also recommend this. It has a spacious yard, as well as a basement and other areas, allowing you space to set up a workshop.”

“A Japanese-style home?”

“Yes. It comes with some special effects as well, so it’s quite a valuable acquisition.”

“Special effects?”

“It comes with a feature that allows you to hear the sound of insects in accordance with the four seasons, weather, and time. Of course, it comes with an on-off switch, so you don’t need to worry about annoyance.”

It comes with some pretty refined functions, huh? But it seemed interesting. The fact that it was the only Japanese-style home among all the other Western-style homes enticed me as well.

“By the way, could I see what the prices are like?”

“Certainly. Here are the prices for the current homes.”

“Huh? They’re so expensive!”

“Yes, sir, these are exceptional homes.”

The apartment-style homes, which were the cheapest, cost 100,000 G. A house with a yard was 1,000,000 G. In terms of area, the Japanese-style house only had two more rooms than the detached home with a yard did, but it was a total of 2,500,000 G.

“Two and a half million...? That’s almost everything I have on me. Can I pay in installments?”

“My apologies, but that is not possible...”

Unfortunately, it seemed like I couldn’t take out a loan.

Why’s that gotta be the only nonrealistic aspect of this realtor?!

“...Please let me think about it for a bit.”

“Of course. Here is an overview of the specific features.”

“Hmm.”

It was a one-story single-family home. For that reason, the lot was larger than the regular detached homes. That could also increase, seeing as how the courtyard could be expanded. No matter how much you expanded the yard, it wouldn't be visible from the outside. Just like the Magical Beasts Guild's ranch, it utilized some kind of mysterious space.

The house had a Japanese-style living room, three tatami rooms, and a kitchen. It also had a storage room and two rooms in the basement. The bedrooms even had closets.

It lacked a toilet and a bath, though. Not that I needed to use those in game.

Oh right, and I couldn't forget the veranda. That was a must for a traditional Japanese home.

Seeing the layout, it was pretty spacious. Also, it was possible to remodel the tatami rooms and basement into a workshop, and a farm could even be set up in the yard. However, I couldn't make any of the rooms into Western-style rooms, so I guess I had to give up on that...

"What's this 'transporter'?"

My eyes were drawn to the edge of the residence where the word "transporter" was notated. It was sketched onto the layout as if it were a bathroom or a changing room.

"It is a device that connects your homes and allows you to travel between them. You may travel unconditionally between the homes you own. For simple homes, you may travel to them once you've installed a transfer gate."

"A simple home? Would a barn be included in that?"

"Of course. Its function is to allow players to move easily between their home and distant farms, ranches, and simple bases, after all."

So basically, if I installed a transfer gate in a farm in each town, then I'd be able to travel even more easily between farms. No, not even farms—it'd be a breeze to travel between *towns*. I definitely needed that in my home.

Wouldn't it be better to buy the cheapest home just for that feature, then? I considered it, but it apparently didn't come with apartment-type homes.

“How much is the transfer gate?”

“The first one is 50,000 G. Then, they become 300,000 G.”

So the first one was discounted. I could buy it if I poured all my remaining money into it.

But was I actually okay with going ahead and buying the Japanese-style house?

“Hmm... Yeah, okay. It’d be great to have a drink and cool off on the veranda with my monsters.”

“Aye!”

“Chirp!”

Fau and Rick seemed to agree. They were raising their hands up happily from their perch on my shoulders.

“All right, I’ve decided!”

“Yes?”

“I’ll take the Japanese-style house. And a transfer gate.”

“Thank you very much. Now, where will you place your home?”

“I can choose?”

“Yes. For Japanese-style houses, you can pick anywhere you like in this area.”

Maybe to preserve the scenery, the Japanese-style houses were in a completely separate area from the other houses. Still within the residential area, it was a place filled with hills and forests.

“It’s definitely spacious, but I don’t see how hundreds of homes could be built here. Is this first come, first serve?”

“No. Just like with the garden, if it starts to become cramped, it will expand.”

So it wasn’t as if there was a prime location or anything. *I’ll pick based on the scenery and convenience.*

“Hmm, in that case, can I pick this spot?”

“Yes, certainly. I will go ahead and set up your home there. And this is for you:

your home key.”

“Oh, thank you.”

Was that the end of the purchase agreement? I checked my stats to see that all that cash I’d had was now down to a meager 20,000 G.

I had been considering getting some stronger equipment, but now I was flat broke. *I know I’m the one who bought it, but seeing how little money I have now makes me feel like I was a bit hasty...*

“Chirp chirp!”

“Aye!”

“Wh-What’s up with you guys?”

The tiny monsters on my shoulders started making a fuss. They grabbed hold of my head on either side and started rocking it back and forth.

“Hey— What’s gotten into you two all of a sudden?!”

“Chirp!”

“Aye!”

They seemed to be demanding that I head to the house right away, so excited to see the house that they couldn’t help it. If they were looking forward to it this much, then maybe it *had* been worth buying.

I could just save up money again. I’d have to put some more work into my unmanned farm stand.

“But more importantly, right now we better hurry up and go see our—”

“Now then, allow me to explain the mascots.”

Oops, I forgot about that.

“You may choose from this list of mascots. Which would you like?”

“Um, aren’t there only ten starter mascots?”

A window displayed a list of the mascots, but there were more of them than I was expecting.

“Ah, yes. These mascots are limited to Japanese-style homes.”

“Oh, was that a thing?”

I could choose from four extra mascots in addition to the ten mentioned in the message from the devs, though the one received for free still didn’t have any special abilities.

“What’s with this lineup? A mame shiba inu, a calico cat, a moon bear, and a red-crowned crane?”

As I looked through the list, I saw that, unlike the starter mascots, these were all realistic-seeming mascots. Actually, with this level of realism, they were already feeling like pets.

I checked out their portraits.

The mame shiba inu, calico cat, and moon bear were all baby versions of their respective animals. *So adorable*. But the red-crowned crane was just the adult version. Was it chosen to match the Japanese style...? If that was the case, there were smaller, cuter birds they could have chosen from, like a rock ptarmigan, or a pheasant, or a sparrow. Why a red-crowned crane? Was there someone who picked a crane over those other three?

“Oh well. Maybe I’ll go with the calico?”

I already had Bear Bear covering the bear spot. Although they were more of a stuffed-animal-looking bear and the moon bear was a real one, they were both still bears. Besides, I needed to get revenge for the Breeze Kitties. Oh, but the mame shiba inu was also cute...

“I can always get more, so for now I’ll go with the calico cat!”

“Very well. In that case, I’ll send the calico cat to your home.”

Some aspects, like the coat of the cat’s fur, would be randomized. Calico cats were cute no matter what, so I wasn’t really picky.

“Mascots and tamed monsters can move freely between homes by default.”

“Ah, understood.”

He must have been talking about how as long as I installed a transfer gate, then my monsters and mascots could freely travel to and from the farm. Just like other objects, the transfer gate was something you set up yourself. It

showed up in my inventory as an item. I would set it up on my farm later.

After I left the realtor's office behind, I headed straight for the home I'd just bought.

"I wonder what it's like."

"Chirp!"

"Aye!"

As I chatted with Rick and Fau on my shoulders and walked towards the residential area, my surroundings grew more and more devoid of other people. Soon, we were the only ones around.

"Huh? There's no one here..."

"Chirp?"

"Are Japanese-style homes not popular?"

"Aye?"

"Well, this is a Western-style fantasy world, after all. People are probably steering clear of Japanese homes."

I didn't think it was so expensive that no one else but me would be able to buy it, but it wasn't cheap enough for people to buy just try it out. *I did buy it, though...* Considering that, few people probably went for them.

"Let's think of it as being able to get some peace and quiet. More importantly—I see it!"

"Chirp!"

"You like it, Rick? Man, it really does look cool seeing it outside like this."

My home came into view in the middle of the lush forest, surrounded by short hedges. Despite the subdued black-tiled roof, I could feel a sense of warmth from the wooden construction. I had been imagining it to have lime-plaster walls, but this way had a more folk feel that I liked.

This went above and beyond my expectations. It really was awesome.

"Let's check out the inside!"

“Chirp chirp!”

I couldn’t wait any longer—I started running towards the house. I bolted so suddenly Rick got thrown off my shoulder, but he stuck a clean landing and started running by my side. Fau was flying above us.

“Man, it’s even more charming up close!”

“Aye!”

Rather than being a new building, it had the charm of a decades-old traditional home. I think I preferred that even more. The gate was simple, just a wooden gatepost with a double wooden door and a fence. It wasn’t as if it was a samurai’s residence, so this seemed about right. Round stones placed slightly apart led the way to the front entryway. It made me want to start playing hopscotch on them.

The door to the entryway was a paper sliding door made with wood and shoji. It seemed like this house didn’t use any glass. All the other windows were also shoji.

No burglars were around since this was a game, and the residential area wouldn’t have any natural disasters either. It’d be fine even if I carelessly left all the windows open, so I had no issue with this.

“All righty, what’s the inside like?”

“Chiiirp!”

When I opened the door to the front entryway, an adorable kitten was there to greet me.

“Meow!”

“Ooh! Is this the mascot?”

“Mrrow!”

It was a calico cat, so it was no doubt my mascot. I went to touch it without thinking, but it looked like I had to decide on a name first, as a naming window appeared.

“A name, huh... Hmm, a calico cat has a tricolor coat, so...” If it was three

colors we were talking about, there was no other choice. “All right, your name will be Dango!”

“Mrow!”

It seemed I had successfully named her. It was the same process as naming monsters.

“Good kitty, Dango!”

“Meow!”

I stroked her gently and she closed her eyes with a contented mewl. Even when I picked her up, she remained calm. Her belly was covered in soft fur, and her pink nose and toe beans were much too lovely.

Oh man, she transcends cuteness. I was a dog person, but now I could understand how cat people felt...

After petting her for a while, I brought Dango face-to-face with Rick and Fau. My tamed monsters got along with each other, but how would they do with mascots? It'd be a problem if they were to start fighting or—

“Chirp!”

“Aye!”

“Mrow!”

There was absolutely no problem. They were playing on equal terms, none of them seeming to feel like they were above the other. *Ooh, Fau got an upgrade from being a squirrel rider to a cat rider!*

Dango seemed to have no problem even as Fau climbed atop her back.

“Aye!”

“Meow!”

Fau valiantly thrust her finger forward, but Dango was just walking around as normal. She seemed like the type to take things at her own pace.

“All right, let's explore the interior!”

“Chirp chirp!”

Accompanied by the tiny critter crowd, whose number had increased to three with the addition of Dango, I explored the home.

I stepped out of the entranceway onto wood flooring. The floor creaked slightly under the weight of my foot, and the faint wooden scent tickled my nostrils. The level of realism was something else.

With the light by the entryway filtering through the shoji-covered windows, the place was exploding with a classical ambience.

Japanese homes really are the best!

I didn't forget to take my shoes off, by the way. This time, I removed them myself, but I changed my settings to make it so they would toggle automatically going forward. When I entered the house, my shoes would automatically come off, and when I left, I would automatically reequip the shoes I had been wearing. There was also an option for changing into other clothes.

Being able to immediately change into a yukata or a jinbei as soon as I entered my house? Not bad.

"After the entryway, the first room is a regular tatami room."

On the right side of the corridor leading from the entryway were stairs descending to the basement. On the left was a sliding screen door, which, when I opened it, revealed a six-tatami-mat room. It was a modest Japanese-style room with not much furnishing besides one wooden dresser. But I was still moved.

"Whoa, they even recreated the smell of tatami!"

Once I caught a whiff of tatami scent, I couldn't *not* throw myself down on it. I took a dive right where I was standing and lay facedown on the tatami floor. The scent of the soft rush entered my nose with even more intensity.

"Ahhh, it feels nice too!"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Aye!"

Rick and Fau copied me by lying down on top of the mat, but I could tell by their faces that they were actually pleased. It seemed my tamed monsters could

also appreciate the comfort of tatami.

Dango, however, was loafing at the entrance to the room, yawning.

“Oh, right. There should be some storage in these rooms. I wonder what’s inside?”

Remembering that closets were included, I took a peek inside one. As I did, I saw there was a futon set.

“No way, a futon?!”

Moreover, it wasn’t like the fantasy world, austere bedding you’d find at the inns in game—it was a proper Japanese futon, with a pillow filled with chaff.

“S-Sleep... No, I can’t!”

Sleeping in a bed in the game world would mean logging out.

“Which means I can’t fully enjoy the comfort of sleeping on a futon... Too bad.”

After we had our fill of the tatami, we headed to the next room. At the end of the hallway was a sliding screen door. The hallway turned to the left, and then to the right. If I went there, I’d likely run into the veranda.

“Let’s enjoy the veranda later. What’s this room like?”

I pushed down my desire to check out the veranda and opened up the door to the room in front of me.

“This one’s just another regular tatami room.”

However, this room had a sliding screen door leading to other rooms straight ahead and to the left. To the left was probably the room that faced out onto the veranda.

But I’d just decided to save that for later, so I firmly resisted my urge to turn left and opened the sliding screen door right in front of me. It opened out to a kitchen with wooden floors and walls.

“Oho, this is interesting.”

It was a super old-fashioned kitchen. There weren’t even any tiles, but there was a traditional stone stove and kiln as well as a wooden water bucket. All the

kitchen utensils, however, were made out of metal, so I wouldn't have any problems cooking with those. Even though the exterior was antiquated, it seemed like there wouldn't be any issues with its functionality.

There was even a faucet, which was also wooden. I tried twisting it on and sure enough, water came out. That was the work of the game.

"There's even a rice cooker. That really makes me want some rice..."

Maybe I'd try going to Alyssa to find out whether they'd discovered any yet on the front lines.

"All right, on to the other room!"

"Chirp!"

Rick, who had at some point reappeared on my right shoulder, agreed. Fau was on top of my head.

"All right then, this spot's for you."

"Mrow?"

I tried putting Dango on my left shoulder, and I achieved perfect balance. At least while we were interacting in the home, mascots and monsters weren't much different from each other.

With the four of us like that, rather than heading back into the prior room, we headed for another sliding door. Based on the direction, it was likely the room on the side of the veranda and courtyard.

"Whoa, would you look at that. Amazing!"

"Aye!"

It was the living room. It was a bit like a living-slash-dining area.

I was surprised to see a sunken hearth in the middle of the room. In the middle of the wide wooden frame that served as a table was a spread of ashes and charcoal. Moreover, above that was— What was that called? A pole with a hook attached to it? It was that thing that came with the hearth. Also, an iron kettle was hanging from that hook.

"This is so cool! Whoa, it's so easy to light a fire!"

Upon getting closer, I was given a choice to light a fire in the charcoal. It looked like I wouldn't have to start a fire with magic or flint each time.

Impressive as always, LJO!

It seemed like I could also do some cooking here, since it really was a hearth. But there was one thing I was worried about.

"Is the smoke going to be a problem?"

I'd wondered about the same thing in the kitchen, but that and this living room were the only areas where the ceiling had been removed, leaving the framework and roof uncovered. Compared to the tatami rooms, it gave it an even stronger antique feel.

However, I couldn't see anything installed that would allow the smoke to disperse.

"Hmm? Well, since this is a game, I guess it'll just work out somehow? Let's test it out."

I decided to try boiling water in the iron teakettle above the hearth to try out some tea.

"Just gotta light the fire and... Oh, I have to put water in the kettle. Okay, can I just leave it like this now?"

I sat cross-legged in front of the hearth as I waited for a while, petting Dango and Rick. Fau sat herself down on the wooden frame of the hearth and started strumming her lute. She didn't sing; it was a purely instrumental tune. She was playing her usual Nordic folk music, but the calm, relaxing music strangely fit in with this scene.

"The music actually goes well with a Japanese home."

"Chiiirp."

"Meow."

Rick and Dango's eyes gently closed. They seemed to be enjoying it.

After a few minutes of doing nothing but relaxing and waiting, steam began to rise from the mouth of the kettle. I peered inside and saw that the water was boiling. I used that water to brew some herb tea, and the taste was as delicious

as always.

“And the smoke...? Doesn’t seem like an issue.”

The amount of smoke coming up from the charcoal was surprisingly little, but the small amount that was produced rose up and disappeared, seemingly swallowed up by the roof.

“So there are aspects that are realistic and aspects that are made convenient by game logic. Mm-hmm, that’s what I call well-balanced.”

Now then, time to check out the rest of the rooms.

I urged on Rick and Dango, who were lazing about, and we returned to our house exploration.

“There should be three tatami rooms, a living room, a kitchen, and two basement rooms, so the last room on the first floor should be the other tatami room.”

The last unexplored room was the one next to the living room with the hearth. Positionally, it was on the left side of the first room we’d entered.

“Okay, now for this roo— Whooooaaa!”

I couldn’t help but shout. Could you blame me? After all, right before my eyes was enshrined a fiendish invention that could make any human being fall into depravity.

“A kotatsu?!”

Sitting in the middle of the tatami room was a kotatsu. I threw open all the shoji doors to reveal the veranda on the other side. Beyond that, I could also see the garden. Weeds were growing all over it in full force, but strangely, that added to the charm in its own way.

With the added tea cupboard, the room had an incredibly calm atmosphere.

The kotatsu had a brown tabletop with a black-and-white checkered quilt. Simple, but I couldn’t deny its charm. I mean, it was a kotatsu. I hadn’t been under one in years.

Once I had moved to Tokyo and started living in an apartment, I became

satisfied with just using a heater. My parents' house had one, though. I had good memories of getting under the kotatsu with Fran—our pet white dog resembling a mop—and falling asleep there and catching a cold.

“I’ve gotta get under there.”

I stuck my feet underneath it and felt them slowly become enveloped in warmth. I went farther in, up to my waist, and let out a fully satisfied “Ahhh...”

Man, being able to recreate the comfort of a kotatsu in a game? LJO does not miss!

“Aah, this is nice...”

As I gazed out at the garden in front of me, I sipped the tea I’d brewed earlier. It was a moment of pure bliss.

“You all should eat too!”

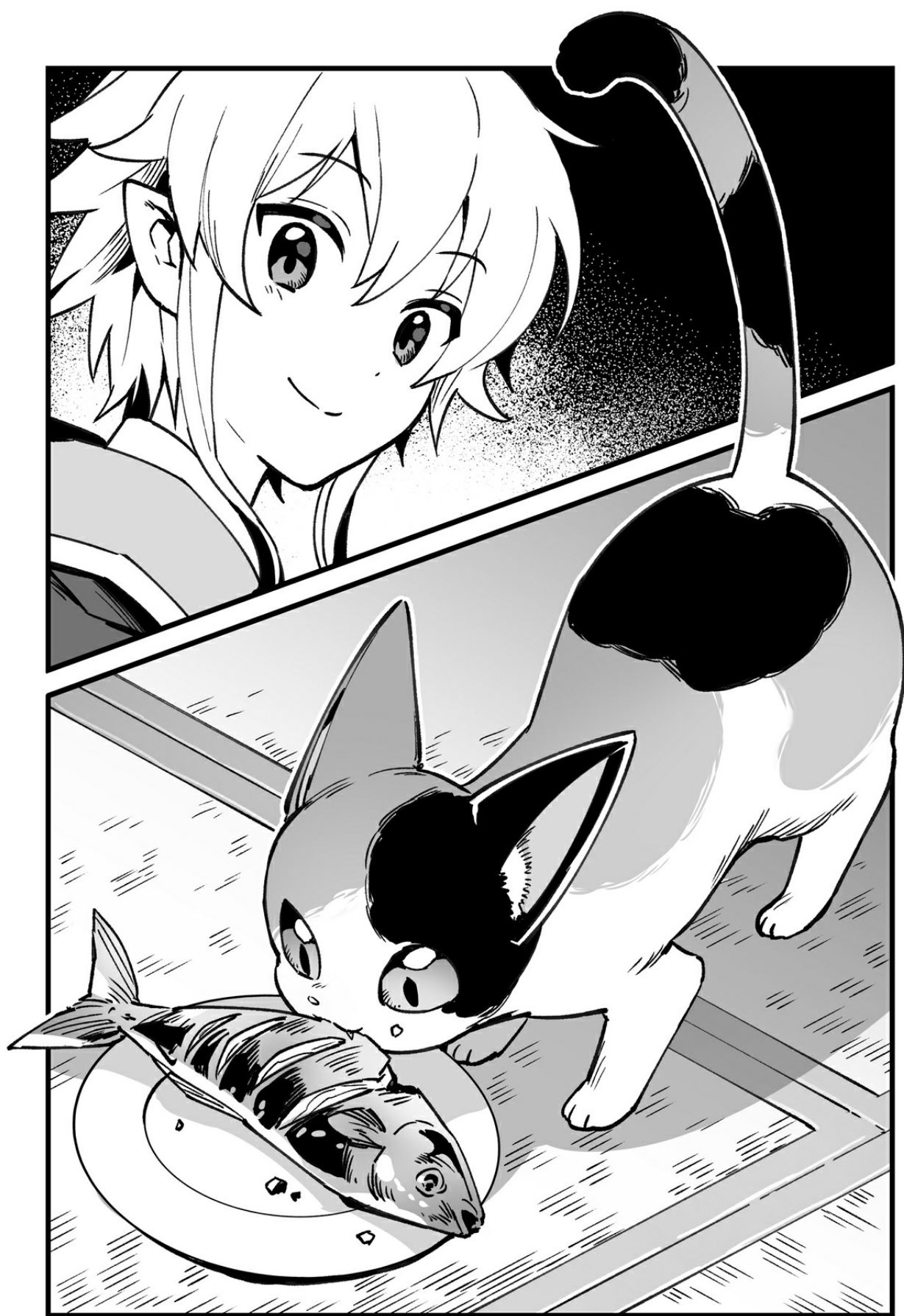
“Aye!”

“Chirp!”

“What about you, Dango? Will you eat?”

“Meow.”

Apparently, while mascots didn’t need to eat, it was still possible for them. I took out some grilled fish and she got to work devouring it.



“Haah...”

After I finished my meal, still under the kotatsu, I started spacing out. Atop the kotatsu, the three small creatures were lined up amiably and gazing out at the garden. The sight of them huddled together was just too precious. I took a screenshot of the three of them with the courtyard in the background. Combined with the backlight, it was strangely moving.

This is a great screenshot. I'll show it off to someone later.

I ended up spending a lot of time just chilling under the kotatsu.

“Right, since I’m here, I should try rearranging the room.”

As far as placing objects, I could probably do that in this room and the living room. Later on, I could renovate one of the other rooms into a workshop.

“I’m glad there’s a shelf here already. I can place my figurine here. Ooh, and I’ll put the yokai dolls I got at the festival right next to it.”

I tried putting up the hanging scroll I got from the Zashiki-Warashi in an alcove.

“And if I put the Moss Ball Sakura made in front of the hanging scroll... Yeah! That looks great!”

I could put the kitchenware Himka and Sakura made in the living room and kitchen. *Oh yeah, and Kettle’s kettle! I’ll bring that here too!* I’d just left it in the barn this whole time.

“Maybe I’ll go set up the transfer gate real quick. That’ll make things a lot easier.”

Right, before that, I had to check out the remaining rooms. Before the basement, I went to check out the storage closet and transporter. Despite the fact I couldn’t enter either one, I had no issues using them. Touching the door of the room brought up a window.

The transporter didn’t have a destination, so I couldn’t use that. The storage closet could store my items. It looked like it could hold ninety-nine of ninety-nine different items. I didn’t have very many valuables, so that was enough for me. I could also put money in it, so maybe I would take the valuables I was

storing at the Adventurers' Guild and bring them here.

"Okay, last is the basement... Aaand it's empty."

"Chirp."

The basement only had two rooms with a dirt floor and the only furnishing was a lamp on the ceiling. As it was now, it seemed usable only as a storage space. I needed to hurry up and save money so I could buy some crafting equipment.

"All right, since I need to install the transfer gate, I'll head back for now. See you later, Dango."

"Meow."

Dango, who was lounging on the veranda, kept her back towards me as she responded to my call. That aloof demeanor was very catlike. She didn't look like she would miss us, so I could be at ease leaving her behind.

Upon my return from the residential area, I saw a familiar-looking guy in front of my farm. He was a handsome animal-hybrid player, his trademark gleaming spectacles and brown bear ears obvious.

"KingOysterMushroom?"

"Ah, Silver-Haired."

"Were you waiting for me?"

"No, I just came to observe your farm when you happened to return. But it's great timing. I was thinking I needed to give you your share of the information we sold."

KingOysterMushroom was one of the friends who had explored the Mayoiga with me. Apparently, he had come here to bring me my share of the money from the information he'd sold.

I received a request from him for a transfer of 200,000 G. Since I had just splurged on my house, I was grateful... *Actually, no, I'm not.*

"Yeah, about that! I told you I was fine with splitting it four ways!"

"Yes, that's why I took you up on that offer and split it four ways."

“Huh? But you’re sending me 200,000 G.”

“That’s right, because the total sum was 800,000 G.”

According to KingOysterMushroom, Alyssa’s silver tongue had persuaded them to divulge even some of the information they had been planning to keep under wraps. That upped the price of their information. I didn’t expect anything less from Alyssa.

“We kept a good portion of the information pertaining to the Zashiki-Warashi to ourselves, though.”

After he said that, he left. I didn’t think there was much information worth hiding about that... Well, whatever. More importantly, I could increase my number of mascots with this money! That was what truly mattered!

“Yahoo! I’d better hurry over to the real esta— Oh wait, first I need to install the transfer gate.”

I tried setting up the transfer gate on a wall inside the barn for now, right across from the entrance. It was just a normal, plain-looking wooden sliding door.

Apparently, its appearance would change to fit the environment it was installed in. You could play around with the frame if you wanted to give it a flashier appearance, but I was fine with the way it was.

“Is this really it?”

I hesitantly touched the transfer gate, which brought up the same window that appeared at my home’s transporter. If I selected a destination and opened up the gate, it would connect me to that location. Presently, I only had the one home I’d just purchased as an available destination, so there was only one option for me to choose from.

“So, once you pick a place and open the gate, you get transported.”

Now, I was standing at the end of the corridor in my home, right beside the living room—probably because the transporter was situated where a bathroom would normally be in a regular home.

“It’s the same process when going back.”

With this, my monsters and I would be able to easily travel between the farm and the house.

“All right, lemme experiment with it first.”

I called over Olto, who was close by, and brought him in front of the transfer gate.

“Officer Olto! I’m assigning you the mission of ascertaining whether monsters can successfully travel back and forth using this transfer gate!”

“Mm-mm!”

“Very good! Now, onwards!”

“Mm!”

Keeping up with our little performance, Olto gave a salute, then passed through the transfer gate alone and disappeared. Not long after, he returned from the other side.

“The experiment was a success!”

“Mmm!”

With that, we were able to confirm that even monsters would be able to go and come back from the house.

The reason I knew Olto had definitely gone to the house was because he’d returned with Dango. I was surprised when I saw him carrying the calico kitten as he passed back through the transfer gate. Mascots could only be brought out in homes or in the residential area, but it seemed like the farm was permissible too.

“Mm.”

“Mrrow.”

Olto was carrying Dango from behind, his hands under the kitten’s armpits. Dango yawned as her lower body dangled in midair. She didn’t seem to mind it.



Now Dango could also play with the other monsters on the farm, so she wouldn't be lonely.

"Okay, you're next. How will this go?"

The next one I brought over was the yokai Sunekosuri. The yokai were treated differently from tamed monsters and mascots in a way that was still unclear, so I wondered how this would work with them.

"Sneeh."

The Sunekosuri had no problem either. And so, I was able to confirm that tamed monsters, yokai, and mascots would all be able to travel between the farm and the house.

"All right, you all can feel free to move between the two places even when I'm not here, okay?"

"Mm!"

"Meow!"

"Sneh!"

Olto was carrying the kitten in front of him, its legs dangling, and the Sunekosuri was curled up on top of Olto's head.

What was with this chaotically cute scene? It was a sight only possible in a game. I just *had* to take a bunch of screenshots. *Okay, at this rate, I'll never stop.*

"Sakura, can you bring the kettle to the home base?"

"...!"

"Thanks."

"...!"

Next, I had to get more mascots. I mean, really, after seeing how pretty Dango was, it wasn't like I had a choice *not* to get more, right?

"What should I get next? Maybe go with the mame shiba inu? But the bear cub was also cute..."

Should I form a double-bear formation with the bear cub and Bear Bear? Or maybe I should pick one of the ten normal starters? Those distorted, basketball-looking mascots were cute too.

I considered my choices on my way back to the realtor. When I arrived, I paid the fee to increase the number of mascots I could have. *50,000 G each...?* But I had no regrets.

“Mame shiba inu, bear cub... Hm?”

As I was looking through the list of mascots, I reflexively made a strange noise.

“Ahawaah? Hweeh?”

But I really couldn’t help it.

“Is this for real?”

“Yes. This is a list of the mascots you are currently able to choose from, Mr. Yuto.”

But there were so many more to choose from now. Earlier, there had been fourteen types, and now there were nineteen.

“Zashiki-Warashi, Mini Kappa, Tefu-Tefu, Obake, Fluffaball... This just *has* to be related to that event, right?”

But why couldn’t I choose them earlier? Wait, did the Zashiki-Warashi get added because I hung that scroll up in the house? And the other four must have appeared because I displayed those dolls, right?

“It looks like they all have some special ability too.”

The Zashiki-Warashi had three abilities: “Helping Hand,” “Fortune,” and “Diary.” The Mini Kappa had “Rainy Day,” the Tefu-Tefu “Insect Song,” the Obake “Under the Willow Tree,” and the Fluffaball “Bait.”

However, I didn’t know the details of each one. I even asked the realtor, but he wouldn’t tell me.

“You’ll find that out in due time. However, the main feature of the mascots is simply their cuteness. Please think of their abilities as a bonus.”

Basically, their abilities wouldn't have any huge benefits or anything.

"If I were to decide on the Zashiki-Warashi... Their special abilities are appealing, but as far as cuteness goes... Hmm..."

If I were going for cuteness, I'd go for the mame shiba inu or the bear cub. But it was hard to give up on those special abilities.

"So maybe I *should* go with one of the yokai mascots."

Since I could have a total of six mascots, I could welcome them all. Then, I could verify their special abilities.

"All right, this time I'll go with the Zashiki-Warashi and the Obake, please."

"Certainly."

I didn't have any particular reason for choosing the Obake. It was just the very first mascot I met, so it made sense to start with.

"Also, could you show me the equipment I can set up? I'd like to know how much the workshop is."

"Very well. Here you go."

The realtor showed me a list of possible renovations, but I didn't have enough for a workshop. However, this list also included several items that hadn't been available before.

"Let me see... An Old Willow Tree?"

Was this added because I'd chosen the Obake as a mascot? Willow trees were associated with ghosts, after all. Moreover, it could be installed in my home at no cost.

The Old Willow Tree didn't have any effects, but it came as a set with a small pond, and it seemed that I could use the water for crafting purposes. Well, it was probably an item to further add to the atmosphere and traditional feel, just like the insect soundscape that came with the home. However, it was normally impossible to set up a watering hole for free. Could it be that the Obake's ability "Under the Willow Tree" was giving me the authority to install this object?

"Well, if it's free, then I'll definitely take it."

I indicated a corner of the garden on a map of the layout and asked the realtor to set it up there. And with that, I'd done everything I was able to do here.

"Let's head back! I'm excited to see how it looks."

And so, with the arrangement of my new mascots and objects, my home was now suddenly pretty lively.

"Mm!"

"Hmm!"

"Tra-la-la!"

"Hum!"

The elemental monsters were having fun playing tag. Bear Bear and Drimo were relaxing on the veranda, watching them play.

"Growl."

"Squeak."

"Are the plant critters photosynthesizing over there?"

Sakura and Olea were standing still together next to the Old Willow Tree.

"This actually really brought out the charm of this place."

"...♪"

"Trrrr!"

Sakura and Olea looked happy when I praised the Old Willow Tree. Maybe they felt some affinity to it as fellow plants.

"Oh, there's a dragonfly!"

In the pond filling the space at the willow tree's roots were not only dragonflies, but pond skaters too. There were even some fish that looked like Japanese rice fish. Man, the pond combined with the willow branches swaying in the breeze had such a nice and refreshing feel. I had really lucked out getting this for free.

The garden had an entirely summerlike feel, but I could also go into the

tatami room and enjoy a kotatsu. Ignoring the seasons like this was something that could only be experienced in a game.

“Where’d the little guys go?”

The most energetic ones were nowhere to be seen. I went to go look for them and found them under the kotatsu. Each one had occupied a side of their own, only their tiny faces peeking out from under the quilt.

“Chirp.”

“Aye.”

“Mrow.”

“Sneh.”

“You’re all really living it up, huh?”

I then stopped by the living room and saw Kettle polishing its own kettle as it lounged in front of the hearth. It seemed to be boiling water. Maybe with this, Kettle would brew some tea.

“Poko!”

Next to Kettle were the two I was looking for.

“Zashiki-Warashi and Obake! So this is where you were!”

“Ya!”

“Booo.”

The two newly welcomed mascots, the Zashiki-Warashi and the Obake. They were together, hanging out in front of the hearth.

“Whoops, looks like I have to name you.”

“Ya-ya!”

“Booo!”

The two of them raised their hands up in excitement, looking up at me with expectant eyes.

Jeez, their eyes are sparkling... I can't give them weird names.

“Hmm, I’ll start with the Zashiki-Warashi.”

Would just “Warashi” be too basic? But “Kettle” was kind of basic too... Nah, I’d think about it a little more.

“A guardian deity that brings good fortune into a home... Guardian deity, aka a *Mamorigami*... All right, how about Mamori!”

A Zashiki-Warashi with a similar name also appeared in one of my favorite manga about yokai.

“Ya!”

“Phew, it seems you like it. Next is the Obake.”

“Booo!”

“Well all I can think of is the character Boo now...”

But “Boo” was probably a bad choice. What else was there? Q-chan, Holly...
No no, let’s stay away from existing character names.

Appearancewise, it was a gently floating piece of white cloth with eyes and a mouth drawn on it.

“Cloth...sheets...linen...linnn... All right, your name will be Rinne!”

“Rinne,” meaning the cycle of reincarnation, has an afterlife sort of feel, so it’s a great name! It’s decided!

“Boooo!”

Rinne and Mamori were jumping for joy. *Guess they like their names.*

The Hanami Vandal was missing from this scene, but it was currently off haunting the shrine, so it probably couldn’t come here. Or maybe it just had no interest. Or it was passed out drunk.

“Never mind the Hanami Vandal. But we have ended up becoming a pretty big family.”

As for my monsters, we now had: Olto, Sakura, Rick, Bear Bear, Olea, Fau, Reflet, Drimo, Himka, and Eine.

And as for yokai: the Hanami Vandal, Tea Kettle Tanuki, and Sunekosuri.

And today's new additions to our group were: Dango, Mamori, and Rinne.

Just with those present, we had a total of fifteen. When I went out onto the veranda, everyone gathered around.

Olto and Mamori sat down next to me, while Rick and the Sunekosuri made their home on my shoulder and head. Eine, Rinne, and Fau, the flying syndicate, were chasing each other in midair in the garden.

What a great scene. I had used up all my money, but I really was glad I had purchased a home.

No, I'm not finished. Not yet.

"Right, I need to purchase even more mascots with real currency!"

But I need to log out to do that...

"I'll log out for just a sec and go through the payment process as fast as I can!"

Then, I could gather the remaining yokai mascots to this home! I'd have even more cute monsters, plus it was only thanks to the Obake that I had obtained the amazing Old Willow Tree, which had instantly brought out the charm of the garden.

"I need to hurry!"

Right! The futon! If I use that, I can log out in a flash!

I hurried over to the tatami room and went to lay out the futon. As I did, Mamori came over to help me. She gently smoothed out the futon and placed a pillow down for me. Was this the effect of "Helping Hand"?

Thanks to Mamori, the futon was ready right away. I crawled into it without a moment's delay.

"All right, see you soon."

"Ya!"

After a brief exchange with Mamori, who sat in the seiza position at the top of the futon by the pillow, I closed my eyes. As I did, I heard an announcement asking me whether I wanted to log out. I responded yes, and my consciousness

was lifted out of the game and returned to the real world.

As soon as I woke up, I tore off my gear and flew out of bed.

“Phew. Time to hurry up and buy!”

It didn’t take much to get it done. I just had to access the LJO website, open up the payment page, and select what I wanted to purchase. It wasn’t much different from buying things on a mobile game.

“Let’s see... There it is!”

There was an item to increase the number of mascots you could have by one.

I purchased three, the limit, and then made a break back for my bed.

After logging in, I woke up back in the tatami room.

“Morning, Mamori. It’s been a minute—fifteen, actually.”

“Ya!”

Mamori seemed to have been watching over me. I patted her on the head and then I headed out to visit the real estate agent once again.

“Hellooo!”

“Welcome in, sir.”

It was the third time that day that I had visited the realtor, but he welcomed me in the exact same way as always. At this point, I had to be one of his most frequent customers, but he didn’t greet me with anything like a “Back again, eh?” Well, they were probably dealing with a lot of people at once, so they had to be prioritizing a quick processing speed.

“I’d like to select the remaining yokai.”

I selected the Mini Kappa, Fluffaball, and Tefu-Tefu from the list the realtor showed me. Also, when I checked the list of the objects and facilities I could set up in my home, sure enough, it had gotten longer. It was the same as when I had selected the Obake.

“The new ones are a Kappa Stone, a Dayflower, and an Animal Trail? I have no clue what any of those would do... Well, okay. They’re all free anyway, so I’ll set them up.”

I didn't know what was kappa-like about the stone. It was a blackish rock about the size of a refrigerator. The Dayflower looked like a mass of weeds. I decided to place those around the Old Willow Tree for now.

The Animal Trail alone was unique in that it would be installed along the hedge that encircled my home base. It just looked like a narrow burrow under the hedges.

Ding-dong!

"You have gathered all yokai mascots and installed all facilities associated with them. You have been awarded the title 'Yokai Mascot Guardian.'"

Whoa, I got a title for that!

Title: Yokai Mascot Guardian

Effect: Increases number of available mascots by one. Some information pertaining to the mascots and their facilities will be disclosed.

Getting one more mascot slot was the best effect. I was by far happier to get that than money or bonus points. Also, I would learn about the yokai mascots and the facilities that came with them.

"This is so—"

Ding-dong!

"Huh? Another one? What happened?"

I thought the information about the free facilities I had added to my home would likely be available, but the moment I was about to check, another announcement rang out.

"Congratulations. You are the first player to obtain ten titles. You have been awarded the title 'Speediest Title Collector.'"

"Wow. That's right, the one before was my tenth title...so I got another title for that?"

Title: Speediest Title Collector

Effect: Acquire 100,000 G, four bonus points, and one random skill scroll. Agility +1.

I had never received that much money from a title before. I got a lot of bonus points for it too. Plus, even a skill scroll? The skill was random, but since I'd be able to get a skill without spending any bonus points, I wouldn't complain no matter what skill it was.

"...So that means I have eleven titles now."

Silver-Haired Pioneer, Thou Shalt Not Kill, The Dryad's Blessing, Unique Monster Enthusiast, The Compassionate Warrior, The Village Savior, Yokai Buster, Spending the Day's Earnings by Night, The Firstcomer, Yokai Mascot Guardian, and Speediest Title Collector. *Let's keep this up!*

"Oh yeah, I need to check on that info on the facilities."

I couldn't help but be more interested in that than the titles. After all, I obtained titles every so often, but the mascot-related event still felt fresh to me.

"Whoa! So that's what it does!"

When I checked the information on my home from my status window, I was able to find out about the effect of the free objects, including the Old Willow Tree.

I first checked the Old Willow Tree. By setting up the willow tree and the pond that housed insects and fish native to Japan, a new feature was added to the garden's random nature settings: "Soft Breeze (Cool)." When the Soft Breeze (Cool) blew, it had the interesting effect of raising your favorability score with monsters that liked the cold, as well as undead-type monsters.

The Kappa Stone came with the effect of adding "Rain (Kappa)" to the garden's nature settings. This had some tremendous effects. When it rained, it would slightly increase the quality of any vegetables growing on a farm in the garden. Also, if cucumbers were grown in the garden, then those were guaranteed to go up one quality level. *Sorry for thinking you were just another*

run-of-the-mill garden stone compared to the Old Willow Tree!

The Animal Trail was also pretty interesting. Its effect was to add “Call of the Wild” to the garden’s nature effects, which would make foxes and tanuki appear often. I didn’t know whether we’d be able to interact with each other, though. Also, if animals appeared due to the Animal Trail’s effect, it would raise your favorability score with beast-type monsters. Among my monsters, that would include Rick, Drimo, and Bear Bear.

“This last one looks promising!”

...Was what I had thought, but this effect was kinda iffy. Others might have thought it was great, but it didn’t have an effect for me. Someone like KingOysterMushroom would enjoy it.

But it was no big deal. Most importantly, it had a certain romanticism.

The Dayflower came with the effect of adding fireflies to the garden’s nature settings. It would raise my favorability score with insect-type monsters, but I didn’t have any of those. However, just being able to see fireflies was enough for me. Apparently, when the Dayflower bloomed, fireflies would come and fly around it.

“I bet that’ll be super pretty.”

I was looking forward to the sight.

“All right, time to go back ho— Actually, before that, I need to get a mame shiba inu!”

Oh man, my home has become a mascot paradise on the first day. Well, this is all I’ve ever wanted!

I couldn’t help but make a dash for my home—I couldn’t wait to see what it looked like. People around me were staring, but I didn’t care about that right now!

When I reached the house, my new mascots were waiting for me patiently in the middle of the garden. Their pleading eyes were saying, “Hurry up and name us!”

“Mini Kappa, you’re Taro. Fluffaball, Floof. Tefu-Tefu, Ochiyo. Mame Shiba,

Nuts.”

I had thought over the names on the way, so I was able to complete the naming process smoothly. After I did, the mascots danced happily around me. It looked like they were doing some sort of Bon Festival dance. I guess that was their happy dance? Maybe thinking they were playing, other creatures also gathered around, and before I knew it, everyone had started dancing around me. It really did feel like a Bon Festival.

At some point, Fau started playing a tune and everyone started dancing like crazy to it.

“Hmm, this is quite a sight to behold...”

But how do I get out of here?

A whole hour passed. After everyone had had their fill and dispersed, I brought Fau with me to visit the Quick-Eared Cats’ stall.

Since I had obtained information on the Japanese-style home and the yokai mascots, I went there to sell it. It wasn’t information related to combat, so I wasn’t expecting to get much for it. But still, I’d be fine with any amount of money since I had just used all mine up on my home.

“Heya.”

“Aye!”

“Welcome! Do you have any information to sell about mascots by chance?”

“Oh, very perceptive. That’s right.”

“O-Oh really? Th-That was fast.”

I was confident about that. After all, in less than an hour after the residential area was implemented, I had sunk all my money into setting up my home.

“I bought some immediately. But thanks to that, I’ve got absolutely no cash on me now.”

“Huh? You used up what you got paid for the information from earlier too? Already?”

“Yep.”

As soon as I said that, for some reason Alyssa’s face froze. Was she shocked by my level of reckless spending?

“...He’s probably going to hit me with some outrageous information again... P- Pull yourself together, Alyssa!”

“Alyssa?”

She was muttering something or other. Was she okay?

“Oh, nothing. Nothing at all. Okay, what kind of information do you have?”

“Well, first off, I bought a home.”

“Which did you buy? A crafting type?”

“No, a Japanese-style home.”

“Come again?”

“I said, a Japanese-style home.”

“...Huh?”

“*I said, a Japanese-style home!*”

What was up with her? Was she having trouble hearing all of a sudden?

“A Japanese-style home... Are you serious?”

“Huh? Is it uncommon or something?”

“I’ve never heard of one, at least.”

Rather than there being few of them, it seemed like I was the only one she’d heard about them from. I had thought anyone could buy a Japanese home. I had no idea it was rare.

“Do you happen to have an idea why you would be the only one able to buy one?”

“Hmm, it might have something to do with the Mayoiga?”

That abandoned house had also been a Japanese-style home, so I wondered whether clearing it meant you could buy one. However, there should have also

been others who cleared it. If that were the case, then could there have been another trigger?

Afterwards, at Alyssa's urging, I gave her more and more information.

In the end, I ended up not just telling her about the mascots and the Japanese house, but also inadvertently spilling information about the Mayoiga. I just happened to talk about it while I was trying to explain the Zashiki-Warashi and yokai mascots...

Alyssa, who had at first been full of excitement, gradually became speechless. Why? Was it because I was giving her so many fine details she was overwhelmed with sorting through it all?

The more shocking thing was the amount she was paying me for the information. It came to a mind-blowing amount of 4,000,000 G.

"Excuse me?"

"I told you. Four million."

"No, but... No no no, no way."

"Four million, I said."

"C-Could you repeat that?"

"Four million!"

This time it was me who was having trouble hearing. I mean, really, *four million*? I had not been expecting it to be worth that much.

But actually, what was *most* shocking was what happened right before that.

It was right after I had finished blabbing about everything. Alyssa, who was oddly trembling, shouted out of nowhere.

"Holy COW! We'll be *bankrupt*!"

"What the—?!"

"Aye!"

Fau and I were startled by the sudden outburst that occurred before our eyes. Fau ended up leaning so far backwards that she toppled off my shoulder. The

surrounding players were also looking our way in surprise.

Well, saying they would go bankrupt was probably going a little too far, but that was a testament to how earth-shattering this information must have been. Sure enough, the amount warranted was 4,000,000 G.

However, Alyssa told me she couldn't pay me the full sum today, and asked whether I'd be okay with splitting it up into installments. It wasn't as if I was in any hurry, so I agreed. For the time being, she paid me 1,000,000 G.

"I have to apologize to KingOysterMushroom and the others."

They had purposefully not sold information about the Zashiki-Warashi, and here I'd gone and blurted out everything.

Afterwards, I immediately contacted KingOysterMushroom and the others to apologize, but they just laughed and said it was fine. *Man, what good guys.* I promised them I would give them a share of the profit, so I would have to throw in a little extra too.

"All right, I got paid more than I was expecting, so now I can add a workshop!"

"Aye!"

As I was about to go do so, I saw a soldier-looking player inching closer to me. His piercing gaze was clearly pointed directly at me.

Wh-What's he want? He was glancing around restlessly, clearly acting suspicious. I looked around too, but there weren't any weirdos around besides him. There were some people looking at me, but that must have been because of Fau. Cute fairies were popular, after all.

"E-Excuse me, you're Silver-Haired, aren't you?"

Apparently, he had some business with me. I must have given myself away by bringing Fau along.

"That's what they call me. Can I help you?"

"Oh nothing. I just saw you leaving the Quick-Eared Cats, so I was wondering if maybe you had sold them some information or something. That's all. Heh heh heh."

His piercing gaze and tall stature gave him a foreboding appearance, but his attitude was extremely timid. He was acting so self-effacingly that he seemed almost subservient. Maybe because of that, I ended up just responding normally.

“I just sold some information about mascots and my home. That I got a Japanese house and stuff like that. Right, Fau?”

“Yuh-aye!”

“Whoa, the homes and mascots that were just implemented? You’re amazing as always.”

“Oh, no. I was just lucky. Besides, it’s not like it’s information that has to do with fighting or anything.”

“I-Is that right? Amazing as always.”

There’s nothing really amazing about that...

What was with this guy’s servile attitude?

“So, how much did you receive for it?”

“Oh, you know, I don’t really think I should say. But I’d say I recovered from some recent splurging.”

“Wow. Amazing as always.”

The guy kept saying “Amazing as always” to the very end and then left. Was it my imagination, or did it seem like he was bowing his head to the players around us rather than to me?

Online Forum [The Master Celebrity] Silver-Haired, Amazing as Always, Part 7

A discussion thread for the most famous of famous players.

We don't want to be deleted from the forums, so no dissing allowed.

Screenshots posted without consent are not permitted.

This thread will be deleted if we're asked to do so.

66: Takashima

From what I hear, the source of the information sold about the four underground dungeons, the abandoned house, and the mascots is, without a doubt, Silver-Haired.

I heard he had some friends form a party with him, but that doesn't change the fact that Silver-Haired was the main part of it.

67: Chosuke

Doesn't take an investigation to figure that out lololol

68: Tundra

Another case of "No duh it's Silver-Haired!" ahahaha

69: Tomato Mato

The mascot-related info got out in just half a day...

Was that really all Silver-Haired? Just how recklessly is he living?

70: Chosuke

I wouldn't say he's being reckless. That would apply more for the front-line players.

Their obsession with leveling up is downright scary.

71: Takashima

In Silver-Haired's case... What would you call it?

I can only say that's just how he is lol

72: Tetsu

I actually happened to be there when Silver-Haired sold his information...

The Quick-Eared Cats' submaster shrieked.

73: Tomato Mato

She's always pretty level-headed, isn't she?

74: Tetsu

She went: "Holy COW! We'll be *bankrupt*!"

Then she went pale and consulted with her clan members.

75: Tundra

That clan? Go bankrupt? When they have more spending power than even other famous clans?

What the heck did he sell them...?

76: Tetsu

Well, I actually got curious...

Knowing it was going against etiquette, I went to talk to Silver-Haired.

77: Takashima

Hey hey... You're lucky you didn't get reported by the Defenders.

78: Tetsu

I don't care if I am, I achieved my long-desired dream!

But I think the reason I wasn't reported was because Silver-Haired was much friendlier than I was expecting. Friendly might not be the right word, but he seemed like he didn't think his information was a big deal?

I'm sure it just looked like we were having an amicable chat to any onlookers

He was a nice guy. And his monster was cute too

79: Chosuke

I'm so jealous.

But I'm not about to charge in. I'm scared of being reported.

80: Tundra

And? What'd you find out?

81: Tetsu

Well of course he couldn't tell me how much he sold it for. But he did say he got back everything he splurged...

82: Tundra

Silver-Haired got the title "Spending the Day's Earnings by Night," right? So to someone like him splurging would mean...

83: Tetsu

I was able to get it out of him that he gave info on his

mascots

He also said he sold information about his home. That it was a Japanese-style home.

84: Chosuke

A Japanese-style home? Was that one of the possible houses?

85: Takashima

It wasn't! I checked the list up and down when I went to buy a home!

I had a blast looking at the layouts!

That's why I can say it confidently: A Japanese-style home wasn't on the list!

86: Tundra

So what you're saying is, that's the information that terrified the Quick-Eared Cats...

87: Tomato Mato

That title, "Yokai Mascot Protector." People have been saying that must've been Silver-Haired's doing, haven't they?

88: Chosuke

Yup.

89: Tomato Mato

So basically, Silver-Haired has a home now. And a bunch of mascots.

Meaning, he has a cute monster + cute mascot paradise?

90: Takashima

Wait. I'm pretty sure it's been confirmed that he has the Tea Kettle Tanuki and the Sunekosuri too.

91: Tomato Mato

So monsters + mascots + yokai? Where is he, in a utopia?!
Ahhh! I wanna see! I wanna join them!

92: Chosuke

Th-This is bad. The cute-crazed crowd is gonna go nuts.

93: Tundra

Run, Silver-Haired!

94: Tetsu

Once again, another Defender falls before the impending frenzied mob.

All that can be heard are Silver-Haired's wailing cries.
The Silver-Haired Defenders VS the Cuteness Hooligans.
Coming soon to a theater near you!

95: Tomato Mato

If only! Well, first we have to start with gathering information.

96: Takashima

Hearing the name "Silver-Haired Defenders" really freaked you out, huh?

97: Tomato Mato

They're a mysterious organization watching over Silver-

Haired from the shadows. The Defenders. No one can escape their watchful eyes...

“Don’t make an enemy of us, or else!” That’s their motto!

98: Chosuke

I dunno if I’d call them an organization. It’s just a term for Silver-Haired’s fans.

Even the people who go see Silver-Haired’s farm to stealthily watch his monsters from a hiding spot once a day, going “Yay! I saw Silver-Haired! Today’s gonna be a good day!” if they catch a glimpse of him in town, are Defenders.

Even just thinking about reporting someone who’s causing Silver-Haired trouble is enough to make someone a Silver-Haired Defender.

That means we’re also Defenders in a way, you know?

99: Tundra

Wh-Whaaat? I guess that means I became a Defender at some point too loool

100: Tetsu

Same here? What the heck lololol

101: Tomato Mato

Wh-Which organization should I prioritize...? At this rate, I’m gonna be called a double agent!

Right, neither one is an actual organization in the first place.

102: Chosuke

The Defenders exist in the hearts of all of us

103: Takashima

I think I'm gonna go try and find Silver-Haired's house.

[I'd Kill For A Title] A Discussion Thread for Ever-Elusive "Titles," Part 11

234: Kainz

I obtained a title!

235: Kurumi

Congrats. So, what'd you get? A brand-new one?

236: Kainz

Nah, I got "Elemental Gate Visitor."

237: Kitaro

Is that the one you get for unlocking all four elemental gates?

That's basically the lesser version of the title Silver-Haired got, "The Firstcomer."

Title: Elemental Gate Visitor

Effect: Acquire 3,000 G and one bonus point. Increased encounter rate for unique elemental monsters.

Not bad.

238: Coriander

What's the real benefit of the increased encounter rate?

239: Kainz

Tbh, not a clue! I didn't even run into a unique Sylph, not once!

240: Keropi

FR? Maybe it doesn't increase it by much?

241: Kitaro

Not much you can do about it, is there?

It's not like you can tell the difference between a 0.1% chance and a 0.2% chance.

242: Kainz

That's right!

243: Kurumi

More importantly, I'm interested in the information on the new titles that the Quick-Eared Cats are selling.

I wonder who got them?

244: Coriander

The Yokai Mascot Guardian and Yokai Mascot Protector. And also the Speediest Title Collector.

A lot of info on the mascots was sold to the Quick-Eared Cats, so that should be made clear sooner or later.

The problem is the other one.

245: Kahlua

The Speediest Title Collector! They obtained ten titles faster than anyone else!

I have heard if you get it now, you're just awarded "Title Collector."

246: Keropi

I don't think that'll be verified for a while. I mean,

according to the data from before, second place only had five titles.

Now he has ten. No, eleven? Just how do you even get so many titles? Should we be copying him? That seems like it'd be the hardest way...

247: Kurumi

There's no copying Silver-Haired!

I teamed up with him once, but he's not even aiming for titles. He's just a genuine person. With no self awareness.

That's why they're saying Silver-Haired is the source of the mascot information too.

248: Kitaro

Wow, if Red Cow is saying that...

Silver MVP lol

249: Coriander

Yeah, we're all thinking it! Silver-Haired's done it again!

250: Kahlua

Speaking of, Red Cow, you teamed up with Silver-Haired?

What a marvel!

251: Kurumi

Well, we just happened to get to know each other.

But more than that, wasn't there a player before who was copying Silver-Haired and saying one day people would call them Blue-Haired?

252: Kainz

You called?

253: Kahlua

Blue-Haired? I've not heard of them.

254: Kainz

It's impossible to copy Silver-Haired! Who was it?! Who said they would get loads more titles?!

255: Coriander

It was you. You. Self-Proclaimed Blue-Haired.

256: Keropi

L0L Self-Proclaimed Blue-Haired

257: Kurumi

Next time I meet you I'm calling you "L0L Self-Proclaimed Blue-Haired"

258: Kainz

Quit it! Just hearing the name "Blue-Haired" just feels like some high-level ridicule technique!

259: Kahlua

Lord L0L Self-Proclaimed Blue-Haired!! Do your best, sire.

260: Coriander

Hey, L0L Self-Proclaimed Blue-Haired!, won't the Defenders get mad at you for imitating Silver-Haired? Won't you get banned?

261: Kitaro

Nah, at some point the rumors got ahead of themselves and made it sound like they're some radical group, but those are just rumors.

The exaggerated jokes on the forums got blown out of proportion and now some people believe them.

262: Coriander

Oh really? I thought you'd get reported if you so much as talked to Silver-Haired.

263: Keropi

I think it's just that Silver-Haired's fans will report people who round up on and bother him.

If you were reported just for talking to him, then Silver-Haired wouldn't be able to play the game lmao

Well, some amount of extreme rumors circulating is probably good for Silver-Haired's well-being

264: Kurumi

In that case, I will go ahead and call you LOL Self-Proclaimed Blue-Haired!

265: Kahlua

Yes, I will too, hehehe

266: Kainz

Nooo!

[Mascots Are Too Cute for Their Own Good!] Thread

for Discussing Mascots, Part 2

A thread for discussing the implemented mascot feature

Let's show off our mascots!

Screenshots are VERY welcome

No talking badly about other people's mascots

Information on new mascots is also welcome

21: Miaow

So you're saying those are possible mascot choices?

22: Meow-ralysis

Yeah! There's actually been some people who've gotten yokai mascots.

And it's definite that some of the unfamiliar monsters spotted on Silver-Haired's farm are yokai mascots.

I've had it confirmed, so there's no doubt.

23: Nukumoria

After the pandemonium of "Silver-Haired's monsters have disappeared from his farm!", there was a huge uproar of "OMG so many mysterious little cuties!"

But I could understand, given their cuteness. It looked like a huge sports meet! It was crazy! Those were mascots? I've gotta get 'em!

24: Miaow

But wasn't there a small girl wearing a kimono?

That's definitely a Zashiki-Warashi, so they might have been a yokai, right?

25: Meow-ralysis

The Zashiki-Warashi was confirmed to be seen in the Abandoned House of Tono from before.

26: Miaow

Right? So that abandoned house is definitely tied to the mascots, then, huh?

If that's the case, then there's a high chance that little Zashiki-Warashi is a potential mascot, right?

27: Nocturne

Hey! Silver-Haired's house is amazing!!

28: Miaow

Ooh, has it finally been discovered~?

29: Nukumoria

Well, there were a lot of players looking for it, after all.

30: Meow-ralysis

So? Where was it? In the residential area, right?

31: Nocturne

Yeah! And it's a Japanese-style house on a mountain side!

It's a place that's not even on the realtor's list of homes for sale!

32: Miaow

I see. So that's why it's hard to find.

What a bomb to drop! He's really gone and done it again!

33: Nocturne

And I heard his garden is unreal.

Though I couldn't see it. You can't see the gardens of other people's homes unless you're friends with them.

34: Nukumoria

What do you mean by "unreal"?

35: Nocturne

From what other people have said, there was a huge party of almost twenty monsters and mascots and yokai gathered together, drinking and dancing! So I've heard, at least.

36: Namihei

I've seen it! Silver-Haired's mascots are insane!

I knew he'd gotten all the yokai because of the title, but there were some completely unknown mascots!

37: Meow-ralysis

You saw his garden?

38: Namihei

Yeah, we exchanged friend codes during the cherry blossom viewing party.

But anyway, there were even mascots in his garden that were neither starters nor yokai mascots.

39: Miaow

Were they really mascots? Knowing Silver-Haired, they could have been new monsters or yokai.

40: Namihei

If they were monsters or yokai, they would have had a blue marker above them.

Right, so, yokai used to have NPC markers, but the update changed things so that yokai affiliated with a player have a blue marker now. So, mascots would now have NPC markers instead, wouldn't they?

41: Nocturne

Understood. So, what were the mascots like?

42: Namihei

There was a puppy and a kitten. They looked super realistic and cute beyond belief!

A mame shiba and a calico!!

43: Miaow

See ya!

44: Meow-ralysis

I'm off.

45: Namihei

Don't even think about it! You're gonna bother him!

46: Nukumoria

My friend was just in front of Silver-Haired's house apparently, but there was a huge crowd.

And everyone had to disperse in a hurry after getting a

warning from the devs.

47: Namihei

See? Information is gonna come out in time, so it's better just to wait.

48: Miaow

A calico!

49: Meow-ralysis

A kitten!

50: Namihei

Cat fanatics.

51: Nocturne

It's possible those mascots are exclusive to Japanese homes.

52: Nukumoria

Speaking of, the Quick-Eared Cats were selling info on Japanese homes.

It was too expensive, though, so I didn't buy it.

53: Namihei

Oooh, how about you go ahead and buy that first?

Then afterwards, you can tell us all about it *evil grin*

54: Miaow

Got it! The Quick-Eared Cats!

55: Meow-ralysis

Quick-Eared Cats, roger that!

56: Namihei

I didn't seriously think they'd go...

I hope their wallets survive.

57: Nocturne

-_-

58: Nukumoria

-_-

59: Namihei

-_-

Chapter Three: Participating in the Mini Event

After leaving the Quick-Eared Cats' stall behind, I headed for the real estate agent.

I automatically started walking at a quick pace. It was getting close to the time that I'd be forcibly logged out, and there was maintenance planned for tonight right before the second wave of players logged in tomorrow. Once the clock hit time for maintenance, I'd be logged out by force.

"I'll have to buy a workshop before that happens."

With the money I'd just gotten, I wanted to install a workshop in my home base's basement.

"Welcome in, sir."

I'd given up on expecting this guy to give me any special treatment. Any other shop or guild would have started treating me as a regular after visiting four times in one day. The AI of this NPC must have specialized in streamlining the process to manage the large influx of customers.

"I'd like a workshop. Can I see the list, please?"

"Certainly. Here you go."

As of now, my basement had two empty rooms, which meant I could set up a workshop in two spots.

"Woodworking, Alchemy, Cooking, Smithing, Sewing... There are so many."

If I were the only one who would be using it, then I would pick one for either Cooking, Alchemy, or Concoct. But if my monsters would also be using it, then that changed my possible choices.

"Hmm... Oh?"

As I scrolled through the list while vacillating over that, I saw an interesting-looking workshop towards the bottom.

“An All-Purpose Workshop? Wow, it can be used with a whole bunch of crafting skills... Or actually, all of them?”

Amazingly, and true to its name, this All-Purpose Workshop could be used with all types of crafting skills.

I thought that was a great pick, but of course it came with its flaws. It was fairly expensive, several times the price of individual workshops. Also, it needed twice the space, meaning it would use up both rooms in my basement.

Plus, the effects it produced were low. It would only give eighty percent of the crafting bonus for each skill compared to the specialized workshops.

“But still, having all crafting skills covered is pretty appealing. I’ll go with this.”

I wanted everyone to be able to use it, after all.

I bought the workshop named “All-Purpose Workshop (Model 1).” In order to upgrade to the second model, I would need to pay 10,000,000 G. That was still a long ways away.

“Thank you for your patronage. Now, allow me to set it up for you right away.”

When I got back to the house, I headed straight for my new workshop. However, what I was greeted with was a bit of a letdown. Sakura, who was with me, seemed to feel the same.

“This *is* an all-purpose workshop, right? Looks pretty bare to me.”

“...?”

The basement room, with the newly installed all-purpose workshop, had turned into a dreary-looking room with wooden floors.

Floor, walls, ceiling. That was it! That was the sum of it. Sakura was also tilting her head in confusion.

However, upon closer inspection, I saw something resembling an acrylic panel stuck on the wall next to the entrance. It was about the size of a large television, and incongruous with the style of the rest of the room. When I touched it, a window popped up. I could choose from Woodworking, to

Smithing, to Cooking, and so on.

“Let’s choose Woodworking as a test.”

I touched the Woodworking option. When I did, the room’s appearance changed in an instant.

The wooden floorboards stayed the same, but there were now various tools, like carpentry tools and chisels, laid out. There must have been a storehouse within the room.

“I see, it changes based on what you need it for. It is an all-purpose workshop, after all!”

“...♪”

“Oh, should we jump right into making something?”

Sakura and I would be able to test out the various ways to use this workshop together.

I decided to start out by trying out my Engraving skill. Earlier, I had figured out I could select the wooden teacup Sakura made as a target, but since I hadn’t had any tools, I hadn’t actually been able to use it. With this workshop, I would be able to activate the skill.

“Guessing by the name, I should be able to mark something by carving it. Meaning, I bet I can use the skill with a chisel.”

This workshop was perfectly equipped with chisels. I picked up the most orthodox V-shaped chisel, took out the teacup from my inventory, and tried once again to engrave it.

“Bingo!”

Once I tried, a small window popped up in front of me.

On the window appeared a mark that looked like a wind symbol, made into a decorative seal. It seemed that I could use this mark to fine-tune where to apply the seal on the teacup.

I could also choose between an automatic and manual option.

“This is my first time, so I’ll definitely go with auto.”

After some slight adjustments to get the mark to fit on a side of the teacup, I activated the Engraving skill. The rest was easy. I moved the chisel along the light that had appeared on the surface of the teacup. Whenever I was about to go over the line, an invisible barrier stopped me from doing so. If I picked the manual option, it would probably only show the guiding lines.

Barely even five minutes later, I had a finished, engraved teacup sitting in front of me.

Name: Handmade Teacup (Sakura & Co.)

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 1★

Effect: Slight increased rate of temperature decline

The quality had dropped to the lowest it could possibly go. Plus, that effect... It seemed it would make your drinks cool down faster. Wasn't that kinda the worst effect for a teacup to have? Well, I guess the idea was that the wind was cooling it down.

The teacup's appearance looked cooler now, but it had become worse to use.

"I bet if I engraved it with fire or water, it would come out with a more suitable effect for a teacup..."

"..."

"Are you comforting me? Thanks for that."

"...♪"

Sakura had placed a hand on my shoulder and was smiling sweetly at me. That did make me feel better. I couldn't expect it to go perfectly on my first try, after all.

"Why don't we try engraving a bunch of stuff without worrying about the effects? For practice."

"...♪"

"Oh, a plate? All right, let's engrave it!"

It's working! As expected, it seemed like woodwork could be engraved. However, the effects it came with were again underwhelming: "Slight increased rate of food deterioration." So it would make the food you put on the plate spoil faster?

It was a terrible item, one which I could not even think of a use for. Whatever, it looked good, so it'd be fine as long as I just ate whatever I put on top of it quickly...

Next, I focused on testing out the Engraving skill on cutlery and tableware. What I learned from that was that cooking and wind did not go very well together. My Engraving level went up, but it still didn't give any decent effects.

The only thing that didn't gain a negative effect was the soup bowl. It had the effect "Aroma Diffusion (Slight)." I figured it made the smell of the soup spread more. That kind of seemed like it would lure monsters to me if I used it outside, though.

But I won't give up! I still have a lot of wooden goods!

"What else...? How about this floor chair?"

And finally, after engraving floor chairs and regular chairs alike, I was able to successfully make a respectable product.

"A soft breeze effect... Oh, yeah. When I sit on it, I can feel a bit of a breeze."

It really was a subtle breeze, but I did feel wind blowing against my cheek and arms. This would feel nice someplace hot. It would definitely feel refreshing and pleasant to sit on this chair out on the veranda.

"I hear that Zone Five and beyond have fixed seasons. I bet there are people who'd love to have this in the summer zone."

The Town of Beginnings didn't have four seasons. Well, rather than not having any, it was more like it was constantly at a pleasant temperature. Kind of like the beginning of autumn? In real life, it would be too hot to get under a kotatsu, and too cold to wear light clothing.

However, the game's settings made it so players didn't feel external stimuli too strongly, so it didn't feel hot under a kotatsu, and it didn't feel cold playing

out in the garden. In both cases, the temperature felt exactly right.

“What next... Weapons? Metalwork? I can’t very well use it to engrave food.”

Thinking about it with some common sense, this must be a skill meant for adding an attribute to a weapon.

“All right, I think I more or less got the hang of Engraving.”

I’ll go ahead and keep engraving floor chairs and other stuff then.

Also, I could probably use that increased rate of deterioration effect for fermentation. I made an engraved Fermenting Barrel, then called over Reflet right away to have her experiment with it. I handed the barrel, which had the rapid deterioration effect as planned, over to Reflet.

“I’m counting on you! With this, you should be able to make even more things quickly.”

“Hum!”

That’s enough Engraving for now, I think.

The next thing I wanted to try out was the skill scroll I had received as a reward for getting Speediest Title Collector. I still hadn’t opened it.

“Since it’s a reward for a title, it’s gotta be a good skill!”

Considering past examples, the “random” part of the random skill scroll didn’t mean it would be from the pool of *all* possible skills.

The skill scroll I had received during the Water Elementals’ trial had been related to water. The scroll from the Air Elementals’ trial had gotten me a skill related to wind.

It was probably a skill picked randomly from several possible choices.

In that case, just what kind of awesome skill would I get from a scroll that was a reward for a unique title?

“Heh heh heh. Maybe I’ll get an EX skill...”

“...?”

“Hum?”

“Sakura, Reflet. Feast your eyes on *this!*”

“...”

“Hum!”

Then, I opened up the scroll.

“Mwa ha ha ha ha! Come on, gimme some great skill!”

The scroll, which had been faintly glowing, turned into small particles of light, which were then absorbed into my body. Success.

“All right, what kind of skill did I— Huh?”

Looking at my stats, I had definitely acquired a new skill.

But...this? This is what I get?

“Uh, Telekinesis?”

The new skill I had learned was Telekinesis. It was the skill that became available after befriending the Sunekosuri. Besides that, it was possibly what ghost-type enemies used to attack?

The evaluation among players seemed to be summed up as: convenient for disarming traps, useless for attacking, and handy for grabbing faraway objects, *duh*. I heard a lot of Thief players had this skill, but it seemed unpopular among other players.

“This is what I got, out of everything?”

“...?”

“I-I haven’t given up on using it yet! I need to try it out a bunch first!”

And with that, I attempted to use Telekinesis.

“Oho!”

When I activated it, I could see an invisible-hand-type thing. Then, I imagined it moving in my mind, which it did surprisingly smoothly. When I thought “Spread out!” it dispersed like a mist. Then, when I thought “Gather!” it turned into a pole-like object.

It also seemed that Sakura couldn’t see it, so it must have only been visible to

the user. *Not too shabby of a skill, eh?*

I attempted to pick things up with my Telekinesis...and was immediately dumbfounded by my inability to do so.

“Urgh. The range seems all right, but I don’t have enough strength...”

Maybe due to my low skill level, I wasn’t even able to lift a spoon for more than five seconds. The range was a respectable five meters, so if I could only raise the power, this skill wouldn’t be so bad...

“Can this not hold anything heavier than a chopstick?”

Wait. I had read that if you focused your Telekinesis, you could raise its power. I condensed my Telekinesis into that pole-like object and then tried picking up the spoon again.

“Whoa, this time it works! Okay, now let me try throwing it.”

I brought my Telekinesis arm high over my head to hurl the spoon. However, halfway through my windup, the connection broke and the spoon fell from its spot in the air. It seemed that it only had a short effect time.

“One more time.”

But no matter how many times I tried, I couldn’t get past the windup stage.

“I need to come at this with a different approach... Is it because I’m imagining pitching it like a baseball? What if I used both hands as if I were passing a basketball...”

I came up with the idea of compressing the Telekinesis even more and then using the recoil to send the spoon flying. I would flick it rather than throw it. Think pachinko.

“Here we gooo! Telekinesis *slingshoooooo*— Oh.”

It flew, all right. About twenty centimeters. I tried several times after that, but in the end I couldn’t make it fly very far.

“Guess I really don’t have enough power.”

Would that be resolved by raising my level? Nah, if the skill could change that dramatically by just raising its level, then it wouldn’t be considered such a

disappointing acquisition.

After a bit of research, I found out that the power of this skill depended on the user's strength. Also, even raising the level of the skill wouldn't strengthen it very much. The most prominent player using this skill was Hamakaze, who had posted her impressions of it on the online forums. As expected of the Onmyōji.

Once your skill level reached twenty, the range of the skill increased to ten meters, but you would still only have enough power to pick up a rock and lightly throw it. It could, however, also be used to do things like provoke and lure someone from a hiding spot or collect materials in hard-to-reach spots. That was what her evaluation had been.

It was probably a useful skill, but it could also probably be substituted for by something else. Especially when I had tamed monsters with various types of abilities that could fill that role.

"...Well, I didn't use up any bonus points, so it's not like I lost anything. I'll think about how to use it as I level it up."

Tug tug.

"..."

"Oh? What's up, Sakura?"

I felt a tugging at my hem, and when I turned to look, Sakura was holding some woodwork in her hands.

"Aren't those...fans?! And bamboo-copters?"

"...♪"

"Did you make me items I could use Engraving on?"

"...♪"

"Wow, really?! Great work!"

What an all-star! I didn't know she could make a fan, never mind the bamboo-copter. She must have used the paper I'd bought from Sawyer's shop earlier.

However, the structure of it was different from the fans I knew. How should I say this... First, it didn't have much of a frame. Instead, the lower half was made up of thin wooden planks. Was that in an effort to conserve on paper and increase the strength of the fan?

It felt heavier than a real fan. Also, since the lower half was made of wood, it wasn't very flexible, making the wind it produced weak. But for Engraving purposes, this would do. After all, a certain amount of blank space was needed to apply the engraving onto. I bet it would be more adaptable if I carved using the manual option rather than the auto, but I didn't feel that I was capable of that yet.

Soon after, I engraved the fan, which gave it the effect "Increased Wind Attribute (Slight)." Its quality was awful, but that didn't make the wind it produced any worse. Although I was a bit worried at first that it would produce some bad-smelling wind or something.

The result of my endeavor was an awesome fan that produced a potent breeze with only the slightest movement.

"This is niiice."

"...♪"

Now for the bamboo-copter... That was a complete failure. The engraving went over the edge of three of them, turning them into garbage. Even the only one I had thought was a success and tried to let fly ended up breaking apart in midair. The engraving must have reduced the power of the wing it was on. The effect given to it was "Increased Wind Attribute (Slight)," so I thought it would extend its flight time, but alas...

"Oh well, at least the fan was a success. Don't let this get you down."

"Huum."

"..."

"Come on, cheer up. Yeah?" I comforted Sakura, who had gone quiet, her shoulders drooping.

"...♪"

She gripped my hand and smiled.

Sakura was always the big-sisterly type, so it was rare to see her acting dispirited and childlike like this. I felt lucky getting to see her like that—not that I would mention that to anyone.

“This Engraving skill seems interesting though... Wonder if I can get any other types of seals?”

When I checked the list of bonus skills, the other Engraving skills weren’t there. They were probably derivative skills obtained after leveling up another skill.

“Too bad. But I guess I can aim for getting it through the prerequisite skills.”

This is the perfect time to go to the Quick-Eared Cats! I should buy more information on the Engraving skill!

“Oh, before that, let me try out everything I can. Sakura, do you have any more fans?”

“...♪”

“Great, now I’ll use this paint to...”

My idea was to draw on the same mark from the engraving with my Painting skill.

“Let’s see, if I use the fan I engraved earlier as a reference... How’s that?”

Hmm. I just can’t get it to be the exact same design. It didn’t give it an effect either.

“...Oh, I see. I need to do this.”

I activated my Engraving skill on auto mode, which showed me where I needed to engrave the mark on the fan. But I didn’t confirm it. I was planning on tracing over the mark with my paint.

“Yeah, this way’s much easier!”

Doing that, I was able to almost perfectly draw the engraving mark, but—

“No good, huh?”

Well, this *was* a skill to engrave a mark on things. The carving part was probably important.

“Okay then, I’m headed to the Quick-Eared Cats, so I’ll leave the rest to you, okay? Rotate using the basement with everyone else.”

“...♪”

“Hum!”

Leaving Sakura and Reflet behind, I headed for the Quick-Eared Cats. On my way there, I was struck with an idea as I looked up at the Tower Mill on my farm. The Tower Mill had a wind attribute, right? If I engraved a mark into it, wouldn’t I be able to enhance it?

“I can’t reach the Tower Mill blades...so maybe I can try the millstone or the outside walls?”

“Tra-la?”

“Triii?”

“Eine and Olea? Funny seeing you two together, huh?”

Well, they were two small elemental types. Maybe they actually got along? Eine was floating, holding on to the shoulder of Olea, who looked like a wooden doll.

“I’m about to try engraving the Tower Mill. Come watch!”

“Tra-la-la!”

“Triiiii!”

They must have been cheering me on. The two of them were on either side of me, dancing in an energetic rhythm. They circled around me, throwing their hands in the air—a very childlike routine.

“Okay, first I’ll try the outer wall... Huh?”

It didn’t work. The chisel didn’t even make a mark. It wasn’t as though the wall was too hard; rather it seemed that the system was preventing it from being marred in any way.

“Tra-la...”

“Tiiii...”

“Hold on, I haven’t failed yet. I’ll try a different spot.”

I tried the millstone next, but that didn’t work either. I was blocked by an invisible barrier.

“Can I not engrave objects?”

“Tra-la!”

“Tiiii!”

“Oh? What is it?”

Eine and Olea started pulling me. It seemed that they were trying to take me somewhere. The frantic look on their faces when I initially resisted was adorable.

“Tra-la! Tra-la-la!”

“Trij, triiii!”

They must have noticed me smirking down at them. They started hitting me, Olea against my legs and Eine against my head. While that was also adorable, if I kept teasing them any more than this, they’d probably start disliking me.

“All right, all right. I’m coming.”

“Tra!”

“Trij!”

The two of them brought me over to the orchard, fuming as if they were saying “Good grief!” When we got there, Olea pointed towards the top of its own main body, the Olive Treant.

“What are you... Huh, what’s that? A nest box?”

“Tiiii!”

I was surprised to see a box made of plain wood perched atop the branches of the Olive Treant. No matter how you looked at it, it was a birdhouse. However, the creature poking its head out was not a little bird, but Rick.

“Chirp chirp?”

“Oh, I see, that’s Rick’s nest box!”

Sakura must have made it. I hadn’t expected my monsters to make something like that and set it up themselves. But if that was one of Sakura’s creations, then I should be able to engrave it.

“Hmm, I’m kind of apprehensive about engraving that right now...”

It’d be great if I could give it a good effect, but if I ended up giving it some weird effect, then it’d be a waste of that nest box.

“Later I’ll have Sakura make me a nest box and try this skill out on that. I want to put one of these at the house too. Thanks for telling me about this, Olea.”

“Trrrr!”

“Chirp!”

“Yeah yeah, thanks to you too, Rick.”

“Tra-la-la!”

“I’m going, I’m going! Chill out!”

The tiny creatures were clinging to me like crazy. Especially to my head. Thanks to Eine riding piggyback on my shoulders and Rick sitting on top of my head, I could barely see.

“Sneeh.”

“Whoa! Wha— You too?!”

And lastly, the Sunekosuri showed up and coiled itself around my neck. *I have no clue what’s happening anymore.*

“Ya-ya!”

“Mrrow.”

“Arf!”

“Oh, you all came to the farm too?”

I felt an abrupt impact against my legs, and when I turned around I saw Mamori, the Zashiki-Warashi, holding tightly onto my leg. On both sides of her, Dango the calico and Nuts the mame shiba were also standing by. Dang, this

scene of the three of them was something else. It was like a cuteness explosion.



“Meeow.”

“H-Hey! Dango! You don’t need to get on too! Ah— Mamori! Why are you pushing Nuts against me?! I got it, I’ll hold him!”

“Tra-la!”

“Ahhhh! I said I got it! I’m going where you want me to! Don’t cover my eyes! What, are we playing guess who or something?!”

“Tra-la?”

I practically had a whole circus clinging to my body now. Following Eine’s directions, I arrived in front of the Silkworm Box.

“The Silkworm Box, huh? I should be able to engrave that, right?”

It was a household object that could be made by oneself. Sure enough, when I activated the skill, I wasn’t repelled from the box. Also, Sericulture was one of Eine’s beginner skills, as she was an Air Elemental. Surely this Engraving (Wind) skill would be compatible with it.

“But I’m afraid to just go ahead and do this right now...”

“Tra-la?”

“I’ll try it after raising my skill a bit, okay?”

“Tra-la.”

I hadn’t even collected the first threads of silk from it yet. Before making any alterations to the box, I should first find out what its default was.

“Heeey, it’s about time to get off me now! I’m heading out!”

At my request, the little creatures dispersed in small groups. They must have been satisfied with all our horsing around.

“Yuto!”

“Oh, hey Tagosack. Haven’t seen you since this morning.”

“Guess not.”

Tagosack was leaving her farm just at the same time as I was leaving my own. We exchanged a brief greeting. Not only did our farms neighbor each other, but

it was common practice for a farmer to do maintenance on their farm after logging in in the morning. Which meant Tagosack and I saw each other every other day or so. Despite that, Tagosack seemed surprised when she saw my farm.

“Your place gets crazier by the day. And you suddenly have way more tiny critters runnin’ around...”

“Those are my mascots.”

“Ah right, the big sports meet...”

“Hm? What’d you say?”

“Nah, just somethin’ I read on the forums... Ya don’t gotta worry ’bout it.”

A big sports meet? Oh yeah, I guess my creatures playing tag did kind of look like a sports festival. Although it was taking place in the afternoon on a farm rather than at nighttime in a graveyard, as in a certain retro anime series.

“Kapa!”

“Booo.”

“Ya!”

“Pom-poko!”

Although, there *were* a lot of yokai present.

“How’s your home base doin’?”

“Pretty good. My monsters seem to enjoy it, and the mascots are cute too. And I have a farm there.”

“A farm? Ya bought a house with a garden? Any differences in how things grow?”

“Olto and the others are tilling it for me right now, so I don’t know yet.”

“Gotcha. Lemme know if it seems good. I’ve been tryin’ to decide on if I should buy one.”

For a solo farmer, owning a home was not absolutely necessary. They would prefer to use their money towards expanding and maintaining their farm

instead. After exchanging some information with Tagosack, I headed for the Quick-Eared Cats.

The fact that you could employ NPCs who had Arboriculture in Zone Seven was some interesting information. With that, the number of farmers who could cultivate trees would increase and new materials would likely start to appear on the market.

“Hi there, Alyssa.”

“Huh? Yuto... A-Are you here to sell more information?”

Why was she staring at me with such a terrified look in her eyes? Did I do something?

“No, this time I came to buy information.”

“*Phew*. Got it, you’re here to buy. Okay then, what do you want to know?”

“I’d like to know about the Engraving skill. How you acquire it and how you use it.”

“Mm-hmm. Right, you said you had Engraving (Wind)?”

And so, she told me how Engraving was acquired, but it seemed fairly complicated. First, you needed to have reached level 20 in either Sculpting, Handiwork, Masonry, or Carpentry. In addition to that, you needed to be at level 20 in the corresponding magic element of the skill. The conditions for obtaining the skill were stricter than I was expecting.

“There are especially few people who have the Engraving (Wind) skill. Most occupations making use of that skill now have the earth or fire one.”

“Okay, so if I make some interesting engraved items, will they sell?”

“I think your items would sell whether they were interesting or not...”

“Ha ha ha, I wish. Oh yeah, I have one more question about Engraving...”

When I tried asking about my futile attempts at painting the engraving mark, Alyssa told me that in order to add the effects of an element with Painting, I needed the skill called Heraldry. Naturally, Engraving was a skill for carving.

Incidentally, Heraldry could be learned by leveling up Painting and Inscription.

I could probably aim for it that way.

“Oh, right. I have another intriguing piece of info for you. Are you interested? It’s about a luminescent item, like the Glowing Walnut.”

“Ooh, really? That does seem intriguing.”

I actually had quite a few Glowing Walnuts stocked up in my inventory, but I still didn’t quite understand how to use them. They worked pretty well for Rick’s Nut Bombs, but that was about it? They could probably be made into glowing paint, but they were too precious of an item to waste like that, so I hadn’t really made progress with experimenting. I did try a few times just in case, but it’d just resulted in me wasting the Glowing Walnuts.

I had tried it out a bunch with Luminous Moss, but I hadn’t been able to make glowing paints with that either. It just turned into good ol’ Weed Water, or lowered the quality of the paint, or turned into trash.

“As far as making glowing paint goes, you just need a mushroom called the Glow Shroom. If you mix it into paint with the Glowing Walnut, you’ll make glowing paint.”

“A Glow Shroom... Where can I find them?”

“It seems like they can be found, albeit very rarely, in the Subterranean Lake. It’s not a guarantee they’ll be there, though. They grow at an extremely low rate.”

“In Zone Five...?”

I’ve only been as far as Zone Three. No way I could manage that, right?

“Yeah? I would think someone like you could get there, though.”

“Hmm... Can those mushrooms not just be bought?”

“They’re still rare, so they haven’t been circulating in the markets yet.”

A Glow Shroom, huh? It seemed interesting beyond just making glowing paint too. I really wanted to get one.

“Is this finally my time to progress forward?”

Since the second wave would be coming in tomorrow, this area would soon

be crowded. In that case, maybe it would be good for me to break some new ground in the zones ahead.

“All right then, could I get some info on Zones Four and Five?”

“Right away, sir!”

I felt like I had just been cleverly coaxed into doing this, but oh well. If I just stayed in the starter area forever, I would just be separating myself more and more from the top players.

Then, fired up with the enthusiasm to explore the farther-away zones, I returned to my home, where Himka was making use of the basement.

“Hm-hm!” He was hammering away at a bronze ingot with satisfying clanging sounds.

With the acquisition of this All-Purpose Workshop, even Himka could demonstrate all his abilities. Various types of goods were lined up, from glassware to copperware and pottery.

“It’s rare for you to make glass and pottery... Especially pottery.”

“Hm!”

“Keep it up! Use all the materials you want.”

“Hm-hmm!”

Himka threw his hands in the air in celebration, a smile on his face. It seemed like he really did enjoy crafting work in and of itself.

“I bet it’d taste great to drink some soda out of this glass or tumbler, or have a cider on the veranda or a beer right out of the bath...”

A thought came to me suddenly as I thought about that—could I engrave Himka’s works? Wouldn’t a tumbler with the ability to keep its contents cool be just the best thing?

The assortment of copperware consisted mostly of thin objects, so putting a chisel to those would just pierce a hole into them.

“Mind if I try it out?”

“Hm!”

Himka presented a glass to me as if saying “Go ahead!” I picked it up and tried to activate my Engraving skill.

“Hope this works on a glasswa— Ah.”

I was able to activate the skill, but right after I started carving with my chisel, it turned into garbage. Seeing the clear glass cup suddenly turn into some black charcoal-like substance pained my heart.

“Okay then, how about if I try this before it’s baked?”

I tried engraving a clay plate that Himka had made on the potter’s wheel, but it didn’t go well. I was able to carve it out, but even after it was baked, it didn’t gain any effect.

Both the plate and the cup changed shape slightly after baking, which meant the shape of the engraving also changed. It ended up just turning into a regular old design.

“This seems pretty difficult.”

“Hmm.”

It seemed like I would have to experiment a bit more. It wasn’t as if the products that I had failed to engrave were unusable, so in the meantime maybe I could just sell those at my unmanned stand.

Afterwards, I engraved Rick’s nest box, giving it the ability “Wind Protection (Slight),” which he greatly appreciated. I got a bit caught up in the moment and engraved the beehive too, but I ended up giving it the increased deterioration rate effect. Bear Bear was not the least bit happy.

Evidently, the effect didn’t apply to the insides, but rather it sped up the deterioration of the beehive itself. I hastily scraped off the mark, which took away the engraving’s effect, but the hive’s durability ended up being greatly reduced. I’d have to ask Sakura to repair its durability, or else.

“Wait, what about the rapid deterioration effect I put on the Fermenting Barrel...?”

Thinking about it now, had I actually given it a simple sped-up deterioration effect and not the sped-up *food* deterioration effect?

“W-Well, I guess I’ll find out when I check it later...”

“Growl!”

“Whoa! Sorry about that. No, really, I’m sincerely apologizing!”

The next day.

“...Hmm? I feel kind of heavy.”

After I logged in, I woke up in my home base’s futon.

I woke up feeling refreshed—is what I wished I could say. For some reason, I couldn’t move. Though the reason was clear.

“There’re too many of you on me.”

“Meow?”

“Ya?”

My mascots were piled up together on top of my futon. It seemed like they’d been observing me as I slept.

“All right, I’m getting up now, so could you get off?”

“Booo.”

“Arf.”

My monsters played at the home base as much as they wanted, but my mascots also had a good amount of freedom.

I slowly got out of bed, careful not to knock my mascots over, and then I headed for the kitchen. I twisted the faucet on and filled up Himka’s handmade tumbler with water, which I then gulped down.

“Whew, that’s delicious.”

Was the lack of an odd flavor the reason it tasted better than real-life water?

Since this was a game, I didn’t need to get myself ready, so I could immediately head out of the house. There were a lot of things I wanted to do today, but first there was somewhere I wanted to go.

“All right, who wants to go to the square with me?”

I called out to the monsters that were on the farm, and then I headed to the public square. I had two reasons for going to the Central Square. The first was to see the second wave of players come in. I wanted to see what sorts of players would arrive.

I munched on a skewer I bought at a stall to serve as my breakfast as I arrived at the Central Square, which had taken on a completely different appearance from usual.

“Ooh, well isn’t this something.”

“Tra-la.”

“Hmm.”

It was a pretty impressive sight to see the new players, having just finished character creation, log in one after another. If I was remembering right, the second wave of shipments in Japan was somewhere around sixty thousand. It wasn’t as if all of them would be logging on today, but still, the player base was probably increasing by tens of thousands all at once.

Thanks to technological innovations, it was now possible for a million players to log in at the same time without any stress to the game. Even in this game, the only time players were divided into servers was during events.

This was a matter of course for recent VR games, but it was apparently a shocking thing for older generations. I’ve heard that in the past, a single game would have up to dozens of servers.

Nevertheless, having all players from around the world join all at once was still difficult. After the second wave of players, they would begin to sell the game around the world, and they were planning on dividing each country into a server for the time being.

“There must be more than a thousand people in this square alone.”

As I watched the new players checking their stats, I got a warm feeling, as though I were watching myself when I had just started out.

“Also, doesn’t it seem like there are a lot of Tamers?”

Maybe it was because I was a Tamer myself that I noticed all the Tamers with

tamed monsters, but there seemed to be comparatively more of them.

“Oh, that person has a Little Bear as a starting monster? Lucky them. And they have a Chicky? Dang, that’s great too.”

“Squeak.”

“Aye.”

Maybe I should rather say that there was no bad monster to get. As long as you took care to raise them well, there would come a day when they would live up to your trust.

“You guys got a lot stronger after some growth too.”

“Chirp?”

“Growl?”

While I was pretending I was some full-fledged player and my thoughts ran away from me, I heard a slight commotion in the square.

“What’s going on?”

Everyone in the square was looking in the same direction. There, a lone girl and a small boy were standing. The girl was about 140 centimeters tall and had super long blonde hair that reached all the way down to the back of her knees.

However, everyone’s attention was fixed on the young boy. He had green hair and carried a hoe on his back. That’s right, he was a unique gnome. Even though they were new players, many of them had probably obtained some information ahead of time. It seemed like the players observing the gnome were aware of what he was.

“Hmm, starting out with a gnome, huh?”

Although now I thought that that was great, it was a definite fact that I had experienced my share of hardship.

“That girl’s gonna have a rough time. But I hope she does her best.”

Actually, if she had gotten information on gnomes prior, then she might remake her character. It was unfortunate, but having no combat ability really was tough. But then, when the girl saw her gnome, a smile filled her face and

she threw her arms around him.

“Yay! A gnome!”

Oh? Had she actually been aiming to get a gnome? Or maybe she didn’t mind what she got as a starter monster, but a gnome was just one of the types she did want?

Well, if she was happy with it, then that was good. I would root for her as a fellow gnome-Tamer. In secret, that was. After all, if I were to call out to her here, it’d totally be like I was hitting on her, y’know? A grown working adult using the fact that they were both Tamers to call out to a small pretty girl? *Yerrr out!*

“Well, it’s only a matter of time...”

More importantly, it should have been about time for my other reason for coming here to start.

Ding-dong.

“Oh, it’s starting!”

“It is now time for the first Second Wave Mini Event: ‘The Town of Beginnings’ Mini Exploration’ to begin.”

They were planning to hold the special event. It was a short event where participants would be put into small groups to tackle something like a minigame. I’d thought I had to be in the Central Square to participate, but it seemed like you could participate as long as you were in the Town of Beginnings.

I touched the button to participate. Instantly, my monsters and I glowed with light, and then my field of vision suddenly changed. I must’ve been sent from the square to the event field. However, our location hadn’t actually changed. We were still in the Town of Beginnings.

What *had* changed was the number of people. The large number of people that had just been in the square had simultaneously disappeared. It seemed like it was a field mimicking the Town of Beginnings.

“All right then, what are we supposed to do here?”

I took a look at our surroundings, but besides the fact that there was no one else around, nothing else seemed strange. It was the same Town of Beginnings as always.

Ding-dong.

“Oh, are they going to explain the event now?”

“Twelve jewels have been placed around this Pseudo Town of Beginnings. With your twelve teammates, please procure these jewels and enshrine them within the Lakeside Sequoia Dryad’s Altar at its roots within the time limit.”

So this was a combination treasure hunt-orienteering event?

Apparently, I had eleven other teammates on the field, but I couldn’t see them anywhere around me.

“Well, I guess I’ll find them at some point while I’m walking. All right, let’s get this treasure hunt started! Do your best to find the jewels, everyone!”

“Aye!”

“Tra-la!”

Right now, the six I had with me were Rick, Bear Bear, Fau, Drimo, Himka, and Eine.

I’d randomly brought along whoever was around at the farm, but I was relieved to have Fau and Eine here, who could fly. We had to hunt for treasure in the vast Town of Beginnings, after all.

I placed Rick and Fau on my shoulders and then placed Eine piggyback style on my back, and set out walking.

What about their flying ability, you might ask? Well, I was sure that would become useful in time.

“Grooowl.”

“Hmm.”

Bear Bear and Himka left my side, pushing aside hedges and peering through gaps in the walls. Could there really be a jewel in such an obscure spot? There were only twelve of us. Also, considering that brand-new players were also

playing, I felt like the jewels would be placed in more obvious spots.

“Squeak squeak.”

Drimo was right by my side, vigilant of our surroundings. He looked as if he was preparing for any possible monsters appearing, probably because my other monsters were having so much fun that they were neglecting being on guard. Himka and Bear Bear had moved considerably farther away and had already downright forgotten me.

“Drimo, I’ve only got you to rely on.”

“Squeak.”

Drimo patted my leg and gave a light nod. I got the feeling he was clearly saying “Don’t worry!” *Drimo, you’re as manly as ever!*

It was interesting enough walking around with my monsters and taking in the town’s changed ambience. The town, empty of people aside from us, felt completely unnatural, after all.

The only thing was, we couldn’t find these “jewels.” And just when I began to think it was time to start seriously searching—

Ding-dong.

“Mr. Sukegawa has obtained a jewel. There are eleven remaining.”

Oh? Someone I knew was also participating in the same field as me.

Sukegawa, the lewd blacksmith, was one of my friends, whom I’d also fought together with during the previous event. He was an odd guy who gave himself the nickname “the lewd blacksmith,” but he was actually really easy to talk to.

I wondered whatever had happened with him and Chris. Earlier, I had foisted Chris, the femboy necromancer, onto him and run away...

“I’m kinda scared of facing him.”

“Squeak?”

“It’s nothing. If I really need to, I’ll just prostrate myself in front of him.”

He had done the same to me, so I’d just be returning the favor. *See how you like it!*

“Heh heh heh.”

“Tra-la?”

Eine had climbed over the top of my head and was upside down, peering at my face.

“...Nothing. It’s nothing.”

“Tra-la-la?”

“Really, it’s nothing.”

Looking at Eine’s bright, shining eyes suddenly made me feel embarrassed. Why the heck was I feeling so determined to prostrate myself?

“Anyway, I wonder where that jewel is...”

“Squeak.”

“What’s up, Drimo?”

“Squeak!”

When we reached a winding path, Drimo all of a sudden started pulling on my robe, dragging me along with him to where he wanted to go. There, I saw a strange object that I had never seen before in the Town of Beginnings. Right in the middle of the main road was something that resembled a stage constructed of stone. Without a doubt, it had to be an object related to the event.

Cautiously, we approached the stone stage.

“Any enemies?”

“Squeak.”

Taking the initiative, Drimo got onto the stage and verified its safety.

There didn’t seem to be any danger, so we all climbed onto the stage, in the center of which was placed a large treasure box. When I approached it, a window suddenly popped up.

“Hmm, let’s see... A quiz?”

It looked like a player needed to clear this mini game in order to open the treasure chest. Apparently, if a player lost, they wouldn’t be able to try it again,

and would have to leave it to another player.

“A quiz, huh...”

There were a total of ten questions, seven of which I needed to get right or I would fail. Depending on the difficulty of the quiz, the fail rate seemed like it would be high.

“Well, there are more than ten other people besides me, so no harm in at least trying.”

With that thought, I touched the button to challenge the quiz. That instant, a giant monitor appeared above the stone stage. It reminded me of a quiz game show. *Ooh, exciting!*

As I gazed at the monitor, a question was projected onto it along with an aggressive “*Duuun-dun!*” sound.

“Question one: The name of the first town you enter after logging in is called the Town of Departures. True or false?”

Yes, a super easy question! It was called the Town of Beginnings, so the right answer was “False.”

But wait, was this actually a trick question? Maybe it was also called the Town of Departures, and I just didn’t know?

I had never heard anyone call it that, but it wasn’t as if I had friends who were well-informed of gossip, and I wasn’t myself either. Could I really say it was wrong just because I hadn’t heard of it?

“Squeak?”

“Hm?”

My monsters were staring at me, tilting their heads in confusion. They must have been wondering why I was wavering over such an easy question.

“...All right! Let’s put it to a vote! If you think it’s true, go to the right! If you think it’s false, go to the left!”

“Aye!”

“Chirp chirp!”

Well, sure enough, everyone lined up on the left. My monsters wouldn't know something I didn't, after all.

"Okay, it's decided! The answer is *false*!"

"Ding ding ding! Correct!"

"Phew, it wasn't a trick question."

They were probably all questions easy enough for second-wave players, after all. In that case, it was better for me to think of the answers straightforwardly, not being worried about them trying to trip me up.

I felt a little more at ease with that. If this was how it would go, then I could probably clear this well enough even on my own.

"Question two: Wild Dogs are a type of monster that appears in the Northern Plains. True or false?"

This was also easy. They were the reason I had respawned so many times!

But I didn't answer right away. My monsters were also thinking it over and dividing themselves between left and right. Apparently, they felt like they should participate too.

And so, I waited for a bit. Eine was the only one who stood in front of the "False" choice, while everyone else had gathered in front of "True." Eine's shoulders drooped slightly. She didn't seem to have known the answer.

Even knowledge differed among monsters. That was an interesting thing to find out.

"It's true."

"Ding ding ding! Correct."

"Tra-la..."

"Hey, don't be sad. You haven't fought in Zone One yet, so there's no way you would've known."

"Tra-la?"

"Next time, we'll go into the field together. 'Kay?"

“Tra-la.”

Eine sat on my shoulders on her own and clung to the back of my head. *If it makes you feel better, you can do whatever you want, but...*

“You can ride piggyback, but try not to blindfold me.”

“Tra-la?”

“Look, your hands are completely covering my eyes. If this were real life, you’d be poking my eyes out.”

While that was going on, the next question appeared.

“Question three: The Humming Forest is located at the end of the Eastern Plains. True or false?”

This was also an obvious question. All my monsters also seemed to know, as they were moving in front of “True.”

“True!”

“Ding ding ding! Correct!”

Afterwards, we secured correct answer after correct answer. They really were questions for new players. At this rate, weren’t we well on our way to getting a perfect score?

“Question seven. Shield Skills are included in a Soldier’s starter skills. True or false?”

“Huh? I got a hard question all of a sudden.”

What were the starting skills for a Soldier again? I had gathered data on the game before starting it, but by now I’d forgotten anything that wasn’t relevant to me.

“Shield Skills... Was that part of their starter skills?”

I felt like Weapon Skills and Repair Skills were some of their starter skills. What were the others?

“Hmm. Right, it’s times like these that we can work together! Everyone, which do you think is the right answer?”

“Growl growl!”

“Squeak squeak!”

“Hmm!”

“Mm-hmm. It’s an even split.”

Surprisingly, my monsters had separated into two groups of three.

“Whoever’s confident in their answer, speak up!”

“...”

Complete silence. Everyone averted their eyes, uttering not a single sound. Seemed they’d all just picked true or false based on a gut feeling.

“Hmm, you all don’t know either, huh?”

I myself didn’t know whether it was true or false, and my monsters didn’t know either. With that being the case, I had to decide using my intuition.

“All right, I know how to figure this out! So far there have been five trues and one false! That means this one has a high chance of being false!”

“Bzzt! Incorrect.”

“Nooo! Damn it, devs! You’ve outsmarted me!”

Thinking about it, Soldier was the most balanced warrior-type class. Shield Skills were of course essential.

“Question eight: Strength Up is not included in an Archer’s starter skills. True or false?”

“Another question about starter skills?”

I was sure I’d read up on Archers previously too, but I couldn’t remember very well. I remembered that they came with Archer Skills and Load... Oh, and I was sure they had a skill to temporarily increase their attack power. Was that Strength Up? If I thought of it like them drawing their bowstring back tight to increase their power, then that type of skill seemed possible. Plus, there had been a lot of true answers up to this point, so it was about time for a false.

“False, right?”

“Hm?”

“Squeak!”

This time, several of my monsters moved in front of True: Himka, Bear Bear, Drimo, and Fau.

“Sorry, everyone. Just this once let me ignore the majority vote and trust my intuition!”

“Bzzt! Incorrect.”

“Wha?”

“Growl...”

“Aye...”

“Ha, ha ha ha, don’t look at me like that! We all make mistakes, right?”

“Squeak.”

“Hey, I don’t feel great about that ‘It is what it is’ type of consoling! I’m sorry! Next time I’ll trust *your* intuitions!”

And with that, we tried the ninth question, but—

“Bzzt! Incorrect.”

“Hey, guys...”

“Fwee fwee...”

Someone started whistling innocently.

“Don’t try to whistle away your problems! You little—!”

“Chirp chirp!”

I caught Rick, who had his arms behind his head and was whistling off-key, and assigned him a tickling punishment. Rick twisted his body trying to escape, but I held fast! The other monsters didn’t try to stop me either. At any rate, everyone had picked false, the incorrect answer. In order to avoid their own tickling punishment, they were all facing the opposite direction and pretending they had nothing to do with what was going on.

“Haaah... I really didn’t think we’d be hit with three wrong answers at the

end...”

“Tra-la.”

“If we get the next one wrong, we fail the mini game, got it?”

Dang. I wasn’t sure what the other mini games were like, but the quiz was probably one of the easier ones. Depending on one’s luck, anyone could beat it. What if the other trials required you to have athletic reflexes or combat ability? It was seeming possible that I alone would turn out to be a useless clown without a jewel.

No, anything but that! If the second wave of players who only just logged in for the first time today got their hands on a jewel, while I didn’t...

“I can’t let that happen! Everyone, we *have* to get this next one right!”

“Tra-la-la!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Aye!”

All my monsters nodded, looking fired up. It was clear our hearts were all united as one. We had a sense of unity even stronger than we did in most boss fights. I wasn’t even bothered by the weight of all my small monsters setting up camp on top of my head.

Right now, I felt like I could take on the world.

“All right, bring on the last question!”

“Squeak!”

“Growl!”

“Hmm!”

“Question ten: Cooking is not included in a Tamer’s starter skills. True or false?”

“Huh?”

That was the last question?

“...”

My monsters made no effort to move. They were just staring at the monitor with dead eyes.

“False.”

“Ding ding ding! Correct. You answered a total of seven questions correctly out of ten. You’ve cleared the mini game.”

The correct answer fanfare felt empty.

I’m a Tamer! It wasn’t even like it was easier than the others! Give us back our fighting spirit!

While we were all feeling defeated for some reason, we heard a clank come from the treasure chest in the middle of the stage. It must have been unlocked.

“...”

Without a word, I opened it up.

“Oho, is this the jewel?”

Inside was a sphere the size of a softball. When I took it out, it glittered beautifully with the colors of the rainbow. I cheered up as soon as I realized I had obtained the treasure. I guess I was pretty mercenary.

But it seemed I wasn’t the only one.

“Grooowl.”

“Tra-la-laaa.”

My monsters were also staring at the jewel in my hand, their eyes sparkling. It seemed to have cheered them right up as well.

Who did they get that from? Me? Did monsters generally take after people? *Nah, can’t be.* If they took after me, they would have to be more refined, adorable super monsters.

“Tra-la?”

“Sorry. It’s nothing. You all are the best monsters ever, you hear?”

“Tra-la!”

Sure enough, Eine’s innocent eyes had a purifying effect on my heart.

“Yuto has obtained a jewel. There are ten remaining.”

“Let’s keep this up! Full speed ahead!”

“Aye!”

“Chirp!”

We’d set off highly motivated, but we couldn’t find the next jewel.

During that time, another voice rang out announcing that someone had obtained a jewel. At this rate, would the rest of the twelve jewels be obtained without my having to do anything? Still, we continued exploring and eventually caught sight of several figures walking ahead. For a second I thought they were monsters, but after getting a little closer, I saw they were players.

“Yo, Silver-Haired!”

“Sukegawa!”

It turned out to be Sukegawa. He was heading our way, waving his hand wildly in the air. Only, he wasn’t alone. He had some players I’d never seen before following behind him.

“Oh, who are they?”

“They’re some second-wave kids I joined up with on the way. They didn’t believe me when I said I knew you, so I brought them with me.”

“I-I’m so honored to meet you! My name is D-suke!”

“My name is U-ko. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

The two of them gave me a super polite bow. They didn’t need to act so courteously to me, even if I was a more senior first-wave player...

Moreover, they seemed to know who I was.

“We haven’t met before, right? You’re part of the second wave, after all. How do you know me?”

“Well, you’re famous, Silver-Haired,” Sukegawa explained. “Lots of people know you. What with your Zashiki-Warashi vid, discovering the Undines, and being the first person to tame a Tree Nymph. You’ve got all sorts of amazing achievements under your belt.”

“I’m not sure about calling those amazing...”

Were those things really that impressive? Hang on, this guy was the lewd blacksmith. He’d probably rate any event involving cute girls highly enough.

“Can I shake your hand?!”

“Shake my hand? Well, we’re not friends, so we can’t shake hands...”

“I’m fine with it being over the harassment block!”

“O-Oh, well in that case, okay...”

I would have refused if he’d asked me to be his friend, but I had no problem giving him a simple handshake here. It wasn’t that big of a deal.

I exchanged a, um, thin-barrier-partitioned handshake with D-suke and U-ko. Afterwards, they went to give handshakes to my monsters too. It was a weird image, seeing as their hands couldn’t touch due to the harassment block.

They said they were brother and sister, with D-suke being the older one, but he seemed to be the more childish one, while U-ko seemed older and more mature.

“Told you I knew Silver-Haired, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did. We apologize for doubting you.”

“I really thought you were using Silver-Haired’s name to hit on me.”

“Hey, not even I would try to pick up a girl who was going around with a dude!”

“How can I believe someone who first introduces himself as ‘the lewd blacksmith’?”

“Oof! U-ko, you’re so harsh!”

Sukegawa seemed pleased no matter how you looked at him. He laughed and stuck out his tongue. Was he happy enough with just being able to talk to a girl?

“Well, now that we’ve cleared up your doubt in me, should we go and head for the Lakeside Sequoia Dryad’s Altar for now?”

“All twelve jewels haven’t been found yet, though.”

“But wouldn’t it be more efficient to exchange info with the other players?”

Sukegawa did have a point. It would probably be faster to compare maps with other players to see what areas hadn’t been explored yet.

“Makes sense. Then, let’s go.”

“All righty. You two good with that?”

“Yes, that’s fine with us.”

D-suke and U-ko were likely students, probably high schoolers. That was just the impression I got, anyway.

I hadn’t been aware since I was playing solo, but if you made a party before joining in the event, you’d end up on the same field as them. As we walked, they told me about how they’d met up with Sukegawa. Apparently they had happened across him when they were trying to decide whether to participate in a battle mini game that could be challenged with multiple players. Sukegawa helped them out with that, and afterwards they continued on together.

“Then, we were walking towards the Lakeside Sequoia, and that’s when we found you, Silver-Haired.”

“I am delighted we can be together.”

“Let’s all do our best!”

The two young players’ pure, innocent gazes were dazzling, almost blinding. *Please, don’t look at me with those radiant eyes! I’m not even a top player or anything, I’ve only triggered some unusual events! I’ll get the wrong idea if I think people respect me!*

They must have thought I was some famous player after seeing my name pop up a few times on the forums or something. I fixed a stare on Sukegawa, trying to get him to do something. When he gave me a thumbs-up, I expected him to clear up the pair’s misunderstanding. Not quite, though. In fact, Sukegawa did absolutely nothing. When I stared at him again, he just gave me a huge smile. *It’s useless. Nothing’s getting through to him.*

“I’m not really—”

“Oh, I see it!”

Listen here, Sukegawa...

“Huh? Silver-Haired, why are you glowering at me like that...?”

“Because it’s you.”

“You’re you, after all.”

“Whaaat? Whyyy?”

D-suke and U-ko seemed to have picked up how to handle Sukegawa even in a short period of time. *They’re pretty talented.* Then, as we were walking, I asked something that suddenly came to mind.

“By the way, what happened with Chris?”

“...”

“Sukegawa?”

“Siegfried would know.”

Ah, this guy. So he foisted Chris onto Siegfried, huh? Well, not like I had any right to talk. But he seemed to take my silence for contempt and started giving excuses with a hangdog look on his face.

“Hey, I joined and helped out for about half the time, all right? I accompanied him as he leveled up and helped him get a new tamed monster!”

“Oh yeah? What was it like teaming up with a Necromancer?”

“Necromancers have kind of the best of both worlds of Summoners and Tamers. But it’s hard for them to manage their MP, and their combat power changes based on the time of day, so it was just difficult getting used to that.”

Sukegawa gave a brief explanation, but it seemed like Chris was getting pretty strong. Actually, he was apparently already stronger than Sukegawa, who was a crafter.

“Really? In that case, aren’t you glad you teamed up with him?”

“...Look. Chris has become surprisingly strong, and he doesn’t have a bad personality. He’s a good guy. But I can’t do it, okay?! I don’t wanna open any new doors!”

So that was what it was. I myself thought he was cute, even knowing he was a guy. Sukegawa had also apparently been aware that something was about to awaken in him and run away.

“Sukegawa.”

“Silver-Haired...”

We both firmly clasped each other’s shoulders and nodded. We knew we had a mutual understanding. This was a feeling only the two of us, who had overcome several dangerous situations, could understand.

Wait...were D-suke and U-ko looking at us in disgust? Oh no, they probably thought I was just like Sukegawa!

“Yodel-Ay-Hee has obtained a jewel. The participating players have found a total of twelve jewels. Please place them in the altar at the base of the Lakeside Sequoia. There will be a final mini game held there which all players can participate in.”

“Whoa, we got them all?”

“Great timing. Let’s move!”

With Sukegawa leading the way, we jogged over to the Lakeside Sequoia. Bear Bear’s behind fluttering as they ran ahead of me was way too adorable. I felt like I was about to faint from the excessive cuteness. U-ko also seemed to like cute things. She had her eyes locked on Bear Bear from behind them.

Her eyes kind of scared me though. Rather than being admiring, they looked more like those of a hawk eyeing its prey. It made me want to shout “Run away!” at Bear Bear. D-suke, meanwhile, was eyeing our resident fairy, Fau. He wasn’t just glancing at her, he was straight-up staring. Couldn’t they be a little more subtle about it? These siblings were really cut from the same cloth.

“Oh, looks like there’s something there at the roots.”

After running for a while, we arrived at the shore of the lake. We still had a ways to go, but from here we had a panoramic view of the Lakeside Sequoia on the other side.

Just as Sukegawa said, a large stone structure had appeared at the base of the

tree. I'd say it looked a bit like a pyramid missing its top half. Even the uninformed second-wave players could probably tell at a glance that it was an altar.

As we circled around the lake, we saw other players also heading towards the Lakeside Sequoia. After five minutes, we arrived at the altar.

"Wow!"

"It's beautiful..."

D-suke and U-ko voiced their admiration of the Lakeside Sequoia as they looked up at it. They'd had the same reaction when we'd seen the tree from the other side of the lake, but looking up at the colossal tree from below must have had its own particular impact. They gazed up breathlessly at the branches and foliage of the Lakeside Sequoia, which covered the sky above our heads.

There were other players there, and I could quickly tell the difference between the first-and second-wave players, with the latter being those with their mouths half-open and eyes glued to the Lakeside Sequoia, just like D-suke and U-ko.

Besides Sukegawa, there were no other players whom I recognized. Since a large number of players had been divided up randomly, it must have just been a stroke of luck that Sukegawa and I had ended up on the same field. I figured half our group would be first-wave players. They would probably try to balance the group in terms of fighting ability.

"Hey there. It doesn't look like everyone's here yet, but why don't we go around and introduce ourselves? Looks like there's gonna be another mini game after this!"

As I deliberated on what to do, Sukegawa called out in a loud voice to the other players.

There was his communication skill at work again. This *was* the guy that unabashedly introduced himself as the lewd blacksmith, after all...

The others must have been trying to decide on what to do too. They gathered around him like he was a lifesaver. But no one made a move to open their mouth to speak, instead just exchanging glances. Maybe a lot of them didn't

have communication as their strong suit? Right, and the second-wave players were probably holding back because of the first-wave players.

Was that why Sukegawa had spoken up? Because he'd sensed that might be the case? Or maybe he had just simply thought that since there were a lot of people here meeting for the first time, we would have to introduce ourselves.

He raised a casual hand and hit them with his usual self-introduction.

"I'm Sukegawa, a Blacksmith! People call me the lewd blacksmith, lover and spreader of all things lewd! Oh yeah, and I'm a first-wave player. Nice to meet you all!"

He even punctuated his introduction with a wink. Of course he would!

The shock and awe of his declaration relaxed the atmosphere in an instant. With everyone more at ease, we began to give our self-introductions in a more easygoing fashion.

I had to give props to the man, if that was what he'd been going for...

"This way, even the second-wave players will know my name!"

...But he was just being self-serving.

We had to restart the introductions halfway through for the players that arrived late, but everyone was able to introduce themselves passably. Sure enough, our group comprised six first-wave players and six second-wave players.

My turn came last.

"I'm Yuto, a Tamer. These are my monsters."

At my words, my monsters each raised a hand and gave their greeting. Their cute display left everyone with a warm smile.

"Nice to meet you all."

After we all gave a quick bow, I heard several squeals from the crowd. *Did a monster appear?* I looked around, flustered, but there weren't any enemies around. Evidently, people had just unintentionally let out high-pitched shrieks when they saw my monsters give a quick bow of their heads.

I'd been worried that more aggressive, uncooperative people would give us some trouble, but it looked like I didn't have to worry. After all, anyone who loved cute monsters wasn't a bad person!

At any rate, my self-introduction was over.

"All that's left is offering these jewels at the altar, right?"

We got up onto the large altar, in the middle of which was placed something resembling a small pedestal. The pedestal had twelve holes, so that must have been where we had to place the jewels. I took out my jewel and tried putting it into one of the holes. It was a perfect fit.

Then, the other players placed their jewels in the holes one after another. When the final jewel was placed, something strange started happening to the altar.

"Wha— It's glowing!"

"Huh? That looks like a wall...!"

A bluish-white wall of light began to surround the altar.

While the second-wave players looked on anxiously, not knowing what was going on, the first-wave players recognized that wall. And naturally, they also knew what was going to happen next.

"Silver-Haired, it's a boss wall!" Sukegawa shouted.

Just like he said, the wall of light looked exactly like the wall that fenced in the field during a boss fight. It was a special object that couldn't be destroyed no matter how you attacked it and wouldn't disappear until after the boss fight was over.

"Looks like this mini event ends with a good old-fashioned battle!"

"What should we do?"

"Why're you asking *me*?"

There were five other first-wave players besides me, so someone else could give the commands, right? At least that would be better than a complete nobody like me taking the lead.

But for some reason, even everybody else was looking at me.

“I guess because you’re Silver-Haired. Besides that...”

What do you mean, “Because you’re Silver-Haired”? That’s not a good reason.

But the other first-wave players followed suit after the one named Yodel-Ay-Hee spoke, each giving similar remarks.

“Yeah! I’m not a great speaker.”

“You’d be better than the lewd blacksmith.”

“Also, see? You were the first one to put your jewel in the pedestal.”

What’s that got to do with anything?! But apparently, they had already decided to saddle me with the role of the leader. If I’d known that would happen, I wouldn’t have taken the initiative in putting my jewel in! Even the second-wave players seemed to have no problem with this and were just silently staring at me.

“Ugh, fine! First-wave warrior-types, to the front! I’ll be in the back with the rear guard! Second-wave players, stay farthest back and wait to see how things play out, okay?”

“Okay! Let’s go with that!”

Damn you, Sukegawa! How dare you smirk like that?! This is annoying! If he hadn’t looked to me for direction in the first place, the others wouldn’t have followed his lead!

“One more thing. Sukegawa’s in the very front.”

“What? No, wait, I’m a crafter—”

“It’s fine.”

“What’s fine?!”

“As a blacksmith, you’re strong, and you can use a hammer, right? Doesn’t that mean you’re a front liner in a way?”

“No, it doesn’t! I mean, I *can* fight! But there’s no front line without a tank!”

“It’s fine, just go! You made me the leader, so you have to follow my orders

absolutely!”

“A-All right, fine!”

“Mm-hmm. You can be our sacrifice.”

“Damn it!”

Honestly, even with that joke order, I wasn’t feeling anxious about the upcoming battle. I didn’t want to jinx it, but a boss battle that second-wave players would be participating in couldn’t be that strong. At the very least, I didn’t think we would face an enemy where Sukegawa would be killed instantly. He must have understood that too, since he went along with my order for the time being. If this had been a serious boss battle, I would have placed Sukegawa in the second row.

“Here it comes!” shouted Yodel-Ay-Hee from behind Sukegawa.

With that enthusiasm, couldn’t you have been the leader?

Well, whatever... Right now, I was more interested in Yodel-Ay-Hee’s job class. To my surprise, he was a Painter, a rare class. Even among the crafter classes, hobbyist classes were unpopular. After all, it was unclear how useful they’d be in battles or even whether the items they made could be sold. For example, in addition to not knowing whether their paintings would sell, Painters had to buy all the art supplies they needed in order to paint. It was a job class that was rough in the early stages. Many players instead suspected that second jobs would be implemented before long and were saying it was better to pick a hobbyist job at that time.

Fighting, support, and raising money—it was a difficult job in all three aspects. It was an even more unfortunate job than a Tamer. For that reason, it was rare for players to choose a hobbyist class to start out with.

This was actually the first time I had a proper conversation with a Painter. I was surprised when he suddenly asked me for a handshake, saying, “Thanks for discovering more painting techniques!”

Apparently, due to my discovery of the special way to use Passing Time, Painters had been receiving a lot more attention. They were being praised like never before and had been receiving a lot of painting orders too. He must’ve

been thanking me for that.

How would Yodel-Ay-Hee the Painter fight? I was watching him in excitement when he suddenly equipped a paintbrush. It was possible to fight with farming equipment and fishing poles, so I guess it was possible to fight with a paintbrush too.

Just then, the altar where we'd enshrined the jewels began to change.

"Rooooooooaaaaarrr!"

"A golem?! How flashy!"

"Aye!"

"Tra-la-la!"

Fau and Eine quickly moved behind me. They must have been spooked seeing the enemy. It was best not to have our buffer and healer have to respawn, so I was fine with them doing that.

The enemy *did* look powerful, after all.

It was a stone figure about five meters tall with thick arms. One hit from those was sure to hurt. The jewels were embedded in its face, hands, and chest, emitting a glow. Strangely, those alone made it look even stronger.

"It does look pretty tough... Let's hit it with a long-range preemptive strike!"

"Yes, sir!"

At my command, everyone set into motion, chanting spells and nocking arrows.

Yodel-Ay-Hee was doing something interesting. With one swing of his brush, he materialized a soap bubble, which moved towards the golem. The soap bubble, fascinatingly, had a curious painting-like appearance, as though it had just broken out of a painting. It had a touch of Van Gogh's style, in fact. When the oil-painted soap bubble made contact with the golem, it lightly bounced off it—producing a sort of shock wave, which dealt damage to it.

Cool! It's also stronger than I expected. Wait, is he stronger than me...? But I heard hobbyist crafter-type classes were really weak fighters...

No, the other players *were* stronger than him, in terms of combat power. Painters really weren't geared for battle. All it meant was that I was even weaker than him.

"...E-Everyone, do your best!"

"Squeak!"

"Chirp chirp!"

Drimo and Rick attacked the golem from afar, landing direct hits and dealing a decent amount of damage.

That's right. I'm a Tamer. Borrowing the strength of one's monsters is what makes a Tamer a Tamer! So it doesn't matter if I'm a little weak, right?

"Bear Bear! Kick it up a notch!"

"Growl growl!"

It seemed like it was the right time to end the long-range attacks, so I commanded Bear Bear to attack. Now was the time for some close combat! *For the vanguards, that is!*

"Aaahhhhh!"

Sukegawa was also giving his all. He really did have pretty high attack power, all thanks to the high-quality weapon he'd made himself. Although, he would look a lot cooler if he didn't throw a glance at the female players every time he landed a hit.

"Showing off in the middle of battle doesn't exactly make him exude sincerity."

"Hm."

Even Himka looked exasperated, which of course meant the other players looked fed up too. Though to put it another way, that meant they had the leeway to shoot reproachful looks at Sukegawa.

The golem's attacks didn't have much fire behind them, and its movements were slow. Even I could easily dodge its attacks. It was probably a small-fry enemy for the front liners. Controlling its enmity was also a piece of cake,

making it so we rear guards could safely attack it. At this rate, it was a surefire win, right? But as soon as that thought crossed my mind—

“Crap! The golem’s changing!”

Sukegawa took a blow from the golem that sent him flying, along with inflicting a lot of damage. That attack clearly had more power than the others up to this point. Evidently the boss entered its enhanced state once its HP was brought down to thirty percent.

This might’ve been a boss for second-wave players, but it wasn’t going down easy. In fact, based on its attack power just now...*it was probably super strong!*

While we players were left bewildered by this drastic upgrade, the golem unleashed another series of punches. It really was a completely different enemy!

“ROOOOOAAAAARRR!”

“Growl!”

“Bear Bear, are you okay?!”

“Growl...!”

Bear Bear was hit with an attack that threw them off their guard, but they actually hadn’t taken that much damage. Compared to Sukegawa, their HP had only gone down by half. But wasn’t that kind of odd?

There was no way Bear Bear’s defense was higher than Sukegawa’s... Even if they didn’t have to respawn, I’d been prepared for them to be brought near the verge of death.

After that, something even more shocking happened.

“M-My attacks have no effect on it!”

“Neither does my magic!”

Our attacks had surprisingly stopped being able to deal damage. Occasionally a hit would deal damage, but most just ended up doing nothing. Our attacks were indeed landing, but to no effect.

While we continued to fight like that, the golem came at us with a charge

attack we hadn't yet seen. It lowered its hips and rushed forward with its long arms spread out as wide as they could go. We were able to evade its hit range, but two second-wave players were late in escaping.

Shaken by the golem's powerful appearance, they'd apparently fallen over while at a loss for where to run to. Another player tried to help them, but was stymied by the harassment block. A typical mistake for a newbie.

At this rate, the two were done for, but there was no way I could save them even if I jumped in.

"Attack the golem! We can probably stop its movement!"

At my command, everyone unleashed quick long-range attacks, but we weren't able to cancel the golem's action.

This golem got way too strong too fast! Those new players are really going to —!

While everyone looked on, gnashing their teeth, two figures leaped between the golem and the new players.

"Hmm!"

"Aaaahhhhhh!"

It was Himka and Sukegawa. It looked like they were trying to buy time for the new players to run away by stopping the golem's attack. However, the golem's charge attack had far exceeded our expectations. To my amazement, they weren't able to stop it for even a moment.

"What the—?!"

"Hmmmm!"

After mowing those two down, the golem pressed in on the rear guard. Himka and Sukegawa had taken a large amount of damage as they went flying. If that charge hit the new players, they wouldn't stand a chance!

"Waaaah!"

"Eeeek!"

Oh no, the new players—!

A look of despair crossed all the first-wave players' faces, but the nightmarish scene we feared didn't come to pass. Even though the new players had taken a direct hit from the golem's arms, their health didn't even drop down to half.

"Huh? Wait, I didn't take any damage."

"It really doesn't hurt!"

The two of them were surprised. Well, so were the rest of us.

After that, I finally figured it out while we fought the golem.

Seemingly, the higher your level was, the more damage you'd receive from the golem's attacks. On the reverse side, the higher your level was, the less damage you'd deal to it. To summarize, the second-wave players who were still only level 1 had the advantage when fighting it.

But the boss fight's gimmick didn't end there. Halfway through, small golems began to appear. They seemed about the same size as Olto, and first-wave players' attacks worked on them. However, due to the emergence of these miniature golems, the second-wave players couldn't focus on the original golem.

These were annoying monsters meant to impede our attacks on the boss. It seemed like both waves of players had to cooperate or we wouldn't be able to defeat them.

"First-wave players, let's take out the mini golems! Second-wave players, focus on the boss!"

"Leave the healing to us!" Sukegawa declared with a dazzling smile aimed at the girls.

Well, all right. I'll heal the gentlemen. I would have rather left the healing up to Reflet, but since she wasn't here right now, I didn't have much of a choice.

In the end, the fight progressed without much issue and we were able to crush the boss. Once we figured out the right strategy, it was easy. D-suke and U-ko dealt the final blow with a flurry of attacks which depleted the golem's HP.

Those two's movements were pretty good. They must have gotten used to fighting in other games. They were sure to surpass someone like me in no time.

It would make me happy if we could be friends after they eventually became famous players.

As soon as the golem broke apart into polygons, we heard an announcement.

“Congratulations on clearing the mini event.”

It looked like defeating the boss was how you cleared the mini event.

“As a reward, you will be awarded a potion pack, 1,000 G, and one bonus point. Please continue to do your best on your adventures ahead. In thirty seconds, you will be returned to the Town of Beginnings.”

The potions and money were whatever, but I was glad to get a bonus point. It seemed like they’d set things up so the first-wave players got a little bit of a benefit out of the event too.

“Himka, great job on trying to protect the new players during the fight.”

“Hm!”

“Tra-la!”

“Yes, of course. You were also great as a decoy, Eine.”

“Chirp!”

“And you, Rick! Yeah, I was watching you too, Bear Bear. You don’t have to come in for a hug!”

“Growl.”

Oh no, I’m being mobbed by my monsters! The other players are judging me! There goes my dignity as a first-wave player!

While that was happening, our bodies were enveloped in light.

“See ya later, Silver-Haired!”

“Oh, yeah. Thanks a bunch, Sukegawa.”

“Silver-Haired! I look forward to meeting again somewhere!”

“Thank you very much.”

With Sukegawa casually waving a hand and D-suke and U-ko giving me a deep bow, we were brought back to the original field.

Once the light settled down, I was already back in the Central Square of the Town of Beginnings. I was surrounded by a crowd of people and the noisy hustle and bustle of the town, so it was clear I wasn't in the special field for the mini event anymore.

"We're back, huh?"

"Tra-la."

It had only been an hour-long event, but it felt like it had lasted much longer, probably because its content had been pretty substantial.

"All right, I'm kinda tired, but I still haven't cleared my checklist for today. Let's move!"

"Growl."

"Squeak."

Accompanied by my monsters, I headed for the transportation gate. My aim was Zone Three. For now, this area would be overrun with new players, so I wanted to level up in a place with relatively fewer people. I also wanted to increase my Adventurers' Guild rank as well as head towards Zone Five. At the very least for today, I wanted to rank up at the Adventurers' Guild.

"I really don't want the second-wave players surpassing me *that* easily."

Seeing D-suke and the others' moves during the mini event kind of sprouted a sense of impatience in me. If I kept taking it easy, I really would be surpassed before I knew it.

Also, there was apparently going to be some big event to commemorate the second-wave players' joining. Rather than this small-scale, orientation-like event, it would be a considerably larger-scale event.

The event would be held eight in-game days from now, on February 5th. It was going to be a huge event that warrior-type classes, crafting-type classes, and monsters alike would be able to enjoy. I didn't know what it would entail, but there was no harm in raising my level in preparation.

But anyway, I was starting to get the strange feeling that the players around me were all looking at me...

Well, that was to be expected. After all, I, a longtime veteran (self-proclaimed), was mixed in with all the new players. It was natural for me to stand out.

“Let’s hurry up and teleport. Onwards to the Eastern Town!”

“...That’s Silver-Haired...”

“...Whoa, it’s really him...”

“...Hmph. Well, I...”

“...overtake soon...”

I couldn’t hear very well over the sound effects of the teleportation, but were they gossiping about me? No way, there was no way all the new players knew who I was. D-suke and his sister must have known about me because they’d done a ton of in-depth research beforehand. They were probably just wondering who I was since I stood out with all the monsters around me.

After hurrying over to the Eastern Town, I went to check out the available jobs at the Adventurer’s Guild.

In order to get to Zone Four from here, I would have to cross through the field dungeon known as the Fire Beasts’ Lair. It seemed like there were a lot of gathering and extermination requests for that dungeon.

“I’ve reached a suitable level, so maybe I’ll head there for now.”

There was already a lot of information about the field itself circulating around, so it wouldn’t be hard to take it on.

I didn’t switch out my monsters. We actually had a pretty good comp like this. Sakura, who was weak to fire, would be sitting this one out, while Himka would be acting as our tank. Since physical attacks were effective on enemies that appeared there, Bear Bear and Drimo could take care of that part. Rick and Eine would take care of collecting items. Some enemies weak to water would appear, but I could take care of those if they did.

“Our main goal is to rank up at the Adventurers’ Guild. Then, it’s time to level up Drimo, Himka, and Eine. Let’s do this!”

“Squeak!”

“Hm!”

“Tra-la-la!”

First we would make it so we’d be able to go everywhere in Zone Four, and then it would be time to conquer Zone Five. At this rate, we’d expand our area of conquests all at once!

Chapter Four: Checking Out Zone Five

Today was February 1st in game time. Four days had already passed since the second-wave players first logged into the game. My monsters and I were at the farm getting ready to set out.

“All right, today’s the day we clear Zone Four! Let’s do it!”

“Mm-mm!”

“Right, sorry. Olto, you’re going to stay here today, okay?”

“Mm? Mmm?”

“Don’t give me that ‘Who, me?’ nonsense. Did you forget what you went through yesterday?”

“Mmm...”

Just past the Southern Town in Zone Three was the field dungeon called the Underground Canal. In a similar fashion, the other towns in Zone Three each had a dungeon set up on their outskirts. Once those dungeons were cleared, you’d be able to challenge the Zone Four field.

What we were aiming for was past the Underground Canal: the Valley of the Yellow Trees in Zone Four. There grew a dense thicket of trees known as Yellow Trees. You could cut them down, but they yielded no items. The area was basically a plant labyrinth. We’d already cleared the Underground Canal. So now, we’d be able to arrive at the town in Zone Five once we broke through this field.

We’d already attempted fighting the zone boss there once and died spectacularly. The zone boss was called Garuda. Like the giant bird of legend that its name referenced, it was a tremendously large bird monster.

The fact that it could fly was annoying, but more than that, the wind pressure it produced with its wings was terrifying. To my shock, the wind it blew at us reduced our agility dramatically, dealing continuous damage.

Since it was a wind-based attack, Olto had suffered a great deal of damage. He was stymied by some of the other attacks as well, so he hadn't been able to prove useful in battle.

Garuda was a monster with a wind attribute that could fly and aimed for the rear guard. It was the worst possible enemy for Olto to face. To be honest, this monster was probably the strongest field boss in Zone Four.

However, we had to get past here to Zone Five at all costs. Or, to be more precise, I had some business to take care of at the Subterranean Lake, which took up the latter half of Zone Five beyond the town.

Our goal was to get the Glow Shroom, which would be the base for making fluorescent paint. Well, it wasn't as if fluorescent paint was a real necessity for me, but now that I had heard about how to make it, I really wanted to try it out.

"...Also, that crab was mouthwateringly delicious."

I had met up with Amimin again on a previous day, and she'd treated me to several types of shellfish cuisine, made with crab that could be obtained from the Subterranean Lake. She really was a top Tamer. Unlike a weakling like me, she was fighting on the front lines.

"It's hard to get crab that tasty even in real life. But here I can eat as much of it as I want!"

For a crab-lover such as myself, going to the Subterranean Lake was a top priority.

Ranking up my home-base farm was also another important goal. The farms I had in the towns and at my home base each had their own rank. The speed at which the crops grew and their max quality level changed depending on the rank. Also, a player's farm's rank would apparently match the rank of the furthest town that they reached. So if we could get to Zone Five, my farms in the other towns would change to match that rank. I had already added a farm to the yard of my Japanese-style home, with Olto taking care of its cultivation. That farm also needed to be ranked up.

"For now, we need to gather a lot of Spider Thread again to help us with Garuda, so we'll have to hunt for spiders first."

“...!”

“Yeah, I’m counting on you, Sakura.”

With the silk from the Yellow Spiders that appeared in the Valley of the Yellow Trees, I could make items called Spider Thread Balls. If we threw those at Garuda, there was a fixed probability that they would impede its flight and drag it down to the ground.

That was the basic tactic, but yesterday we had unfortunately used up all our Spider Thread Balls while attempting the Garuda fight. We still hadn’t been able to win, but I was confident we could win next time after having fought it once.

The Yellow Spiders, which were essential to our plan, possessed a paralyzing poison, but we were able to hunt them easily thanks to Sakura’s Status Ailment Resistance and Rick’s equipment, which had paralysis resistance. The spiders’ actual combat ability wasn’t much of a threat.

Being able to say that Zone Four enemies weren’t much of a threat... That meant I was also getting stronger. Well, out of all the enemies that appeared in Zone Four, Yellow Spiders *were* the weakest.

“All right! We got our Spider Thread! Let’s jump right into making those Spider Thread Balls.”

Over the past few days, our levels had increased across the board. It really had been a good idea to make Zones Three and Four our main battlefields.

I had also used the items I’d bought to commemorate the second-wave players starting the game. I used the EXP-Up ticket, a drink that doubled the rate my skills leveled up, and other such items to their fullest extent, which had made for effective leveling.

My Alchemy level had also shot up, which meant I could make items I needed on the spot. It was almost like we were a frontline team!

Oh, but I hadn’t forgotten about my experiments and crafting. Over the past few days, I had probably tried out Engraving over a hundred times. Most were failures, though. That sped-up deterioration effect I’d put on the Fermenting Barrel really *had* just sped up the deterioration of the barrel itself...

Oh well. I discovered a bunch of other stuff too, so I'd say it was time well spent. Oh, and I had already ordered an additional beehive for Bear Bear. *Sorry, Bear Bear. I just couldn't resist my curiosity...* I also prepared a high-quality wind-resistance potion using the Windproof Plant I'd obtained during the Air Elementals' trial.

"Now that we've replenished our stock of Spider Thread Balls, we'll take down Garuda this time for sure!"

"Tra-la-la!"

"Aye!"

"Nice, nice. I like the enthusiasm. I'll be counting on you two this time as our aerial unit!"

With a regular party, you could apparently throw a Spider Thread Ball at Garuda when it swooped down low, or shoot one at it with an arrow. However, it was a different story when you had party members that could fly. They could get up close and throw the ball at it directly.

Of course, there was a chance they'd get hit with an attack, but the chances of making Garuda fall would skyrocket. I watched a video of Amimin's victory over it. She had all flying monsters with her, and she was able to win without really having to do much of anything.

"But before that, we have to take care of the gatekeeper. That's where you come in, right, Drimo?"

"Squeak!"

The gatekeeper was a large monster who took up position in front of the boss room. It was an annoying monster you had to fight every time until you beat the boss and cleared the field.

Garuda's gatekeeper was Stoneman. It was a type of golem, about five meters in height. I had already figured out its weak points—tree and earth attributes—and I had formed a solid strategy for beating it. Also, I knew that if you mined the few mining nodes that were on its body, you could deal significant damage to it.

That meant the earth-attribute, pickax-wielding Drimo was the Stoneman's natural enemy. The location of its mining nodes changed every time, but Drimo could defeat it just by mining five spots.

With a regular party, defeating it would take much more time. After all, mining the moving Stoneman was pretty difficult. But for our party, which had both me and Sakura with our tree magic, it was easy to obstruct the Stoneman's movements. All this meant it was practically a sitting duck to us.

"Squeak squeak!"

"Oh? Well, aren't you eager?"

"Squeak squeak squeak!"

"Wh-What's going on? You're so— Oh, did you level up?!"

We were just about to take on the Stoneman when Drimo started leveling up from the battle right before it.

Drimo was level 24, which means now he's growing to level 25...

"You're evolving!"

I wasn't expecting him to be able to evolve already. Gaining experience in Zone Four really had been efficient!

"How d'you feel?"

"Squeak?"

According to the window, there were two types of evolutions for Drimo.

"Drimole Soldier and Drimole Digger, huh?"

If I picked Soldier, he would learn the skill Pierce, and his Excavation, Heavy Bo Staff Skills, and Earth Magic would become advanced skills.

If I picked Digger, he would get the skill Ore Detection, and his Mining, Heavy Bo Staff Skills, and Earth Magic would become advanced skills. It seemed like this one would be specialized in Mining.

"Well, you're my battle MVP, so I'll go with Soldier."

"Squeak squeak!"

“Y-You’re so valiant! It’s rare to see you like this!”

Name: Drimo Race: *Drimole Soldier* Base Level: 25

Master: Yuto

HP: 101/101 MP: 7373

Strength: 24 Endurance: 23 Agility: 12

Dexterity: 19 Intelligence: 14 Sanity: 16

Skills: Tailwind, Wind Resistance, Thrash, Excavation (Advanced), Mining, Heavy Bo Staff Skills (Advanced), Earth Magic (Advanced), Night Vision, Dragon Blood Awakening (Baby Dragon), Gem Finder (20), Pierce

Equipment: Mole Soldier’s Pickax, Mole Soldier’s Overalls, Mole Soldier’s Helmet, Mole Soldier’s Sunglasses

+40 Strength and +15 to all other stats during Dragon Blood Awakening

“Wh-Whoa! That’s a huge change!”

“Squeak.”

His size didn’t change, but the color of his fur changed from brown to a much more reddish hue; he was now a reddish-brown mole. Also, he looked a little fluffier. Even with just those differences, his appearance had changed a lot.

His overalls had also changed from a more standard blue to a deep navy color, giving him a more subdued look. His pickax had grown one size larger, and even its handle was metal now. It didn’t seem like his helmet or sunglasses had changed, but with his fur and clothing taking on a new color, the impression he gave had changed considerably. Overall, he gave off a more combative vibe. I wouldn’t have expected less from a soldier.

“What else... Dragon Blood Awakening changed, huh?”

Baby Dragon? Oh, and he gets an even better stats boost when he awakens!

Does it get stronger with each evolution? I can't wait to find out!

"Drimo. You've got this gatekeeper battle, haven't you?"

"Squeak!"

Then, twenty minutes after Drimo's evolution...

"Grruuuuggghh..."

"And we crushed it."

We easily defeated Stoneman, the gatekeeper.

It was a complete victory, and we didn't even give it a chance to use its last-resort self-destruct move. Sakura and I continuously alternated casting tree magic, stopping its actions, which left time for Drimo's Super Exciting Mining Tour.

"Oh, we got a Wind Ore! Score! This is the hardest one to get."

"Marble? I don't have a way of using this, so I'll just have to sell it."

"An Iron Ore. Lamé."

Surprisingly, I even had time to check my inventory in the middle of battle.

"We were able to win without taking damage thanks to you, Reflet. Thanks a bunch."

"Hum!"

Reflet was also able to heal us the instant we took any damage from AoE attacks. We didn't even have to use any Medicine before the boss fight. Sakura, Reflet, and I could just down a Mana Potion, and then we'd be ready to challenge Garuda.

"You've gotten pretty strong, haven't you, Drimo? That Pierce skill is awesome."

Although Pierce wasn't as powerful as Thrash, at the time of calculating its damage output, it would reduce the enemy's defense. It was a great skill that allowed you to deal definite damage even to enemies with solid defense. It was perfect against any enemy like Stoneman. Also, unlike Thrash, it had a high hit rate. Combined with Tailwind, it could set the user up to deal a huge amount of

damage.

To my amazement, Drimo was able to knock down Stoneman, who should have had fairly high defense, in three hits. I ended up even thinking it was kind of a waste that some of the mining nodes were left untouched.

“Squeak.”

“What is it, Drimo? Is something up with Him—”

“Hmmmm!”

“Oh, are you leveling up? And isn’t it time for you to evolve too?!”

This was a good omen. I couldn’t believe Drimo *and* Himka were leveling up before our fight with Garuda! I hadn’t received a Tamed Monster’s Heart from him to unlock the max-favorability evolution route, but that was okay. In any case, I could pick the unique evolution route.

I would check the information just in case, though.

“The standard evolution, Salamander Craftsman, the special evolution, Fire Salamander, and the unique evolution, Salamander Chief.”

The Salamander Craftsman would make his Malletworking and Fire Magic become specialized skills, while Glassblowing would reach advanced status. I could also choose two extra skills. They were all fire-related crafting skills, like Smithing, Alchemy, and Refining

Fire Salamander would bring Malletworking, Fire Magic, and Smelting to advanced status, and he would also learn the skills Smithing (Swords Specialization) and Sword Sharpening. Would he be like a swordsmith? *S-So cool...* If I were a warrior-type, I’d *definitely* pick Fire Salamander! And the fact that his Fire Magic would become an advanced skill rather than specialized probably meant that he would be able to use it in battle too.

Last was the unique evolution, the Salamander Chief. This one was great, as I expected. Not only would it raise his stats the most, but the skills were also well-balanced. Glassblowing and Smelting would become advanced skills, and Fire Magic would become specialized, and he would learn the new skill Counterattacker. I could also pick one more additional skill.

Fire Salamander's not a bad choice either, but...

"I've gotta go with the Chief unique evolution."

"Hm!"

Name: Himka Race: Salamander Chief Base Level: 25

Master: Yuto

HP: 73/73 MP 6969

Strength: 23 Endurance: 19 Agility: 11

Dexterity: 20 Intelligence: 15 Sanity: 14

Skills: Glassblowing (Advanced), Metalworking, Smelting (Advanced), Malletworking, Pottery, Fire Magic (Specialized), Fire and Heat Resistance, Crockery Making, Fire Spirit's Circle (20), Counterattacker, Smithing

Equipment: Salamander's Mallet, Salamander's Garments, Salamander's Big Work Bag

I added Smithing as a new skill. I wasn't sure how useful it would be for us, but I figured there was no harm in him having it. The Counterattacker skill was also more aggressive than I'd expected. While it was active, it had a taunting effect, making it easy to focus the enemy's hate. Then, it would allow the user to counterattack an attacking enemy with their fists or magical garments.

It was an ability that made it possible for an elemental monster, who normally specialized in crafting, to actually deal some damage.

"But more than that, your appearance has changed drastically."

"Hm!"

"You've definitely gotten bigger."

The most major thing was that he had grown more than ten centimeters, bringing him close to 150 centimeters tall. He'd probably get taller than me with his next evolution. His spiky red hair had also gotten even taller. With a black

bandana around his head, he changed from looking like a cute boy to a bit of a troublemaker.

His clothes had also changed somewhat. He wore a short red jacket above his well-fitting black undershirt, and his pants had changed to baggy, black, cargo-type trousers with a tribal flame pattern on them.

His work bag didn't look like it had changed size, but since its name had changed to "Big Work Bag," that must have meant that it could fit more inside it now.

"Himka, will you be okay jumping into a boss fight right after evolving?"

"Hm!"

Even though evolving had made him look like a bit of a ruffian, his personality was the same as ever. He flashed a smile and swung both arms around to show off his enthusiasm.

"Okay then. Fau, Eine, I'm handing the Spider Thread Balls to you two."

"Aye!"

"Tra-la!"

My aerial unit tried to give me a salute while holding the Spider Thread Balls, a serious expression on their faces. But since they were both small, the Spider Thread Balls toppled out of their hands. *Look, you really don't need to salute me. Just hold on to those!* I knew there probably wouldn't be any accidental discharges with that little force, but still, it was bad for my heart.

"Sakura and Himka, you two focus on defending until Garuda falls down. But feel free to use Counterattacker, Himka. Sakura, when the enemy falls, use Branch Binder first to hinder its movement."

"...!"

"Hm!"

"Drimo, you'll be on standby next to me. Then, when Garuda falls, use Dragon Awakening to chip away at its HP."

"Squeak!"

Drimo was also weak to wind like Olto. My plan was to switch out Drimo with Bear Bear once he was done using Dragon Awakening. He had Wind Resistance, but that couldn't exactly overcome that weak point completely. It would probably make his big weakness into a small weakness. Normally that would be fine, but for a boss that only used wind-based attacks, it'd be rough.

Even after becoming reddish-brown in color, his cool demeanor hadn't changed. He just smirked and gave me a thumbs-up.

"Stay in the back, okay, Reflet? If we lose you as our healer, we're done for."

"Hum-hum!"

Whoa, Reflet looks so serious right now! She must have acknowledged Garuda to be a formidable opponent after yesterday's defeat. Well, she'd probably forget about it tomorrow. Contrary to her neat and tidy appearance, she was surprisingly carefree deep down.

"We're taking down that damn bird today for sure!"

"Hum!"

After psyching ourselves up one last time, we stepped foot into the boss area where Garuda was waiting for us. When we entered, the gigantic bird flying in midair was already glowering at us with a piercing gaze. As my and Garuda's gazes converged, a blue boss wall began to surround the field, signaling the start of the boss fight.

"Skreeeeeeeee!"

"All right, let's go!"

Then, only three minutes later—

"Skreeeee?"

"Nice! It's coming down! Having Eine and Fau flying and hitting with a Spider Thread Ball really does have a higher chance of making it fall!"

Even though they had taken some damage, Eine and Fau had completed their mission. With its wings wrapped in the spider's thread, Garuda fell out of the sky, taking some fall damage as a bonus. *I knew this was the best method!*

“...!”

“Nice, Branch Binder was a success too! Drimo, you’re up!”

“Squeak squeeeeak!”

Just as we’d planned, Sakura shot out ivy to bind Garuda, inhibiting its movements. Then, in order to commence his attack, Drimo used Dragon Blood Awakening and his appearance started to change.

“Huh? Drimo?”

“Squeak!”

It was probably because of Dragon Blood Awakening getting an upgrade, but to my surprise, Drimo’s dragon form looked way different. Before, he’d looked like a triceratops that had sprouted dragon wings. But now, he looked even more dragon-like. Since his back legs had grown, he went from walking on four legs to walking on two, leaving his front legs to move freely. Plus, he was twice as large as before, now about the size of a small car.

Since his snout had grown longer and his fangs larger, he looked less like a triceratops and more like a raptor. The two horns protruding from his forehead had grown thicker and longer, and they might have also become more curved.

Also, thanks to his wings being bigger, he could accelerate by flapping them. When used with Tailwind, he could attain a tremendous speed that made it seem as if he was flying at a low altitude.

Drimo rammed against the boss with a decisive high-speed charge attack.

“Squeak squeak!”

“Skreeeeeeeeeeee!”

His horns gouged into the giant bird’s yellow-green wings. The fierce special effects were followed by a resounding shriek from the Garuda.

Nice one, Drimo! That was some insane damage!

All thanks to this powered-up dragon mode. He had probably wiped out more than ten percent of the boss’s HP in a single hit. His positioning was also optimal. It seemed like he’d taken into consideration Bear Bear’s being

swapped in and had picked to be in a spot that would be easy for them to attack from. *Sir Drimo, you're my hero!*

"All right, let's go! Return, Drimo! Come out, Bear Bear!"

"Grooowl!"

"Bear Bear, go ahead and attack that bird right in front of you!"

"Growl growl!"

Among my monsters, Bear Bear was the most affable. They actually welcomed being petted by other players. Nevertheless, they also loved fighting more than any of my other monsters did. In a situation like this, I could rely on them being ready to attack the moment they were summoned.

The tips of Bear Bear's claws were stained a toxic-looking purple color. At level 30, Bear Bear had learned the skill Poison Claw. I had no clue whether it would be effective against this boss, but it'd be great if it was.

"We've got this!"

"Growl!"

"Hum!"

And then, twenty minutes after our fight with Garuda began...

At the end of the intense battle, we were able to bring Garuda's HP down to ten percent.

"Skreeeee!"

"Ack! Watch out!"

However, you could also say that the real fight was just beginning. The boss's movement pattern changed, the bird now repeatedly attacking the rear guard and then quickly withdrawing.

"Crap, it's too fast to hit!"

"Tra-la..."

"Aye..."

"Our aerial unit too?"

I'd heard that Garuda was fast, but I didn't think it would be *this* fast. I thought that as long as I had Fau and Eine, who could fly, we'd be able to hit it with the Spider Thread Balls...

The time it was hovering in midair, which should have provided us with an opening, was unusually short. And while it was attacking, it was enveloped in wind, which blew the thread away.

"Growl..."

"Hum..."

Reflet's MP was close to running out. I was trying to decide between healing Bear Bear, who was worn out, or switching them out. But the only thing was, I wasn't sure how Rick would fare against Garuda.

"No, Bear Bear's at their limit. It's Rick's turn! Return, Bear Bear! Come out, Rick!"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Rick, it's time for a Nut Bomb free-for-all! Throw to your heart's content!"

"Chirp!"

"Fau, you can stop with the Spider Thread Balls! Support us with your singing!"

"Aye!"

"Eine, focus on using Wind Break!"

"Tra-la-la!"

Wind Break was a new skill Eine had learned when she reached level 20. As its name implied, it had the effect of reducing susceptibility to wind damage for party members.

Now all that was left was for me to finish this with my magic!

"I have no choice! I'm ready to use up all my MP!"

What I was planning to use was a new water spell I'd learned at level 35, Aqua Shock. That's right, I had finally learned an AoE spell. Unlike ones in ordinary RPGs, it wasn't a convenient skill that would deal damage to all enemies

automatically once it was fired off, but it did create a cover in the shape of about a five-meter-diameter dome. And of course, it could be cast into the air too.

I planned on hitting the boss with this skill the next time it charged at me. It used as much as three times the MP as Aqua Ball, and had maybe eighty percent of its power. It was kind of a waste to use it on a single enemy, but it did come with the benefit of making it easier to hit my target.

“I used up my means of recovering MP... Can I take it out with my remaining MP?”

What I had worried about proved to be right on the mark. My MP was just about to run dry.

“Rick!”

“Chirp!”

Rick was also doing his best, but just as I thought, the boss’s wind protection was making Rick’s Nut Bombs miss, so they couldn’t deal as much damage as I would have liked them to. Should I have kept Bear Bear in?

While I was thinking about that, a shadow appeared above Garuda.

“Tra-la-la!”

It was Eine. I was shocked to see her charging at it like that. Also, she wasn’t repelled by Garuda’s wind protection, allowing her to successfully land a hit on it. Her Wind Break skill must have weakened its protection.

“Tra-la-laaa!”

“Skreeeee?”

Garuda, struck with a Spider Thread Ball at point-blank range, lost its balance and began to fall to the ground. But everything hadn’t ended well for Eine either. She took a direct hit from Garuda’s protective wind and was on the verge of death. I caught Eine as she returned, unsteady and disheveled, and praised her.

“That was great!”

“Tra-la...♪”

Thanks to Eine’s hard work, Garuda had finally fallen to the ground. This was our chance. But even on the ground, Garuda wasn’t giving up. It aimed its beak at the monsters surrounding it. The beak of a giant bird like Garuda must have some tremendous strength. If we didn’t proceed carefully, it would probably turn the tables on us. But if we let too much time go by, Garuda would take to the air once more.

As I was worrying over being forced to attack it, Himka rushed in front of Garuda all on his own.

“Hmm!”

“Himka!”

“Hm-hmm!”

I couldn’t help but yell, but Himka just turned back casually and gave me a big smile. *D-Dang, he’s so cool!*

Himka turned towards Garuda and beckoned it with his hand, trying to provoke it. Either because the provocation worked or because that was one of Counterattacker’s abilities, Garuda seemed to shift to target Himka, its sharp beak pointing straight at him.

“Skreeeeeeeeee!”

“Hm!”

But Himka didn’t even try to dodge that attack, instead trying to use his mallet to stop it. His enemy, however, was a large-size boss. Garuda’s beak and Himka’s mallet collided head-to-head, but Himka lost out and was easily sent flying.

He didn’t die, but his HP had plunged into the red.

But Garuda hadn’t gotten off scot-free either. Surprisingly, it took a hit to the head from Himka’s Counterattacker skill and became stunned. Was that what Himka meant to do?

“Th-This is it! Charge!”

“Chirp!”

“...!”

“Aye!”

We rushed in like crazy. We were out of MP, so all we had left in our arsenal was to hit it with physical attacks. Even Eine pounded against Garuda with her little fists. As a result, Garuda’s remaining five percent HP was obliterated, and we were able to grab hold of the victory.

It had really been a close battle, and we’d barely escaped alive, but...

“W-We won...”

“Tra-la-la.”

“Hmm.”

I’m exhausted!

I stood motionless in that spot for just a bit, catching my breath, and then I checked the results.

“I can see why that’s considered the strongest enemy among the Zone Four bosses... That was the toughest boss I’ve fought, other than raid bosses.”

However, our gains matched the amount of effort we’d put in. Sakura and Fau actually leveled up, hitting level 30 at the same time. Thanks to that, they also learned new skills.

“Hmm, maybe we would have had an easier time winning if I’d leveled them up a little more beforehand...? Nah, actually, neither of these skills would have been useful in the boss fight.”

First off was Sakura. She had learned Pruning, a skill that Rick also had. It was a skill that added a bonus to crops harvested from plants in the user’s care. It was a simple skill, but it was perfect for Sakura.

Fau learned the skill Fairy Heal. It was a passive skill in which particles of shining light would scatter from her wings and increase the speed of automatic recovery of party members on the field. It would probably be hard to actually experience its benefits, but it seemed like a useful skill for long explorations.

Incidentally, over the last few days, my other monsters had also gained new skills. Olto and Reflet had learned new skills at level 30, and Drimo and Himka learned new skills at level 20.

Olto had learned the skill Mutation Rate Booster, which increased the probability of mutation in crops in his care. Reflet learned Knife Skills, which was a skill that prevented ingredients from degrading while using a knife when cooking, and, depending on the circumstances, would even raise their quality. Unfortunately, it wasn't a skill that would allow her to fight with knives.

Drimo had learned the skill Gem Finder, which I also had, and Himka had learned the crafting skill Fire Spirit's Circle, which increased the heat produced by a Furnace. He was getting further away from being a fighter.

Oh right, speaking of skills, Drimo's Earth Resistance skill had disappeared. But that wasn't anything unusual. It was my first time seeing it, but other Tamers had been reporting about it. Apparently, when a monster evolved to have a higher resistance than what that skill provided, it would become unnecessary and be removed.

People speculated that it had something to do with the hidden attribute values. Basically, Earth Resistance had been removed, but his resistance towards earth was just as high as before. With that understood, I had no problem with it.

"All right, skill check complete. How about the drops?"

As a matter of fact, one of the materials I'd been looking for was included in Garuda's drops. Well, it wasn't exactly something I absolutely wanted, but it was something I was happy to have.

"Let's see... There it is! Heck yeah!"

"Hum!"

"With this, I can make a giant fried egg!"

The ingredient Reflet and I were happy to have gotten our hands on was the item called Storm Bird's Giant Egg. Although it was an egg, it was different from a Tamed Monster's Egg. This particular egg was classified as a foodstuff, which meant it was an edible item.

Naturally, I couldn't use the incubator on it, and even if I kept it warm, it wouldn't hatch. I guess you could call it an unfertilized egg.

This was the answer that was deduced by the frontline Tamers after testing out a bunch of things, thinking maybe hatching the egg could allow them to tame the boss.

I had seen the indescribable video uploaded called "Incubating Garuda's Egg." It would have been an exciting video if it had hatched, but it had been a surreal film that only showed an egg not hatching seemingly without end. Even if you played it at 128-times speed, it still just looked like you were watching a still image.

Some players who were veterinarian students IRL had apparently tried using geothermal heat and Fire Ores to hatch the egg. They also made bird-type monsters hold it and fluffy monsters keep it warm. However, in the end all efforts had proved fruitless.

The reason I had been aiming for this egg was for cooking purposes. I wanted to try frying this over-thirty-centimeter-large egg.

"Well, even if it could be hatched, it would probably take forever."

I remembered Rick and Fau's egg, which I had checked on just before going out.

Thinking back on the time when Fau had hatched, it wouldn't be odd for the egg to hatch before long, but I didn't see any signs of it doing so this morning. The time it took to hatch supposedly depended on the monster inside the egg, but I couldn't believe it was taking so long... There was a possibility that meant it would be a rare monster, but just what was it going to turn out to be?

"I wonder if it'll have wings or claws?"

"Chirp chirp!"

While I was checking my drops, Rick suddenly jumped up on my shoulder and started smacking my cheek.

"I'm almost done. Can you just wait a second?"

"Chirp!"

Thinking he was pressing me to hurry up and leave, I lightly petted his neck to calm him down. However, it seemed like I was wrong.

“Chirp chirp!”

Rick pulled on my bangs and pointed towards the entrance of the boss room.

“Huh, is that a person? Wait, seriously?”

I saw a person coming in from the entrance we’d entered from.

But that was really odd. Zone boss rooms were created per party, so even if you finished the battle or they were your friends, fundamentally no other players would be able to enter.

When I looked closer, they had a different colored marker than a player would have.

“It looks like they’re an NPC...”

Was this part of an event? But the information I received earlier didn’t mention any event like this. We all held our breath and watched as the NPC approached.

The NPC was a brown-haired man who looked to be 180 centimeters tall. On top of being lanky and slim, he also had a bit of a hunchback, so he didn’t seem like someone with high combat ability. The man’s face was relaxed into a soft smile that reached all the way to his eyes behind his glasses. He seemed like a good-natured person no matter how you looked at him. The devs would have to have some twisted personalities if an NPC like this turned out to be evil.

The man scratched his unkempt head as he called out to us in a gentle voice.

“Hello there.”

“H-Hello.”

“Chirp!”

“Hum!”

“Oho. They can give a proper greeting, huh? What a bunch of smart monsters you are.”

He looked at my monsters raising their hands in greeting and smiled even

more.

“Also, is that one over there a Tree Nymph? She really is lovely. My name’s Toraus. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Yuto.”

The NPC who had introduced himself as Toraus was incredibly friendly. After shaking my hand, he went to give each of my monsters a handshake too. He even stooped down to match each of their heights.

“Yuto the Tamer...? Do you by chance know someone named Pisco?”

“Pisco who runs the lumber yard?”

“Yeah! So you *are* Yuto! I’m Pisco’s son.”

To my amazement, this was the son of Pisco, the NPC who had attended my flower-viewing picnic. While Pisco looked more stern, this guy seemed the more delicate type. They didn’t look anything alike. Although, despite Pisco’s stern appearance, he did speak like a gentleman, so maybe they resembled each other in terms of personality.

“Dad had a really great time.”

“It was a lot of fun for me too.”

“You seem like a really reliable person, just like Dad said... Hey, I’ve actually got myself in a bit of a pickle. If you don’t mind, could you help me out with it?”

“I guess it depends on what you need help with?”

“I study plants, and I’m compiling a field guide for weeds right now, but my assistant had to go out of town for a bit to take care of some things back home, which means my work has stalled. I’m looking for help with that.”

“I see.”

It seemed like it wasn’t a combat-type quest.

Labor Quest

Requirement: Appraise and sort weeds.

Reward: 1,500 G

Time Limit: Seven days

“You don’t have to give an answer right away. I live in the town of South Gate just up ahead. Come visit me if you feel like taking it on. I’ll write on your map where my house is.”

Right after Toraus said that, my map automatically popped up and a blue mark appeared on it. This must have been a map of Zone Five’s town South Gate, which lay beyond here. However, since we hadn’t been there yet, besides the circle indicating the outer walls and the two main streets, the map was completely blank. Even marking a place on the map wasn’t very helpful.

“All right then, I look forward to meeting you again.”

“Y-Yeah.”

“See you.”

“...♪”

Sakura saw Toraus off with a smile as he took his leave, waving his hand. He did say he was a botanist, so maybe he had an ability to raise his favorability with plant-type monsters?

“This quest has to be the continuation of the chain quest, right?”

If that were the case, I didn’t have a choice but to accept it.

“Well, he did say there was no rush. So it’s probably fine to put this off until after I’ve taken a quick look around town, right?”

First, I wanted to do some exploring in the town in Zone Five. Accompanied by my monsters, we crossed the gate that Toraus had just disappeared past.

For an instant, I was blinded by a white light. When it faded, a vibrant landscape came immediately into view.

“So this is South Gate, huh?”

Zone Five had four towns: East Gate, West Gate, South Gate, and North Gate. Based on the town names, these were the gates leading to the land’s demon-

infested areas, and thus marked the true beginning of the game.

It had taken me this long to reach the real starting line...

The Zone Three and Elemental Gate towns had been magical and beautiful, truly fantastic places, but Zone Five towns took on a whole different appearance. If I had to say, it seemed like they were chasing after a more realistic vibe here. It was the sort of World Heritage Site-type medieval townscape that would show up in a travel pamphlet. It had a charming Western style, but it didn't feel unrealistic. It felt like it could be a place that actually existed on Earth.

"Let's wander around the town first!"

"Tra-la-la."

"Hey, don't move like tha—"

"Tra-la? Tra-la!♪"

Eine landed with her legs astride my shoulders and raised up her arms in delight. Then, she lost balance and fell over backwards. I hastily tried to hold her up, forgetting that she could fly. She used her Float skill to prop herself right back up again.

"Tra-la-la! Tra-la-la!"

"Hold on, I'm losing bal—"

This must have been fun for her. She started falling off and climbing back onto me over and over again. She looked like she was the main character of some kind of Chinese action film doing hanging ab workouts. Or maybe like a new type of roly-poly toy?

Eine's long, swishing hair tickled me each time she swung herself back up, pulling me backwards and messing with my balance. I could see the eyes of those around us starting to turn our way—understandable, given the sight.

"...!"

"Oh. Thanks guys!"

"...♪"

“Hum!”

Sakura and Reflet took my hands and pulled me forward, which kept me from tripping over my own feet as I walked.

“All right, where should we go first?”

“Chirp!”

“Aye!”

Rick and Fau took the lead, with Fau riding on Rick’s back. He might lead us to who knows where, but it also wasn’t like we had any particular destination.

Let’s try going wherever Rick wants to go.

“Aye!”

“Chirp?”

“Aye!”

“Chirp chirp!”

Every time Rick and Fau reached a curved street, they would consult with each other about something or other, and then continue forward. I followed them leisurely as I bought and ate some snacks from vendors along the road.

That went on for about half an hour.

“Huh? What’s that...? Rick, Fau, hold up! I said stop!”

“Aye?”

“Chirp?”

“Come back for a sec. I want to go over here.”

I had spotted some people I knew. I stood at the front of their shop and called out, “Shuella, Seki, you two are here today?”

“Well, if it isn’t Silver-Haired! Haven’t seen you in about three days. I see you’re with your usual adorable, chaotic bunch.”

“Yo.”

Shuella and Seki’s armor shop was there, with the two of them standing in front of it. As usual, Shuella was dressed in a flashy gothic lolita outfit, while

Seki was in a plain button-up shirt and slacks.

“You’re just in time! I’ve just finished up that equipment you asked me for! I was going to send you a message later, but you’ve really saved me the trouble!”

“Quit the act. It’s cringe, seeing as Silver-Haired already knows who you really are.”

“Shut up! I was being sincere!”

The pair’s relationship was a mystery to me. It seemed like they knew each other in real life, but they didn’t give me the impression of being friends. I didn’t think they were a couple either, but they also didn’t seem to be sister and brother.

“Ignore that idiot. Here’s that new equipment you requested for your squirrel cutie!”

Before taking on Zone Four, I had actually asked Shuella to make some new equipment for Rick. She had evidently finished it.

“Dadada da da-daaa! The Thunderbolt Scarf!”

“...Pretty sure that impression gives your age away, grandma,” Seki muttered at Shuella’s apparent imitation of a certain earless robot cat.

“Go to hell!”

I paid no mind to their little comedy-duo routine and appraised the scarf.

Name: Thunderbolt Scarf

Rarity: 4 *Quality*: 7★ Durability: 380

Effect: Defense +31, moderate paralysis resistance, minor sleep resistance, Agility +4

Weight: 2

It had resistance to paralysis and sleep, the two main status effects that stopped movement, plus it granted increased Agility and even high Defense. What a great piece of gear!

“You even made it the color I asked for!”

“A crimson scarf is fundamental for any hero!”

“I don’t think that scarf really lives up to that image.”

Shuella ignored Seki’s dig and took out another piece of equipment.

“And that’s not all!”

“Whoa, you were able to make it?!”

“Yup.”

It was the other item I had requested specifically for Rick, besides the scarf. A small monster like Rick couldn’t equip normal accessories, so I had consulted with Shuella on what to do.

“Heh heh heh! *Voilà!*”

Name: Throwing Bracelet

Rarity: 3 *Quality* 5★ Durability: 230

Effect: Defense +10, minor boost to throwing

Weight: 1

Shuella had taken out a band that looked like nothing more than a simple silver ring. Though when I appraised it, it really did say it was a bracelet. A bracelet made for small monsters.

“This is just as cool as the scarf!”

“Isn’t it? Even though I sized it down, I still had to use a good bit of materials, so I just about broke even with what you gave me.”

I had given a bunch of the materials I had obtained to Shuella. The plan was for her to use what she needed and then purchase any materials that were left over. Even after deducting the commission fee, there had been a chance that I would have gotten back some money from this.

“No worries, it’s great enough that I don’t have to pay! Plus, these abilities

suit Rick perfectly.”

“Right? Am I awesome or what?”

“Yeah, thanks a bunch.”

“In that case, I hope you’ll utilize our services again in the future!”

“I sure will.”

“Bye-bye!”

“Thanks for your patronage.”

I thanked Shuella and Seki one more time and left the shop. Then, I immediately equipped the scarf on Rick.

“Chirp?”

“Yup, you look very dashing, Rick.”

“Chirp!”

Rick climbed up onto my shoulder to show off his new scarf and bracelet. He jumped up and down with glee at the praise.

“Chirp!”

“Tra-la!”

“Hm!”

Now he went to show off to Eine and Himka. They also complimented him, to his great delight. Between the amazing features and how adorable they made him look, I really was glad I had bought these.

“Okay then, what should we do next?”

My original plan was to head right to the Subterranean Lake.

“I would feel kind of bad neglecting that quest chain, though.”

I knew it was just a personal hang-up, but when something needed to be done I’d rather get it done before I did anything else. Be that as it may, I still had time before the deadline of the quest, so I did also feel like I could put it off until after I got my ingredients from the Subterranean Lake.

“Hmm... I can’t decide!”

Why don’t we put it to a vote? I lined up my monsters and asked them to raise their hand for either wanting to go to the Subterranean Lake or Toraus’s house.

“Are we all clear? Raise your hand for where *you* want to go. All right, who wants to go to the Subterranean Lake?”

“Hum!”

“Tra-la!”

“Chirp!”

Reflet, Eine, and Rick raised their hands. *Wait a second, that’s three...*

My voting plan was about to end up in a tie, which wouldn’t help me.

“We’ve got no choice. Let’s decide this the old-fashioned way. We’re gonna have ourselves a rock-paper-scissors elimination tournament between Team Subterranean Lake and Team Toraus!”

Should we go in order of height?

“Round one: Rick vs Fau!”

“Chirp!”

“Aye!”

The tiny twosome raised both arms in the air and stepped forward with full determination. The pair of them usually got along, but now their eyes shot daggers at each other. My monsters took this type of competition seriously, after all.

Rick was shadowboxing for some reason, punching left and right, no trace of fear on his face. Seeing his nimble steps and quick jabs, he looked almost like Muhammad Ali.

In the other corner, Fau was doing that good luck ritual that someone or other had thought up, where she crossed her arms, interlocked her fingers, and then peeked between them.

Were they done with their preparations yet, or what?

“All right, let’s go! Rock, paper, scissors!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Aye!”

They both stuck out a tightly squeezed tiny fist. They had both chosen rock. It was a tie.

“Chirp...”

“Aye...”

Rick and Fau simultaneously wiped the sweat from their brows and grinned at each other as if saying, “Pretty good, hotshot,” and, “Ain’t so bad yourself.” Why were they acting so tough? Were they trying to act like gunslingers or something?

“I-It’s fine. Just go again. Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!”

“Chirp chiiirp!”

“Aye!”

The two threw out their hands using all the force of their bodies, their fierce postures looking like they were trying to unleash a tornado windup pitch. When the dust settled, the victor was made clear. Rick had put out scissors, Fau paper.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Aye!”

Rick thrust his winning scissors up towards the sky and let out a victory yell. Next to him, Fau had dropped to her knees and was pounding her fists against the ground in regret.

I didn’t think things would get so heated over something like rock-paper-scissors...

“Okay, next up is Sakura!”

“...!”

Though she usually wore a graceful smile, Sakura was also pumped up. She and Rick exchanged a smile. Was this weird tough act going to last forever?

Drimo wasn't even here.

Climactic battle after battle ensued, until it was at last time for the final match. The last two left on each team were Reflet and Himka.

"Hmmm!"

"Hummm..."

With even more exaggerated gestures than ever before, the two remaining contenders stuck out their hands.

The winner was...Himka!

He stuck up his winning scissors as a victory sign, exploding with joy. Opposite him, Reflet had dropped her shoulders in disappointment, covering her face with her losing hand still held in the shape of paper. Rick and Eine were at her sides comforting her.



“R-Right, so. I guess that means we’ll stop by Toraus’s house from here.”

“...♪”

“Hm!”

“La-la-la...♪”

The winning team danced with delight, spinning around in a circle with Fau at the center. Were they really that happy about it?

“...Is that...”

“...Silver-Haired...”

“...as always...”

Oh crap! At some point, a crowd of players had gathered to watch us from afar. Our intense rock-paper-scissors tournament must have attracted attention.

A Tamer watching from the sidelines while making his monsters play rock-paper-scissors... They must have been wondering what the hell I was doing! If I had witnessed the same scene, I would have definitely been appalled by it. Which meant people were appalled with *me*. *Nooo! How embarrassing!*

“G-Guys! Let’s get outta here!”

“Hm.”

“...♪”

The winning team was all smiles as they took my hand and started walking. As for the losing team...

“Hummm.”

“Tra-la!”

“Chirp chirp!”

They were also walking behind us having as much fun as usual. Was that despair just now an act?! Though this was much preferable to them staying miserable. I guess they’d each just gotten worked up during their rounds and really didn’t mind where we went.

I looked at the map to confirm our destination.

“So Toraus’s house is on the outskirts of town, huh?”

We’d passed through the area already, but I hadn’t noticed the home. Well, based on the mark on my map, it seemed like it was a pretty secluded area. Like, tucked even farther away in some back alleyway. It was the sort of a place you wouldn’t notice when just walking normally. If I didn’t have it marked on my map, I doubted I would have found it on my own. I felt as though I was walking into an event.

“All right, let’s get this new quest started!”

“Hmmm!”

“...♪”

“Aye!”

We set off with that enthusiasm, only to find...

“Is this the place?”

After we passed through a narrow back alley, we arrived at a detached home. Its outside appearance wasn’t much different from the regular homes on either side of it. Frankly, I was thrown off by how normal it looked. The mark on the map definitely indicated that this was the right house, though.

“Excuse me,” I called out as I lightly knocked on the door.

The door immediately opened, and the figure that appeared from inside was a familiar tall, gangly man. *So this is the right house after all.*

“Oh hey, Yuto. You sure came quick,” Toraus greeted us.

He invited us into his home, where we were met with a shocking scene.

First of all, the room was huge. He had probably removed several walls. It must have been at least three hundred square feet. The room was practically a jungle of plants. Not only were there bunches of plants on top of the several wooden desks placed throughout the room, but they also hung from the walls and ceilings, and were piled up high atop the vinyl flooring.

The only place that was yet safe from the encroaching plants was an area

around a sofa that was placed along the wall to the right of the entrance. I suspected that was for when guests came by. Or at least, this space was the only available standing room.

Also, it seemed like all the plants in this room were weeds. He had said he was a botanist and was currently researching weeds, but this really was something else.

“Go on, take a seat.”

“Oh, thanks. Is it okay that I have my monsters with me?”

“No problem. But please, make sure they don’t get into any trouble.”

Mm-hmm. A warning would do them good. All my monsters were very curious creatures, so who knew what they’d get up to if left to their own devices.

Toraus skillfully weaved a path through the weeds and disappeared into the back of his home. Navigating this narrow space was no trouble for him, was it? And he didn’t even touch a single weed. Maybe he had learned some special way of walking? Was he actually an assassin, with botany work simply as his cover?

“Hey! What did I just say?!”

“Aye?”

“Chirp?”

I hastily picked up Fau and Rick with my fingers. Of all things, they had picked the most unstable-looking pile of weeds on a desk to show interest in.

Rick was sniffing around it, and Fau was even poking at it. If they were to cause a weed avalanche, my favorability score with Toraus would plummet. I bet if we made a wrong move, it would end the quest.

But perhaps not understanding the gravity of the situation, the two tiny creatures I had a firm grasp on were tilting their heads in confusion. Even Rick started slapping my right hand that was holding him, as if to say, “Hurry up and let me go!” At this rate, something bad was bound to happen.

“Listen here, you two. Playing around here is forbidden! And don’t even think about touching anything. If you don’t follow those rules, I’ll switch you out with

someone else. Got it?”

“Chirp.”

“Aye.”

The two of them, dangling from my fingers, immediately gave me a salute...but did they really get it?

“Ha ha ha, I’ll have to repeat the sentiment. I’ve got a lot of precious samples in here.”

Toraus returned, laughing, and handed me a mug. It looked like it was filled with herbal tea. As expected of a plant expert.

“Thanks, this looks great... Huh?”

As the tea filled my mouth, I couldn’t help but voice my astonishment.

“This is herbal tea, right?”

“It sure is. It’s my own specially made tea. How is it?”

“It’s delicious! What in the world is that refreshing aroma...?”

The quality of the tea seemed different from the ones I was used to drinking. The scent was strong, as was the flavor. The bitterness of the herb somehow came through strongly. Some people might not like it, but I enjoyed this type of tea. The aroma in particular was amazing.

“Oh yeah, that’s fresh lemon balm herbal tea. The fresh leaves bring out the aroma more than dry leaves do, so I prefer it this way.”

*Excuse me? What did he say just now? He prefers fresh tea leaves? Never mind that mysterious refreshing scent being from lemon balm, a still undiscovered herb—did he say *fresh herbal tea*?*

“So you’re saying that fresh herbal tea exists?”

“Sure does.”

“H-How do you make it? I’ve tried so many times, but it just turns into Weed Water...”

“Oh, I see. Hmm. Maybe if you help me out, you might learn how to make it,”

Toraus said, and then smiled brightly. He must have meant he would teach me if I took on the quest and successfully completed it.

Well, all right. You're on. I accept your challenge!

"Please, let me help you!"

"Sure thing. I'm grateful to have your assistance. All right then, first things first. Could you sort out the weeds on this table over here?"

"...All of this?"

There was a *mountain* of weeds! Even if they weren't on a table, the pile would have been taller than me.

"Yup. I just brought them back from where I collected them, so I haven't had time to sort them out yet. If you could separate them by type, that'd be great."

"O-Okay."

Good ol' labor quests. This was going to be tedious and demanding. But this was all for that fresh herbal tea.

"All right, let's go, guys!"

My monsters and I promptly began examining the weeds. But the way I thoughtlessly appraised and haphazardly sorted the weeds in front of me proved highly inefficient. Instead, we decided to split up the labor in order to move things along.

"Hm."

"Hum."

"Right, thanks. This is a sunflower, and this is a tulip. And this is..."

Himka and Reflet handed bunches of weeds from the table over to me, and then I handed the appraised weeds over to Rick and Fau, who carried them over to Eine and Sakura, who then arranged the weeds by type.

"Chirp chirp."

"Aye."

"Tra-la-la."

“...♪”

At first, sorting out the weeds was fairly interesting. There were a lot of herbs I didn't know. I really learned a lot just by appraising and classifying them. Nevertheless, after an hour of that, I'd had enough. After two hours, I was little more than a weed-classifying machine.

Then, three hours later, we were finally able to finish sorting the weeds that had been piled up on the table.

“We're done! Finally!”

Since this was a game, there was no way for my body to become stiff, but I stretched out my lower back and shoulders subconsciously. I wasn't really thrilled to be doing a side job for so long.

“Tra-la...”

“Hm!”

“Humm.”

My monsters were also stretching, enjoying the taste of freedom. I guess AI could also tire of menial work? Of course, it was silly of me to think that a labor quest would be finished in such a short amount of time.

Toraus picked up the weeds we had sorted, smiling happily.

“Wow, that was fast! All right, go ahead and tackle this table next.”

“Whuh?”

“I assigned you a small amount of work to begin with, just to see how things went. But seeing how well you did, I don't think you'll have any problems. Keep it up!”

A small amount of work to begin with? That was a *small amount of work*? That's right. I had forgotten, but this was exactly what labor quests were like!

“...I see how it is. Bring it on.”

“...”

Even Sakura looked dismayed, but we had to get through this to complete the quest! I wanted just as badly to run away from here, but a quest was a quest!

“Come on! We got this!”

“Hm...”

“Hum...”

I resumed the sorting, tempting my monsters with food to help them pick up their sluggish pace.

Half a day then passed us by. We endured endless torment in weed hell, sorting and sorting with no end in sight. Or maybe I should say, no matter how quickly we finished up what Toraus asked of us, he immediately had more waiting for us.

“Chirp...”

“Aye...”

“Keep up the good work, everyone...”

My monsters shouldn’t have felt much bodily fatigue, but they were also growing listless. It was more than feeling fed up—they were actually suffering from mental exhaustion. This was the first time I’d seen my monsters with such lifeless eyes.

Maybe we should call it quits soon. Thinking about it, there was no way a labor quest would be finished in one day. Even picking up trash and cutting grass in the Town of Beginnings had taken several days.

It was going to become nighttime soon, so this was probably a good stopping point.

“Toraus, I think I’d like to end here for today.”

“Gotcha. When will you stop by next?”

So the quest really *was* going to continue...

“I can come by tomorrow morning. Does that work?”

“Oho, I’m happy to see such motivation!”

I just wanted to get this annoying work out of the way as soon as possible. I casually asked how much there was left to do, but the response he gave was not what I wanted to hear.

“Hmm, I think there’s still a decent chunk left.”

“O-Oh, really...”

It seemed we still had a long way to go.

“Hm...”

“Tra-la...”

Hearing Toraus’s words, Himka’s and Eine’s shoulders drooped. They all probably needed a change of pace, just as I did.

“Should we take a break by going to the Subterranean Lake?”

“Hum!”

“...!”

That perked Reflet, who loved water, right up. Actually, the Subterranean Lake at night was apparently a popular sightseeing spot.

The Subterranean Lake itself was dark starting from the afternoon, but it had special effects at night. It was said it was worth seeing the extra colorful, whimsical Subterranean Lake at least once.

We weren’t prepared enough to clear it, but we’d probably be fine just taking a quick peek. Plus, though there would be more monsters at night, other creatures would become active too. That meant there would also be a higher chance of catching crab and fish.

“All right, let’s do some sightseeing at the Subterranean Lake! And if we can secure some crab too, all the better!”

“Hm!”

“Tra-a!”

Just as we were about to make our way to the dungeon, we abruptly had to stop. Someone called out to me from behind.

“Hey there, Silver-Haired!”

“Heh heh... Been a minute...”

Hey, I recognize that duo.

The one who was waving her hand vigorously this way was Kurumi, the small human-cow hybrid with a red afro. The one behind her who was chuckling was the magenta-haired, kimono-clad, human-snake hybrid beauty, Rikyu.

Wait, they weren't a duo. Today, they were a trio. Another girl was behind them.

"G-Good evening."

A girl with short, ultramarine-colored hair bowed her head to me. She had a very serious air about her.

The thing that stood out about her the most was sticking out from under her hair: fish fins, from the looks of them. It looked like she was playing as a Nereid, a race which granted players the characteristics of a fish. Those large fish fins took the place of her ears, and she had small slits along her neck that must have been gills.

She was equipped with scale armor made of linked aqua-colored fish scales over a black bodysuit. However, the actual covered part of her was incredibly small, taking on the form of bikini armor. That said, since she was wearing a two-piece bodysuit underneath the armor, aside from her arms and legs her navel was the only other part of her body that was exposed. But even her exposed bare midriff just showcased how fit she was. It was very tasteful.

"This is our friend, Filma! Say hi!"

"Heh heh... She's nice."

"Nice to meet you!"

Filma bowed her head once again. Her bow was super polite. She really did seem like the serious type.

"We usually form a party with the three of us."

"I'm not very good at games, so I'm always just getting in Kurumi and Rikyu's way."

"That's not true. The way you're able to move in water even as a newbie is amazing!"

"Heh heh... You always help me out with negotiations."

Filma was apparently one of the few people Rikyu wasn't shy around. She was talking to her easily.

"Silver-Haired, are you going to the Subterranean Lake?" Kurumi asked.

"Yeah, that was my plan."

"In that case, why don't we go together? Filma has been wanting to meet you!"

"Really?"

"Um, well," said Filma, "I was thinking it'd be nice to swim with your Undine..."

"Heh... Filma started playing this game so she could swim, you know."

"Huh? To swim?"

They explained to me that one of Filma's real-life hobbies was going diving. She was also a part of the swim club. She must have really loved swimming. But diving was expensive, especially if she wanted to go diving in areas with beautiful scenery or unique spots, so her allowance as a student just wasn't going to cut it.

That was where this game came in. I hadn't been focusing on it at the time, but apparently the game's prerelease trailer depicted some beautiful underwater scenes, including images of Nereids swimming around.

"As soon as I saw that, I knew I had to play!"

Though I wouldn't quite call it role-playing, she had a particular goal. There were actually a number of players who were likewise playing this game with goals beyond just beating it. For example, there were those who couldn't have a pet in real life, so they wanted to enjoy fluffy creatures to their heart's content in the game. There were those who were on a diet, so they wanted to be able to eat as much as they wanted. And so on and so forth; the reasons were many.

I was pretty sure that was the case with Tsugarun, whom I had exchanged friend codes with during the flower-viewing picnic. He'd told me that he wanted to eat as many apples as he could in the game, since he loved them but was allergic to them.

Filma must have been that type of player too.

“I’ve been having fun playing with Kurumi and Rikyu, so I can fight well enough.”

“Being a Nereid makes you basically invincible underwater.”

She liked diving and was a Nereid. Naturally, she would be strong underwater.

“That’s reassuring. I mean, I was thinking about going to the Subterranean Lake, but honestly I was kind of worried about having to fight.”

“Oh, were you going to sightsee?”

“And I want crab.”

Once I mentioned crab, the three girls became more excited. Okay, I couldn’t actually tell if Rikyu did, but the other two definitely began speaking more rapidly.

“Heh heh... Crab’s delicious.”

“It is, isn’t it? An acquaintance let me try some earlier, and it was super tasty. I really want to eat it again.”

“Silver-Haired, you can cook, right?” asked Kurumi.

“Yeah, it’s one of the Tamer skills.”

“Okay then, we’ll help you out with gathering crab! In exchange, maybe you wouldn’t mind cooking some for us too? None of us actually have Cooking.”

“Huh? Really? Well, if that’s all you want, that’s no problem for me.”

“Do you mean it? Thanks so much!” Filma gushed.

With Kurumi and the others as my escort in exchange for just my cooking, I wondered whether I wasn’t benefiting unfairly from this deal.

“All righty, it’s decided! Filma, Rikyu, let’s do our best for some of Silver-Haired’s famous cooking!”

“Yeah! Let’s do it!”

“Heh heh... Crab sticks, crab chips, crab ramen...”

Rikyu, what the heck’s up with that dish lineup?

“Sounds like there’ll be a lot of underwater monsters. It might be tough for my party.”

As we talked and made our way to the Subterranean Lake, I learned that there would also be a lot of monsters that stayed underwater. With my party, we would have had a difficult time fighting them.

“Leave the fighting to us!”

“Heh heh... More like to my bombs and to Filma.”

“You’re no good at underwater fighting, Kurumi.”

“Is that right?”

“Yeah, well, y’know my weapon...”

That was right—Kurumi’s weapon was a hammer. Apparently it was hard for her to handle it underwater.

“Well, most enemies will be toast in the face of Rikyu’s newly developed underwater depth charges!”

“You shouldn’t use them too much.”

“I know, I know. It’s for emergencies only! Plus, we have you with us, Filma!”

“You really think I’ll help that much?”

“You bet! That video of you fighting underwater is doing some crazy numbers, after all. I think it made it onto this week’s leaderboard.”

“Leaderboard?”

“Huh? You don’t know about it? *You* don’t?”

Kurumi’s eyes went wide, but I didn’t understand what she was so surprised about.

She followed up with a detailed explanation.

“You know how players can publicly post videos and screenshots they took, right?”

“Well yeah, I know that much. I’ve seen stuff like cooking videos.”

Apparently, just like with official videos, they could be viewed in and out of

the game, but with the recent update, a ranking system was added. And those videos were ranked based on how many people watched them.

Players with top-ranked videos would receive small compensation, like in-game currency or potions. It really wasn't much of a reward, about what you would get from doing some gathering in the early stages of the game. Nevertheless, it provided more motivation to people rather than just having them upload videos for nothing.

Due to that ranking system being implemented, more players had been taking awesome videos and cute pictures and sharing them. The most popular videos seemed to be videos of top-ranking players explaining techniques, videos of fierce battles, and videos of adorable fuzzy creatures. Apparently, a video of Filma looking as if she were dancing as she fought underwater had become one of the top-ranked videos. While technique-explanation videos and walk-through videos were useful, people apparently also placed value on pretty, fantastical videos too.

"Wow, that's awesome. I knew Kurumi and Rikyu were celebrities, but you're a top player too, huh, Filma?"

It seemed I'd ended up forming a team with three great players. But in response to my compliment, the three of them just looked at me, speechless.

"What's wrong?"

"...You're one to talk, as the top ranker."

"Huh? What'd you just say?"

"I mean, the highest-ranked video for this week was yours, Silver-Haired."

I tilted my head in confusion at Kurumi's words. I really didn't get what she was saying. Was she teasing me? But her face was dead serious. Maybe she'd gotten me confused with someone else. It was possible she'd gotten me mixed up with a player named Yuta or Yuka or something.

"Can't be. I don't even go on the online forums. There's no way I'd post a video there. You've got the wrong person."

"Okay then, what's this?" Kurumi asked, showing me a chart of the rankings.

Sure enough, there was Filma's name in fourth place. Then, there in first place, next to the top video was written the name "Yuto." It really was me! The title of the video was "Mamori's Diary." *Mamori?* As in, my Zashiki-Warashi Mamori? But I really had no idea about this!

I decided to play the video.

As the video played, the first thing to come into view was Mamori. The camera was positioned at about the same height as Mamori's eyeline. From the camera angle, it seemed like it was floating just right behind her.

When taking a video, the camera position can be freely changed up by the player, so this camera must have been set up to be recording from behind the filmer. Was it really Mamori shooting this video?

Mamori was trotting down the hallway. Then, she jumped down off the veranda and whirled around to look at the camera. She shot her hand up and gave a "Ya!" in greeting. Then, the camera moved a little away from Mamori, and the surrounding scene came into view.

It was the garden of my home base. Around Mamori were a small, deformed kappa, a spherical white sheet Obake, a largish plush butterfly, and a brown ball of fluff. Aka, my mascots.

"Ya-ya! Ya-ya!"

"Booo, ooo! Booo!"

"Kapa, kapa-pa!"

"Tiep-tiep!"

"Fluff, fluff-fluff!"

Wh-What the heck? This was adorable!

The video showed my mascots starting up some sort of radio calisthenics. Actually, a little while ago, there was a day I started doing radio calisthenics and my mascots joined in, but...had they really remembered that?

The only ones who could do the movements properly were Mamori and Taro, the Mini Kappa, though. Floof, the Fluffaball, was just sitting in place flapping its arms and legs up and down. And I could only see Rinne the Obake and even

Ochiyo the Tefu-Tefu lightly floating up and down.

It looked like Dango the calico and Nuts the mame shiba were cheering them on from the veranda. Actually, Nuts was barking at an oddly fixed rhythm. Were they acting as the metronome?

That went on for a while—that radio calisthenics or game or whatever it was—resulting in a totally adorable mascot video. The video ended with Mamori wiping sweat from her brow as she smiled and declared “Ya!” with a satisfied look.

No, wait, after the fade to black, it started up again. Mamori was restocking the items at the unmanned stand. Plus, the video courteously included on-screen text showing what items were being restocked. Sakura’s wooden plates, Himka’s copper cups, Bear Bear’s specially made honey. The text let people know which monster had crafted the items, as if saying, “Look who made these!” It nearly looked like a commercial for my unmanned stand.

Mamori looked incredibly cute as she stood on tiptoe to restock the products. Her preciousness really tickled at my heartstrings. I really felt that I would fight for her if ever need be.

However, seeing that reminded me of something.

“Right, I had to approve some of Mamori’s actions the other day.”

One of Mamori’s special abilities was “Helping Hand,” which turned out to be a pretty handy skill. As its name implied, Mamori would help out with various things.

For example, not only would she help with simple stuff like cleaning the house and greeting visitors, she could also provide light assistance for duties like restocking the unmanned stand and weeding the farm.

What I found really exceptional was her being able to restock the unmanned stand. Until now, I’d been employing people from the guild, but now that had become unnecessary. Olea could also restock the stall, but I wanted them to focus on their increasing farming duties. Plus, I could set some specific preferences with Mamori.

There were dozens of settings I could decide on, like what to prioritize, what

not to sell, the order of restocking, when to replace products, et cetera. Though precisely because there were so many, I had to rush through them all, since it had been right before my forced log-out time. After the mad rush to finish the settings for the unmanned stand, I'd approved some other Helping Hand options too, and then logged out...

What had likely happened was that, since I had been so pressed for time, I hadn't just checked off items for Helping Hand but had also given permissions for Diary to be made public. That was the only possibility I could think of.

So the video had served as a brief introduction to a day in Mamori's life, as well as an advertisement for my unmanned stand? And was that camerawork all Mamori? She was super talented!

"I kind of understand how the video was made public, but...why's it in first place?"

It was cute for sure, but it had twice the number of views as the second place video. Was it really that great of a video? It just showed my mascots goofing off at my home base and Mamori doing some work at the farm.

"It's because mascots are adorable! And they're rare to see."

"Heh heh... And the camerawork was perfect."

I see. Since a lot was still unknown about mascots, just showing a bunch of them together must have drawn people's attention.

In fact, the comments written under the video weren't just interactions of "So cute" and "I want them!" but also "Where's that house?" and "Was that a kotatsu I saw?" Getting a full view of the also yet-unknown Japanese-style home must have stood out.

"Did you say the highest-ranked videos get compensated with money?"

"That's right."

In that case, this was just fine. The video hadn't shown anything I didn't want to be seen, after all. There wasn't anything I didn't want shown in the first place. In fact, I wanted this video. Could I ask Mamori for it?

Chapter Five: The Mysteries of the Subterranean Lake

After recovering from the shock of reaching the number one spot in the video rankings without my knowledge, I made it to the Subterranean Lake.

“Whoa, this is so cool!”

“Hum!”

The scene that stretched before me could truly be called fantastical and beautiful beyond compare. We were inside a huge cavern with stalactites of all shapes and sizes hanging from the ceiling, the sort I wouldn't have been able to easily see in real life. Before us lay a lake filled with water so clear I could see right to the bottom. The combination of those two natural wonders, which would have been a sight to behold on their own, created a space dominated by a sense of perilous mystery.

The Subterranean Lake by lamplight must have been a deeply moving sight for the players who had them. However, we hadn't prepared any lamps to bring. We had all arrived empty-handed. But that was no problem; we all still gazed at the Subterranean Lake, burning its mystical appearance into our retinas.

“The surface of the lake really is glowing.”

“Hum.”

“The lake is set up to have bioluminescent organisms that make it glow, like sea sparkle.”

The lake surface was sparkling a bluish-white color. This was a special effect that was produced by the Subterranean Lake only at night. The softly swaying pale light illuminated the limestone cavern in the darkness, bringing it into sharp relief.

“How nice that you get to see it as blue for your first time, Silver-Haired,” said

Kurumi.

“Does the color of the lights change depending on the day?” I asked.

“Yep. There’s yellow, red, and blue. They’re all pretty, but I like blue the best.”

“The light makes it easier to explore the lake at night,” chimed in Filma.

“But that also means more enemies... Heh heh.”

In the daytime it was dark, and at nighttime the enemies were strong. *Got it.* People could choose when to come depending on their strengths and weaknesses.

“All right, I think I’ve taken in my fill of the view and got some good screenshots. Should we keep moving?”

“Yeah!”

“Mind if I set up a trap in the lake? I can collect it on the way back, and maybe I’ll be able to catch a crab.”

“Ooh, great idea!”

I also wanted to try fishing, but that would take up time. I would just set up a trap for now.

“Okay, let’s go!”

“Aye!”

Kurumi placed Fau upon her head and took the lead as we made our way through the Subterranean Lake. Fau was lying sprawled out on top of Kurumi’s hair, holding on to her horns. Kurumi’s afro was getting squashed, but she didn’t seem to care. If anything, she shook her head around a bit to play with Fau. Fau wouldn’t be able to put on any performances in that state, but she was having fun, so it was fine. Maybe she was getting a taste of what it was like to control a titan.

We descended from our vantage point at the entrance and headed down a steep path towards the brink of the lake.

The Subterranean Lake was a bit of a special area. First off, the ginormous lake was situated smack-dab in the center of the field. Adjoining the lake were

several rooms. The rooms were connected by caverns, but it was also possible to get to them by swimming across the lake. And depending on your methods, it was also possible to take a significant shortcut. Incidentally, whether you moved clockwise or counterclockwise, in the end you'd arrive in the same spot.

However, that was the extent of what was known. This dungeon hadn't been fully traversed. The Subterranean Lake was the only area in Zone Five that hadn't been cleared yet. Many players had set out to clear it at the start, but now those players were few and far between. Rather than the lake, which seemed hopeless to clear and was difficult to fight in, people found it more efficient to progress in areas whose methods of traversing had already been discovered.

People had been talking about how Amimin had found a secret passageway here, but that had also just led to a dead end instead of a way to clear the dungeon.

"Something's definitely been overlooked, but no one knows what exactly."

"Heh heh... The boss hasn't appeared either."

Since enemies were hard to defeat and there was no boss, the amount of experience and rare drops that could be gained here was very little. Yeah, that would start to keep players away.

That was why it wasn't an overstatement to say that Filma, who made the Subterranean Lake her main place of activity, was a top player in this area. She apparently had the known passageways of this lake mapped out in her head, and she was very familiar with the monsters' patterns. Plus, the way she moved underwater was top-notch. You'd be hard-pressed to find someone who surpassed her fighting ability here.

In fact, even now she was diving under the water and engaging in battle with the fish-type monsters there, with Reflet as her companion. Thanks to the water being so clear, we could also see them underwater, but the way Filma moved underwater definitely stood out. She handled the fish's rapid charge attacks deftly with her harpoon, landing direct hits and not once taking any herself. There was no way I could have accompanied her down there. I'd just get in her way.

After a flawless victory, Filma resurfaced.

“*Phew!* This is amazing, Silver-Haired!”

“Hm? What is?”

“Reflet! Thanks to her Aquamobilize skill, I was able to move even smoother than usual!”

“Hum!”

It seemed the effects of Reflet’s Aquamobilize had passed to Filma as well, letting her swim even faster underwater. Even though I was useless here, I was glad Reflet was being helpful. Reflet also looked proud of herself at Filma’s compliment.

“I think I can reach even deeper places like this!”

The deepest parts of the Subterranean Lake were apparently where the lair of the fish-type monsters lay, making it pretty difficult to explore down there. It had been confirmed that there was nothing you could see with your naked eye, so there were players who went down there prepared for a suicide mission, but apparently they hadn’t discovered anything in the end.

“But I really think there must be something down there. That’s the only area that hasn’t been explored yet...”

Thus, we decided to entrust exploring the bottom of the lake to Filma, while the rest of us would stay back. We’d *all* just get in her way, after all.

“All right, how about we fish while we wait?”

“Yeah, let’s! We can make some delicious food to give Filma when she comes back!”

“Heh heh... Silver-Haired will be the only one doing any cooking, though.”

Kurumi, Rikyu, and I lined up and cast our fishing lines. The two of them had apparently acquired Swimming and Fishing skills since they often came to the Subterranean Lake with Filma. They even lent my monsters fishing rods they could use. These fishing rods were really great in that they came with the Fishing skill attached, meaning anyone could enjoy fishing with them.

“Hey, so where’s that new passageway Amimin found?”

“You can actually see it from here. Look, it’s over there.”

“Where?”

“*There*. See? The spot where the stalactites kind of break off. There’s a small opening you can go through that brings you to a small room.”

Kurumi was pointing at a spot near the ceiling at a small tunnel opening. To me, it just looked like a dent. There were other depressions that looked similar, so I didn’t think it was anything special. But apparently, there really was a passageway there.

“Wow, she was able to find that?”

“She said her bird monster spotted it.”

“Makes sense. But how are you supposed to climb up there?”

“Amimin said she tied a rope to one of her flying monsters and went up that way. But you can also climb up the wall, as it turns out. It looks impossible at first, but there is a path to climb up it.”

In my case, I could probably make it up there somehow with Fau or Eine’s help.

“At one point, a bunch of players came crowding in here and even checked out the other holes too, but they didn’t end up finding anything.”

“Oh yeah?”

Just what the heck was everyone overlooking? As we speculated on the possibilities, Fau suddenly hopped up onto my shoulder and started smacking my cheek.

“Aye!”

“Wh-What is it, Fau?”

“Aye-aye!”

“Silver-Haired, you caught something!”

“Oh, you’re right!”

The fishing rod I had left casually hanging into the water had snagged something, which was what Fau had been trying to bring my attention to. I hastily tried to reel it in, but—

“It got away...”

“Aye.”

“Aw, too bad. It looked like a big one.”

“Heh heh... Shame.”

Hearing that made me feel a little disappointed that I hadn’t caught it.

“All right, I’ll definitely reel the next one in!”

“Aye!”

I psyched myself up and cast the fishing line back out into the lake. Maybe it was because I had started fishing in earnest, but my monsters also began taking their fishing seriously. Then, before I knew it, it turned into a competition. Everyone was determined to be the first to catch something. *But they’d better not underestimate me!*

“I got one, I got one! Here it comes!”

“Hmmm!”

“Tra-la-la!”

“...!”

Himka and Eine looked on regrettably as I pulled ahead of them. *Heh heh heh. I’ve got this fishing competition in the bag!*

Well, it might just be because I had better equipment, though.

Himka, Eine, and Sakura didn’t have the Fishing skill normally, so ordinarily they couldn’t even use a fishing pole. Since they were only able to use Fishing thanks to the poles that granted them the ability to do so, they were only given a level 1 Fishing effect.

In contrast, my Fishing was at level 15. It wasn’t like that was high or anything, but I had raised it gradually by fishing for fun in several spots. I had no intention of losing!

“Heh heh... Silver-Haired takes third place.”

“Congrats!”

Well, never mind. Rikyu and Kurumi had already caught five fish!

“...!”

“Aye!”

Sakura, Fau, stop it! Don't celebrate like I won something! You can quit it with that majestic-sounding music, Fau!

The fish I'd caught had the very literal name of Subterranean Lake Fish.

“Can we eat this? It says it's edible, but...” I couldn't help but mutter, seeing how colorful the fish was. It was about the size and shape of a sweetfish, but its coloring was even showier than a guppy's. Its scales were a random arrangement of red, blue, and yellow, and its tail and dorsal fin were also a super bright, solid color. Each individual fish had its own unique coloring, but each one was just as striking as the others.

“Filma's not back yet. Should we go ahead and try cooking up the fish we caught?”

“Heh heh... Sashimi...”

“Sashimi? But I think these are freshwater fish...”

Well, this was a game, so maybe parasites weren't a risk? Maybe I should try making sashimi, as requested. This was the perfect opportunity to see how they tasted. With that thought in mind, I attempted making all of our fish into sashimi.

“Blegh! This sucks! This might be the worst thing I've ever tasted!”

“Wh-What the hell?! This is awful! It's bitter and fishy!”

Jeez, I felt like I'd just put straight-up raw garbage in my mouth! Wasn't this listed as edible?! What the heck happened? All I did was cut it up, so there should be no reason for that to have made it taste this bad! Unless the fish itself already tasted bad from the beginning...

But while Kurumi and I were fainting with disgust, Rikyu had a daring smile on

her face, as if she were plotting something.

“Heh heh... Yum.”

“Wait, Rikyu, why do you look so happy? Is there something wrong with your tongue?!”

I guess that's just Rikyu's happy face.

“A-Are you okay...?”

“Heh heh... What d’you mean?”

It didn’t seem like she was just pretending to be tough. She actually seemed to be genuinely enjoying it. Kurumi picked up the sashimi on Rikyu’s plate and put it in her mouth fearfully.

“H-Hey, Kurumi. You okay?”

Chew chew. “...It’s delicious! This one’s good, Silver-Haired!”

“Huh? Really?”

Hearing that, I also took some sashimi from Rikyu’s plate and tried it. I was bracing myself for that intensely terrible taste from earlier, but this sashimi had a completely different flavor. The savory fat melted in my mouth, its flavor slightly sweet. It tasted exactly like salmon. I had no notes; it was delicious.

“Rikyu, try this.”

“Heh heh... Mngh... What the...”

There was nothing wrong with Rikyu’s tongue after all. She immediately spat out the sashimi that had come from my plate. As I tilted my head in confusion, unsure what was going on, Kurumi cried out, “Ah!”

“What’s up?”

“I remembered something! That’s right, the flavor depends on the color of the fins! That was definitely mentioned on the forums!”

We looked into it in more depth and found out that the Subterranean Lake Fish came in three varieties: red-, blue-, and yellow-finned. They didn’t seem to have any differences when you appraised them, but apparently their tastes were completely different depending on their fin color.

What was more, their flavors changed every day. Amazingly, the fish with the same color fins as the light that shined in the lake would become delicious, and the ones that were differently colored from the lake would taste awful. I must have used blue-finned Subterranean Lake Fish just for Rikyu's sashimi. I really didn't remember doing that, though.

"Let me try making sashimi using the blue fish again."

After trying it out, we confirmed that the blue-finned fish really were the only ones that tasted good. I tried using the nasty-tasting sashimi as bait for my fishing rod, but there were no takers. It was so bad, not even the fish would eat it. When I tried using the yummiest sashimi as bait instead, sure enough, I was able to catch some fish.

Rikyu and Kurumi raised a fuss about it being a waste to use food with buffs as bait. I would make more soon, so they would just have to let this slide. After all, by using the delicious sashimi, I was able to catch nothing but blue-finned fish. I was three for three. Even if it was just a coincidence, that was pretty lucky.

While we were doing that, Filma and Reflet came back, looking both satisfied and also somewhat disappointed.

"That was so much fun!"

"Hum!"

"But I didn't discover anything new..."

"Hum..."

Evidently, even with Reflet assisting her, Filma wasn't able to come across anything new.

"I'm sorry, Silver-Haired. I kept you waiting and even borrowed Reflet, but I came back with nothing."

"Hum! Hummm!"

Reflet patted Filma's back when she apologized, and then took out several fish to show off. It was as if she was comforting Filma by saying it wasn't as if they had accomplished nothing.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not going to be as easy as that to make a new discovery. Plus, it looks like Reflet had fun, so really I should be thanking you. Right, Reflet?”

“Hum!”

“Aha. Thank you, Reflet.”

Nevertheless, Filma still looked down. This called for some delicious sashimi. Fortunately, Reflet had caught blue-finned fish. Maybe I could also try making some salt-grilled fish.

However, before that, how about we have her experience the same suffering we had to go through? I exchanged a quick look with Kurumi and Rikyu, who both nodded at the same time. We all had the same idea.

“Here, try this. It’ll cheer you up.”

“Heh heh... It’ll knock your socks off.”

“It tastes really good!”

Smiling from ear to ear, we presented Filma with the sashimi made from the non-blue-finned fish.

An hour later, we were sitting on a rock by the shore of the lake and gazing at the cavern, which was illuminated in blue. I never got tired of this sight. I could sit here and look at it forever.

“La-la-la, la-la-la!♪”

The short time we spent sipping tea and listening to Fau strum her lute surrounded by the dreamy atmosphere of the Subterranean Lake truly was luxurious. Other than fighting the monsters again after they respawned, things were very serene. Besides, Kurumi just crushed the enemies with her secret technique the moment they spawned in. But as we sat there, comfortably relaxing, Rikyu sat beside us with a troubled look on her face.

“What’s wrong? Are you still worried about Filma getting mad at us?” I asked her.

“Filma did look really scary...” said Kurumi.

“I did? I’m sorry! I might have said some things I shouldn’t have...”

“...No. I’m thinking about the color of the fish.”

I can’t believe it, Rikyu rolled her eyes at me! Apparently, she’d been thinking over the Subterranean Lake’s many mysteries.

“...Don’t you think their color has something to do with it?”

“You mean with how to clear this place?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, this is the only field with that sort of gimmick, so that’s a possibility.”

“There’s no way only the flavor of the fish changes... Heh heh. That’s what I think.”

“Hmm, yeah. You might be right.”

It was probably as Rikyu said. The light of the surface of the lake changed each day, which changed the flavor of the fish. Plus, the monsters that appeared here known as Charging Cherry Salmon also varied in color. That obviously had to mean something. But all this had been discussed exhaustively. So many attempts had been made, and yet the way to proceed hadn’t been found.

“Silver-Haired, can you think of any possibilities?”

I’m not sure how to answer that on the spot...

“Well, this is pretty standard, but what if we try defeating a certain amount of the Charging Cherry Salmon that match the color of the lake?”

“But don’t you think people have tried that already?”

“Yeah, that’s true. In that case, why don’t we try catching a certain amount of the blue-finned Subterranean Lake Fish?”

“Hmm... People fish here, so I doubt none of them would’ve been unable to fulfill that requirement.”

“You’re right...”

The things I was suggesting were things anyone could have come up with.

Filma, however, had a finger to her chin and was thinking.

“Maybe we have to go after only the fish that are the right color?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, most people catching fish here will use a fishing rod or a casting net, right? So they’d probably catch the other colored fish too.”

Was she saying that we needed to catch a bunch of blue-finned fish in a row, ignoring all the other fish?

“Has no one tried that?”

“Hmm, good question. But in order to do that, someone would have to go free diving, right? I think doing that would be pretty difficult.”

It could be possible if someone just had to free dive and catch fish, but monsters also appeared in the lake. Under those conditions, free diving for a continuous amount of time presented a huge challenge, in terms of both breathing and fighting.

There were many skills for being able to be active underwater, but a skill that allowed you to stay underwater endlessly still hadn’t been discovered. The only players who would be able to do that were the ones who had selected the Nereid race at the beginning of the game, thus obtaining the ability to breathe underwater through gills. However, Nereids, whose stats were reduced on land, were a very unpopular race to pick, so there were only seven of them among the first-wave players.

Furthermore, due to the disadvantages of being a Nereid, there were only a few players including Filma who had reached the Subterranean Lake, so it seemed pretty unfeasible for someone to have gone free diving for blue-finned fish specifically.

“But in that case, we would be completely useless. I mean, we can try diving, but won’t we just be putting the burden on you again?”

“Hee hee. Actually, I’m happy to be able to dive more. Right, Reflet?”

“Hum!”

It seemed that for a person who loved swimming, it wasn’t a burden at all.

Judging from her smile, she really had meant it when she said she was happy. Reflet was also grinning. *I should probably take her to the water more often from now on. Or would my garden pond be enough?*

“All right then, let’s go!”

“Hum-hum!”

So with that, we dived into the Subterranean Lake, our goal being to catch only the blue-finned fish. Thanks to Reflet’s Aquamobilize and Swimming skills, I was able to swim surprisingly well. Nevertheless, it was still more difficult than moving around on land.

But still, I was at least better off than my monsters, who couldn’t keep up at all. They could swim, but they were way too slow. At this rate, they would have had a very difficult time in battle. There was no getting around it, so I decided to leave them waiting on the shore.

If this were a dungeon, we wouldn’t have been able to stay separated like this. However, for the Subterranean Lake, which was classified as a field, even separating ourselves a certain distance apart wouldn’t disband the party.

With the added use of Aqua Lung, I swam slowly across the surface of the lake. Filma and Reflet had already descended and were gliding along the bottom of the lake. It was like watching mermaids or penguins. Anyhow, the way they moved was completely different from me.

There was no point feeling jealous over it; I should just do what I could. I tried searching for the blue-finned fish with that resolve, but they weren’t easy to find. The only ones that passed in front of me were the red-and yellow-finned ones. It looked like Reflet had already captured several blue-finned fish, though. Maybe there were more blue fish deeper down in the water?

While taking down the Charging Cherry Salmon that came charging at us occasionally with Rikyu and Kurumi, I was able to catch some fish. The Subterranean Lake Fish were incredibly slow, which meant that even we were able to manage to catch them.

However, nothing happened despite us doing this for two hours. We must have caught over one hundred fish between us all. If we’d been doing the right

thing, something should have happened by then.

“Should we go back up to the shore for a sec?”

“Sounds good. I’m pretty tired.”

I resurfaced with Kurumi and Rikyu, and we discussed what we were doing wrong.

“I guess the fish aren’t the answer?”

“But I really think they are...”

“Aww, the Silver-Haired effect didn’t work...”

“The heck is that?”

“I thought having you here would make something awesome happen that would trigger an event.”

“No chance of that. I might have discovered some stuff, but that was mainly luck.”

In this sort of situation where proper investigation was key, I was no help. They would have had a better chance if they’d brought a verification team along instead of me. As soon as I was about to tell her that, something happened.

“Heh heh... Look over there.”

“Huh?”

“Whoa, something’s glowing!”

Rikyu was pointing at something in the lake. When I looked, I saw something startling. To my surprise, a thin pillar of light was rising from the lake.

“Wha? Whaaaat? What’s that?!”

“It’s the Silver-Haired effect!”

Rather than me, it was probably Filma who had done something.

As soon as we witnessed that pillar of light in the lake, we quickly plunged our faces into the water to see where it was coming from. The three of us were sitting on our knees at the edge of the lake and with only our faces in the water. We must have looked really dumb from the outside.

We saw Filma swimming up towards the surface at breakneck speed.

“Phew! Look at this!”

Filma resurfaced, holding something in her hand. It was a pearl about the size of a softball. The pillar of light had been coming out of the pearl Filma was now holding. It was surprisingly not that bright now, since all the light was rising towards the ceiling.

“That’s amazing! It’s a shining pearl! Where’d you find it?”

“It’s all thanks to Reflet!”

Filma had been catching blue-finned Subterranean Lake Fish with Reflet when she suddenly noticed something off about Reflet’s movements. After observing her for a bit, she had realized that Reflet was swimming on a fixed course. That is to say, the blue-finned fish were swimming on that fixed course, and Reflet was chasing after them and swimming along it for a while.

That wasn’t all; Filma had noticed one more thing. Once a Charging Cherry Salmon received a certain amount of damage in battle, it would fall back and restore its HP, and it would always run to the same area every time. Moreover, that area was on the blue-finned Subterranean Lake Fish’s circuit. So, when she searched that spot, thinking something might be there, she noticed an opening in a crevice in a rock at the bottom of the lake.

The rest of us also went into the lake to check out the blue-finned fish’s movements, but since there were so many red-and yellow-finned fish, we weren’t able to see well from where we were. That meant this was something that could only be discovered if you dived down to the bottom of the lake.

“Then, when I looked inside the hole, I found this pearl!”

“That’s awesome! You really did a good job of driving the enemies back instead of defeating them. I wouldn’t have thought of that.”

“I did defeat them at first, but then I thought maybe we’re only supposed to defeat the blue-finned ones.”

By repeatedly driving back all the other Charging Cherry Salmon besides the blue-finned ones, she’d been able to notice something out of place. Normally

she wouldn't have had the leeway to do something like that, but she'd managed to do it this time thanks to being healed in a timely manner.

"I could only do it because Reflet was with me."

While Charging Cherry Salmon had high attack power, they actually had very low defenses, so there likely weren't players who would purposefully let them escape. And there weren't many parties who would be able to fight several Charging Cherry Salmon at once in the first place. Even if they could, they wouldn't have been able to be underwater for long enough to notice something off about their movements.

"Well done, Reflet!"

"Hum?"

She was clueless.

"But seriously, no one else has noticed it yet?"

"Hmm, well, catching a certain amount of blue-finned fish could be the key to trigger that change, right?"

Basically, on top of figuring out the trick, one would have to notice the change in movements of the fish and monsters, and then find that tiny hole that Filma had discovered.

"Heh heh... I bet the position of the hole changes too, if you don't find it in time."

"Ah yeah, that'd be a pain."

"At any rate, just what is that pearl?"

"Heh heh... A Killer Cherry Salmon's Egg?"

"Not a Charging Cherry Salmon's?"

"Yes... Maybe *that* thing? Heh heh."

"What thing?"

Kurumi and I simultaneously looked over to where Rikyu was pointing and saw a giant shadow swimming towards us. Just like in a certain killer shark movie, all we could see was its fin poking out of the water.

“I-Is that the boss?”

“Seems that way.”

“Everyone, go back to the surface! Filma, what will you do?”

“I’ll buy some time down here. I’ll try to lead it to where you guys are little by little.”

“Got it!”

Even if we were to fight here, we’d just be a hindrance to Filma. We decided to leave things in her capable hands for now and return to land. However, feeling concerned about leaving Filma on her own, we left Reflet with her. With Reflet’s healing, there should be a low chance of Filma dying.

“Reflet, protect Filma!”

“Hum!”

Reflet winked, as if to say to leave things to her, while the rest of us swam towards the shore. We discussed our strategy on the way.

“Should we attack from above?”

“I think that’s all we can do. I doubt we can hold our own against an underwater boss.”

“Heh heh... We’ll be fine. We can take it down from above,” Rikyu declared with fierce certainty. When I asked her to explain, she gave a very natural reason. “Heh heh... Because this is still the early game.”

“If the only way you could beat the first underwater boss was by fighting it underwater, it’d be game over. That would make it likely for people to ignore the southern part of Zone Five and never push through it, right? This game is really careful about its balance in that regard, so there has to be a way to take the enemy down from above.”

“Oh, I get it.”

For better or for worse, this game placed importance on balance. That was felt especially strongly in the battle system. Though I couldn’t say I had personally experienced the effects of that. While this game *was* good for

newbies and casual gamers, it was also actively called a casual game at times. Again, not that I would call it that!

Considering that, boss though it might have been, this was still early game, so it was unlikely that it would be super difficult.

“Since Filma’s taking the target off our backs right now, we can hit it with long-range attacks. After that, I think we’ll have to just go with the flow... We’re going into this blind, after all.”

“Heh heh... Don’t forget I have a bomb smorgasbord lined up too.”

“Yeah, guess we have no choice this time.”

“It’s called the Killer Cherry Salmon. If it’s the stronger form of the Charging Cherry Salmon, then wouldn’t that mean it would have similar attacks?”

“That’s definitely a possibility. Let’s see, those have Charge and Water Gun, and what else... That tail fin attack?”

“It’s a boss, so it probably has some other tricks up its sleeve.”

I had Himka and the others return as we began our preparations. By preparations, I just meant that we were getting our formation together and replenishing our HP and MP. Of course, we also scarfed down some food with buff effects.

“Filma, we’re ready!” Kurumi called out. Filma seemed to have heard. She gradually came swimming towards us. Just as she’d promised, she was guiding the Killer Cherry Salmon to a spot where we could easily attack it.

“All right, let’s do this!”

“Heh heh... I’ll turn you into grilled fish.”

We went with Rikyu’s bomb for our preemptive strike. It was pretty large, so maybe it was reserved for boss fights. It was clearly bigger than the small bombs she’d used along the way for the much smaller fish.

“Heh heh... Eat this.”

With a snap of her wrist, Rikyu flung the black ball she was holding. As soon as it touched the water, it unleashed a tremendous explosion of scattering flames.

The large shadow underwater started thrashing from the shock. Rikyu's bombs could apparently deal effective damage to underwater monsters as well.

Even the three of us, who were in a distant spot, felt the shock waves. The force of the explosion was so strong, Fau and Rick had to grab hold of my robe to keep from falling over. But for those of us who had witnessed Rikyu's bombs before, its power seemed strangely a little weaker than usual. After all, Rikyu's bombs were super high-powered and had a very wide damage radius. They were a vicious method of attack that put the user at risk of getting caught up in the blast if they were careless.

Despite that, this time, the bomb hadn't blown her up with it and there were no flames filling my field of vision. Wasn't this level of bomb too basic for a boss? Could Rikyu possibly be learning there was a time and place for things?

"Heh, guess it loses power underwater."

"Ah, that's what it is."

It seemed that the flame bombs lost a considerable amount of power when met with water. It wasn't because Rikyu had changed. Well, duh. This was Rikyu we were talking about, after all.

"I think I can fight now!"

"Huh? Kurumi, didn't you say it was hard to fight with your hammer underwater?"

"It's less stressful now that I don't have to worry about Rikyu blowing herself up!"

"O-Oh, really?"

"Yep!"

Wow, what a big smile... She must have really been worrying over Rikyu. My heart broke a little imagining the suffering she must have gone through.

"What's wrong, Silver-Haired? You look off."

"Don't worry, it's nothing. Let's do our best to take down this boss!"

"Hm? R-Right, okay."

Filma would pull the boss's attention away from us, allowing us to attack it without difficulty. Even Reflet, having only Filma to heal, was able to provide us with some support.

While Filma kept the boss targeted on her underwater, we were able to chip away at it from the shore with long-range attacks. We were all pretty excited, thinking we had luckily found the best possible way to fight the boss. This was Zone Five, after all. This boss must have been easy pickings for this trio. The Killer Cherry Salmon occasionally approached the water's edge, but Kurumi would just give it some good hard wallops when it did, which racked up considerable damage.

Even if we couldn't stack up to the rest, I assure you my monsters and I were also doing our best. With my and Sakura's Tree Magic, plus Rick's Nut Bombs, we had the boss's weaknesses fully covered. Each time it came to the surface of the water, we'd whittle down its HP little by little.

"Sakura! Rick! Keep that up!"

"...!"

"Chirp!"

However, we were up against a boss no one had ever fought before. Of course we couldn't bring it down *that* easily. Once we'd gotten it down to half HP, it changed up its pattern.

"Grugruuuuu!"

"Hm!"

"Himka! Are you okay?!"

"Hmm..."

The Killer Cherry Salmon shot water out of its mouth, aiming at Himka. It wasn't its usual Water Gun attack, but an even more powerful Water Bullet attack. Unable to react to a move he hadn't yet seen, Himka took a direct hit.

The Killer Cherry Salmon released another Water Bullet, commencing its attack on us.

"It's really kicked up its attacks all of a sudden!"

“Heh heh... Is it prioritizing attacking above the water?”

Rikyu was likely right. Filma was attacking the Killer Cherry Salmon, focusing its hate, but still it continued to attack us. It seemed like it had shifted its attack pattern to aim for the enemies on land.

“Silver-Haired, get back! Can you focus on support and healing more than attacking?”

“Roger that! You be careful too!”

“Leave it to us!”

“I’ll use my secret weapon... Heh heh.”

“That’s okay, Rikyu. You can probably just do what you’ve been doing.”

“Yeah, what he said!”

“Heh heh... There’s no need to hold back.”

Our words seemed to have no effect on Rikyu.

“Anyway! This is where the battle *really* begins! Here we go!”

“Yeah!”

We somehow managed to keep up fighting for several minutes afterwards. Kurumi took point at the very front, while Rikyu and Filma chipped away at the boss’s health little by little. But after taking all that damage, the Killer Cherry Salmon unleashed an even more annoying attack.

“Gruugruuuu!”

“Ack! Huge wave incoming!”

The Salmon suddenly turned away, but then gave its body a tremendous twist. That action caused the surface of the lake to ripple sharply, forming a gigantic wave that surged straight for us, so tall and wide across it seemed impossible to avoid. It was massive enough to swallow the area where we were standing whole. My monsters and I were shaking like leaves, but Kurumi and Rikyu were still calm before us. Real star players were something else!

As I admired them, the two of them prepared themselves. Kurumi wound up her hammer for a swing and Rikyu took out an especially large bomb. It looked

like they were planning to counteract the wave with a stronger attack.

“Blast Hammer!”

“Heh heh... Here comes Rikyu’s Special Super!”

The two of them unleashed all they had towards the rushing wave.

“Hraaaaaah!”

“Heh... Boom!”

Kurumi broke the wave with her hammer, and Rikyu’s bomb opened up a huge opening in it. For an instant, I thought that the wave was taken care of...but it didn’t go that perfectly. The hole they opened up in the wave closed back up in an instant, and the water continued to rush towards us. What power!

“Everyone! Grab hold of a nearby rock! Rick, Fau, come here!”

“Chirp!”

“Aye!”

We all clung to rocks, bracing ourselves to avoid getting swept away by the wave. We were surrounded by water on all sides as a heavy, low whooshing sound filled our ears.

If I hadn’t gotten Rick and Fau to hold on to my robe, their tiny bodies would’ve been washed away in no time. That was how tremendous the pressure of the wave was.

“...!”

“Tra-la!”

Eine was clinging to Sakura, withstanding the force of the wave. Since Sakura had the Endure skill, she had resistance to status ailments like Blow Away. They should be all right.

After a few seconds, the force of the water abated. We’d taken a decent amount of damage, but the terrifying attack had stopped us in our tracks. If we were struck by a Water Bullet, we wouldn’t have been able to dodge or block it, and would have taken a direct hit.

I turned my thoughts to the next attack and tried to figure out the Killer Cherry Salmon's position. However, the effect of the giant wave wasn't over yet. In fact, the scary part was just beginning.

The water receding back into the Subterranean Lake started to pull us towards the edge of the lake with intense force. At first it was just at our ankles, but soon the water started rising to our waists.

"Oh no! Watch out for the undertow!"

"H-Hmmm!"

I heard a scream from behind me and turned to look. Himka had just let go of the rock he'd been holding on to. Since he was weak to water, he had been stunned by the wave. At this rate, he'd be swept away and dragged into the lake.

"Himka!"

"Hmmmm!"

It's no use! If I reach out my hand, I'll get taken away by the water too!

"Hm-hmm!"

Himka was desperately moving his hands and feet, but it seemed like he couldn't swim properly against the violent current. He screamed as he was carried away into the lake. Worse still, a giant shadow lurked in wait in the spot he was being drawn towards. The Killer Cherry Salmon had its sights set on Himka.

"Grugrugruuu!"

"Hmm!"

The Killer Cherry Salmon slammed into Himka with its charge attack, dealing a crazy amount of damage. Himka had been underwater, but the force of the attack was strong enough to send him flying nearly five meters above the surface of the water, his HP plunging into the red. One more hit and he was a goner.

"R-Return, Himka!"

“Hmm...”

That was a close one. I was somehow able to send Himka away in time. He vanished right before the boss’s Water Bullet attack could hit him.

I called forth another companion to join us in his place.

“Come forth, Drimo!”

“Squeak?”

Shoot. I summoned him suddenly right in the middle of a battle—he’s confused!

Since we had originally come here just to sightsee, we hadn’t been planning on fighting a boss. Naturally, the monsters I had left behind like Drimo probably hadn’t been expecting to be summoned right into the midst of a boss fight. Besides, he had never even seen this place until now. Of course he wouldn’t know what was going on.

“Sorry! We’re fighting a boss right now! Could you please attack that giant thing underwater with your Earth Magic?!”

“Squeak!”

I knew I could count on his coolheadedness!

He quickly accepted the situation and started attacking, using his magic to shoot out bullets of dirt. Since the opponent was underwater, his shots didn’t deal much damage, but having another long-range attack option was still very valuable for our party.

After we’d whittled away the boss’s endurance little by little, its huge body turned away from us again.

Wait, is that what it looks like when—

“It’s doing the same move! Another wave’s coming!”

“So that’s it!”

Just like Kurumi warned, the Killer Cherry Salmon was getting ready to unleash another giant wave attack. We tried to do our best to grab hold of a rock and endure the wave like last time, but the force of this wave was even

stronger than the last. That was probably because Kurumi and Rikyu prioritized guarding rather than attacking the wave this time. Apparently their attacks *had* weakened the force of the previous wave, so they hadn't been completely meaningless.

"Aye!"

"Oh no, Fau!"

"Chirp chirp!"

R-Riiick! Wait, Rick?!

Amazingly, Rick reached out his hand, saving Fau, who was about to get swept away. While his tail and right hand were grabbing hold of my arm, he caught Fau with his left.

"Chi... Chirp!"

Moreover, he pulled Fau in close enough that she could grasp onto my robe. *What a rock star!*

Unfortunately, the price for doing that was steep.

"Ch-Chiiirrrp!"

"Riiick!"

"Aye!"

While he had saved Fau, Rick ended up getting swept away himself. This time Fau extended her hand out, but she couldn't reach Rick. For some reason, though, Rick was giving us a thumbs-up as he was carried away by the water. Was he telling us not to worry about him? *Dammit, Rick, you're so cool!*

But really, what should I do here? Should I send him back right now? Or should I trust he won't die and have Reflet go retrieve him?

While I was stressing over that, I noticed something strange about how Rick's marker was moving. It was heading towards the boss with some tremendous force, at about twice the speed as Himka had been carried away. I could only think that he was actually swimming towards the boss on purpose. It really seemed like he was trying to do something. I should wait and see what

happened.

After a few seconds, I saw Rick's HP bar drop into the red.

He must have gotten too close to the boss and gotten tackled by it. However, there was a bright flash of light underwater and the boss's HP decreased slightly.

Rick had probably hit it with a Glowing Walnut using his Nut Bomb skill. So far, this was the most damage his Nut Bomb attack had dealt. I thought its power should have been reduced underwater, but at point-blank range, it seemed like it had the same power as it would aboveground.

"Thanks, Rick! Take a break!"

I sent back Rick, who had shown me his force of will, and then summoned Olto to replace him.

"Mm-mm!"

"Olto! Our enemy creates huge waves! Try making a wall with your Earth Magic to block the wave!"

"Mmmm!"

Had Himka explained the situation to him after he'd been sent back? Olto didn't look the least bit confused after being summoned, and he immediately got to work.

Although Olto didn't have any attack power, he was good at constructing using his Earth Magic. My idea was for him to maybe create something like an impromptu breakwater with that ability. Following my directions, Olto used his magic to produce a wall of earth between us and the boss. It was about two meters tall and one meter wide. Then, he used even more magic to strengthen the solidity of the wall. It seemed fairly solid, but it wasn't actually that thick. Would it be able to withstand the huge wave?

Olto seemed to share my concern. He walked around the wall with his arms crossed, examining it with the eyes of a craftsman. He looked as though he was thinking long and hard about it, with his right hand to his chin. *Mm-hmm. Concerned Olto. Very cute.* I would have liked to have taken a screenshot if we

weren't on a boss field.

"C-Could you go a little faster, Olto?"

"Mm!"

He stuck the palm of his left hand out to me as if saying, "Be patient!"

"No, really! A huge wave is going to hit us soon!"

"Mmm... Mm-mm!"

It looked like he had thought of a solution. He pounded his palm with his fist.

And yet, Kurumi's warning rang out mercilessly. "Another one's coming! Silver-Haired!"

"Olto, we're in trouble!"

"Mm-mmm!"

In response to my panicked cry, Olto used his Earth Magic again and produced a series of the same walls as before, lining them up so they were stuck tightly together. By joining together the three layers of earthen walls, he had made one thick wall. And that wasn't all. In front of the three-layer-thick wall, he had produced two thin, pole-like segments a bit separated from each other. Those must have been to act like wave-dissipating blocks.

"Guys, get behind the wall!"

"Mmmm!"

Right after we all hid ourselves behind the wall, the big wave came crashing onto us. We made it by a hair's breadth!

The wall Olto had built displayed some truly effective results. It blocked the crashing wave, making it so we only got hit by a spray of water. There was also less of an undertow, the water only rising up to our ankles. The earth wall, having taken the brunt of the force, had gotten eroded by the wave and crumbled away, but Olto could just make another one.

"How's your MP, Olto?"

"Mm!"

“Great, I’ll need you to do that again!”

“Mm-mm!”

Once we were able to set up a countermeasure against the big wave, the fight afterwards wasn’t that hard. We steadily dealt damage to the Killer Cherry Salmon while I restored Olto’s MP with Mana Potions.

However, the boss’s true ace in the hole was not those huge wave attacks. Once we brought it down to ten percent HP, its behavior underwent yet another change.

“Grugruuuuooooooooo!”

“I-It’s surfing!”

After creating a huge wave, the boss started riding the wave and charging right at us. It easily cleared Olto’s earth wall and was coming to hurl itself at us, hiding behind it. Actually, maybe hurling itself at us isn’t the right way to put it. It was more like it was dropping down on us from right above. We were sent flying by the boss’s giant body and took some heavy damage. The entire party had their HP reduced by half.

And it wasn’t finished yet.

“Grugruuooo!”

Even while it was on land, it was moving forward at high speed by wriggling its body. Its target was Eine. Since she had been working so hard to provoke it, she must have pulled a good amount of its hate.

“T-Tra-la!”

Shit! The boss is way too fast, she can’t escape!

I was prepared to summon her away, but Drimo was quicker to act.

“Squeak squeak!”

“Gruooo?”

Drimo went barreling right into the Killer Cherry Salmon from the side, shifting its course.

“Squeak...”

He had prevented Eine from getting attacked directly, but unfortunately Drimo took a lot of damage himself. Drimo was near death after two hits, including the surf tackle. I couldn't believe our Drimo, who had the best defense and endurance, would be brought to that point... If any other of us had taken a direct hit, it'd have been an insta-death. Plus, the Killer Cherry Salmon was twisting its body, trying to change its direction. It must have been trying to do another charge attack.

Though this was also a golden opportunity.

"The enemy's bringing itself on land! Let's get 'em!"

This was our chance to drive in our strongest attack.

"Fau, give us some attack buffs!"

"Aye!"

"Sakura! Can you use Divine Blessing on Drimo?"

"...♪"

The Divine Blessing skill could only be used when the party was in a crisis, but it had an incredible effect. It replenished HP and gave a huge boost to the target's stats. If we could buff our strongest attacker, aka Drimo, he'd be sure to unleash some considerable power.

"All right! Drimo, use Dragon Blood Awaken— Never mind! You can't use it any more today, so just attack it as hard as you can!"

"Squeak!"

"Eine, support Drimo's Tailwind!"

"Tra-la!"

"Olto, protect us all!"

"Mm!"

After giving my orders, I used Monster Assist on Drimo, which was a Tamer skill that boosted a monster's strength and agility.

"Squeak squeeaaak!"

Drimo, having received everyone's buffs, took up his pickax and let out a war cry. Even though his squeaky voice didn't pack much of a punch, I could feel his enthusiasm.

"It's all you, Drimo!"

"Squeeeeeaaaaak!"

With all our efforts combined, it was time to unleash our ultimate attack. Drimo rushed ahead with more speed than I'd ever seen from him before, slamming his pickax into the Killer Cherry Salmon like he was swinging a golf club.

"Gruuuuooooo!"

"A-Awesome! Great job, Drimo!"

"Squeak!"

Shockingly, the Killer Cherry Salmon's massive form went flying almost ten meters in the air. Gravity brought it falling back down to the earth with a deafening roar.

The combined damage dealt by our attack and its fall seemed to have taken out more than five percent of the boss's HP. I thought it was rare for an attack to deal that much damage to a boss. Even among top players, that was probably only feasible for players who focused on attacking. The boss was even stunned from the impact of its fall. All we had to do now was attack it all out.

"Go, everyone!"

"...!"

"Squeak squeak!"

In the end, we narrowly scraped a victory, Kurumi's hammer dealing the final blow.

"Grugrugruuu...!"

The Killer Cherry Salmon bent backwards and released a pitiful cry as it broke apart into polygons and disappeared. *Wow, what a strong foe.* If it had just been me and my monsters, we would have gotten absolutely destroyed right at

the start.

“We won, somehow...”

“Mmm.”

“Squeak.”

“You guys did great too. Thanks.”

“Mm-mm!”

“Squeak.”

Olto beamed while Drimo gave me a nonchalant smirk.

“Man, I can’t believe we came here to sightsee and ended up in a boss fight.”

“Ah, sorry about that. I guess we kinda just rushed into it like we usually do.”

“Heh heh... Our bad.”

“Oh, no. I’m not complaining. We got to level up and stuff, so it was really no loss to us.”

Filma had kept the enemy’s target off us, Kurumi had been a reliable tank, and Rikyu had been throwing out powerfully destructive bombs left and right. I didn’t expect anything less from them.

That’s right, aren’t Rikyu’s bombs pretty expensive? She used so many that it must have put her in the red even though we won. I wanted to cover her bomb expenses, but she firmly refused, saying it was because of them that we had gotten wrapped up in all this. Nevertheless, after some negotiation, she decided to let me give them a cut of the materials I obtained here.

For me, on top of winning against a boss I had no hope of beating on my own with just my monsters, I’d even leveled up. Plus, I’d also obtained some drops from the boss, so I’d really only benefited from this.

“We’re baaack!”

“Hummm!”

“Sorry, I wasn’t able to focus its hate on me at all...” Filma sighed.

“Welcome back!” I said. “It’s thanks to you two attacking it underwater that

we were able to attack it easily.”

“Heh heh... Bravo.”

“Really? Then maybe it was all worth the effort.”

“Hum.”

But what to do now? The field itself hadn’t changed at all. The Killer Cherry Salmon’s egg seemed like it had been an event item, since it had already vanished. As I mulled it over, other players suddenly appeared in our view. It was as if they had teleported there instantly. I was surprised, and so were they.

Kurumi and the others, however, seemed to understand what happened.

“Oh, we must have returned to the regular field.”

“Heh heh... So the boss and regular fields overlap each other here.”

Oh, I see. So the moment the boss appeared, we were sent to the boss field, and now we had returned to the regular field. From the perspective of the other players, we must have seemed like the ones who had teleported into view. In other areas, boss fights were triggered when you stepped into a boss fight arena. Having a boss appear on the regular field such as in this case was a bit peculiar.

Once we understood what had happened, one of the surrounding players came to talk to us, their face a mixture of hope and excitement.

“H-Hey, did you manage to figure out how to clear this place?”

“You must have!”

“Aren’t you Silver-Haired?! Then is it really true?”

The surrounding players came flocking towards us. Even though this place didn’t have a lot of players in it, it wasn’t as if there were no players around. They must have witnessed us as we suddenly disappeared. After seeing that, there was no doubt many players must have thought we had made some sort of progress with exploring the Subterranean Lake.

“Wh-What should we do?”

“Mm-mm.”

While my party panicked, the trio promptly launched into an explanation for the surrounding players.

“Okay, so. We did make some progress, but we won’t know what happened exactly either until we look at our logs! But we’ll probably also be selling our info to the Quick-Eared Cats!”

“W-We apologize, we can’t say anything for certain right now...”

“Hee hee hee...”

Rikyu was just chuckling away and creeping out the crowd, though.

In the face of these famous players, the crowd seemed unable to push them for more. Although the trio was completely surrounded, they just had some questions thrown at them sporadically and that was it. I really was glad that I was together with three of them. If it had just been me, I probably would have been surrounded and attacked with an onslaught of questions.

“Hey, you go...”

“Heck no. The Defenders are gonna...”

“Totally. Silver-Haired...”

People kept chattering even after we escaped from the throng. Actually, most of the players were trailing after us in a swarm, but we couldn’t exactly tell them not to follow us when all they were doing was just walking through the playing field. We decided not to worry about them for now.

“So, what should we do now?”

Even though we had taken down the boss, we couldn’t see any new path having appeared or anything. Kurumi, however, had noticed a change.

“Hey, look over there.”

“Hm?”

Kurumi was pointing up at the ceiling. There, a beam of light was shining out from a crevice among the rock.

“Oh? Could that light be coming in from the outside?”

“Yeah, it’s gotta be!”

That was the hidden passageway Amimin had found. A beam of light, clearly different from the light from the sea sparkle in the lake, was shining through the opening. Kurumi caught hold of one of the onlookers and asked whether they could see the beam of light. She must have wanted to confirm whether we were the only ones who could see it, or whether everyone could. It turned out it was only visible to us, so defeating the boss really had triggered some sort of change.

We decided to head right for the hidden passageway. However, the onlookers were still following us. Were we going to have to bring them with us or something? As I was thinking that, Kurumi spoke up again.

“Hmm, maybe we can give them a hint? That okay with you, Silver-Haired?”

“Huh? Sure. I leave it all to you.”

“All right, let’s see. First, you have to trigger an event underwater. Also, it has nothing to do with the Glow Shroom, contrary to what people have been saying!”

Hearing that, the players all simultaneously began moving towards the lake. Leave it to Kurumi. There was a player who begged her for another hint, but after Kurumi refused, they just walked away dejectedly.

“All right, shall we?”

“Aah, that kind of stuff makes me nervous. Thanks for handling it as usual, Kurumi.”

“Heh heh... They’re finally gone.”

Rikyu was back to normal. She really was shy around strangers.

After we had shaken off the onlookers thanks to Kurumi’s tactful approach, we walked towards the passageway at the top of the cliff that Amimin had discovered.

On the way, I checked out what items I had obtained.

“Let’s see what I was able to collect... I got a Glow Shroom?! And three of them at that! Nice, that was lucky.”

I’d heard they were extremely rare, so I didn’t think I’d get *three* of them.

With this many, I'd be able to make use of them with both Cultivation and Concoct.

"And these too!"

I couldn't help but smile with satisfaction at the six edible items I had managed to obtain. After all, this was what I had come here for. Yes, I *had* caught freshwater crab from the Subterranean Lake. Actually, Reflet had helped me out by going to collect the trap I had set. Besides crab, I'd also caught shrimp and shellfish.

"Hum-hum!"

Well, she probably just wanted to eat them herself, but still. It was a job well done.

I couldn't stop drooling just seeing the big pincers of the gazami crabs. Since Reflet had done so much here at the Subterranean Lake, I would have to make some delicious crab dishes for her to eat.

"All right, how about the monster drops?"

They were just okay. Materials from Zones Six and Seven had already started circulating among players, so obtaining strong equipment even in Zones Three and Four was possible. My own Elemental Cloth Robe was made using materials from Zones Five and Six. Therefore, the drops obtainable here weren't really that valuable.

The boss drops, however, were a different story. We had been the first ones to defeat it, after all. Considering that we were the only ones right now who possessed them, they should be considerably valuable.

"Killer Cherry Salmon's fangs and scales. Oh, and fillets too."

It was classified as an ingredient, but it was called Killer Cherry Salmon Fillet. What was it like? It wasn't really a name that conjured up an appetite... But it *was* a boss drop, so it had to taste good. It was probably a good idea to show the fangs and scales to Lewin and Shuella.

As I looked through my inventory while following behind my monsters, at some point we reached the cliff. Looking up at it again, I could see just how tall

it was.

“We have to climb this...?”

The cliff looked steep and difficult to climb for someone not experienced with bouldering. I, however, had a secret weapon. I had sent Rick away, but since Eine was here it was easy to have her tie a rope for us to climb. Olto also created some footholds.

But even at a time like this, my monsters started playing around.

“Tra-la-la...”

“Aye!”

Especially those two. Fau, who was clinging to the wall, was extending a hand out straight below her to Eine, who was having trouble climbing and was about to exhaust her strength.

“Tra-la!”

“Aye!”

Fau grabbed hold of the tiny hand that Eine held out to her and pulled her up as hard as she could.

Well, Eine could fly, so it wasn't as though she was actually about to fall. I guess they were pretending to be the guys from those energy drink commercials that used to be popular.

“Come on, quit playing around and climb.”

“Tra-la-la.”

“Aye.”

At my pressing, Eine put Fau on her back, used her Float skill, and ascended the cliff in no time. *Hey, aren't you going a little too fast?*

“...Okay then, I guess I have to work a little harder.”

“Mmm?”

“No, it's okay. You don't have to give me a piggyback ride. There's no need to squat with your back to me.”

“Mm?”

“No, it’s not that I don’t like piggyback rides.”

“Squeak?”

“And I’m not saying I don’t want to be carried by Olto specifically!”

No matter how strong Olto and Drimo were, it was way too scary to climb up a cliff while being carried on someone’s back.

“Aww, they love you, Silver-Haired!”

“Heh heh... Monster piggyback ride... Sounds nice.”

“Let’s do our best, Reflet!”

“Hum!”

In the end, thanks to Olto’s footholds, we were able to climb up the cliff at a decent speed.

Then, we crawled through the narrow opening Amimin had discovered. Something was obviously different at the end of the tight passageway. The wall that had been the dead end we’d heard about had crumbled away, revealing an exit. From there, moonlight was streaming in.

“Let’s check it out. Filma, you go ahead first,” said Kurumi.

“Are you sure?”

“Yup. You worked really hard today. You all good with that too?”

“Oh, yeah. Agreed,” I responded.

“Heh heh... Same here.”

“Okay then, Reflet should come with me too. Yeah?”

“Hum!”

Filma and Reflet held hands and amiably passed through the exit side by side.

“Wow! This is so cool!”

“Hum!”

Their cheers of joy were not unwarranted. Outside the Subterranean Lake lay

an expansive field of green.

“It really is amazing...”

“Yeah.”

“Heh heh... Looks picturesque.”

Reedlike grass reached up past my waist and stretched out as far as the eye could see. The meadow illuminated by the bright moonlight was so magnificent and strangely moving that I was almost brought to tears.

It wasn't dreamlike or fantasy-like or anything like. This sort of landscape must have existed somewhere on Earth. That very realness was what was so moving. Even though I knew we were in a game, it was as if I could feel the real might of nature.

For a brief moment, as we gazed at the meadow bathed in moonlight, we forgot how to even speak.

Online Forum [Assemble, Fans of Silver-Haired] All Things Silver-Haired Related, Part 13

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.

118: Yang Yang

So you were in the same instance as Silver-Haired?!

119: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Yeah, surprised me too. I didn't know his real name, so I didn't even recognize him when it was announced.

120: visitorfromanotherplanet

There's a lot of people who don't know it. I probably wouldn't have recognized it either.

121: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Right?

122: Yang Yang

So? When'd you figure out it was him?

123: Yodel-Ay-Hee

We did self-introductions at the altar at the end. At first I thought he was just a Silver-Haired fan with the same monsters and same hair color as him.

124: visitorfromanotherplanet

No way, someone like that would be super rare.

The same monsters? It's not easy to gather those unique types.

125: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Yeah, true. But I really didn't think I'd end up on the same field as THE Silver-Haired, y'know?

Plus, the lewd blacksmith was there too. Tens of thousands of people must have been playing.

126: Yang Yang

It really does seem like a miracle for two celebrities to have ended up in the same instance.

127: visitorfromanotherplanet

For sure. Well? Did something happen? Did you witness the Silver-Haired effect?

Oh yeah, and what's he like?

128: Yodel-Ay-Hee

What's he like...? Pretty ordinary? Seemed like any other Tamer you'd find in the wild.

129: Yang Yang

You called Silver-Haired ordinary...?

Ordinary doesn't mean what I think it means.

130: Yodel-Ay-Hee

No, I mean, he seems ordinary at first sight. But we know what he's capable of, don't we?

At least, I can only describe his appearance and way of speaking as ordinary.

His monsters aren't ordinary, so seeing them as a unit doesn't come across as ordinary at all.

131: visitorfromanotherplanet

Ugh, the word ordinary has lost all meaning now!

132: Yang Yang

Let's quit the ordinary talk.

More importantly, did anything crazy happen?

Did he make us proud?

133: visitorfromanotherplanet

Did he uncover something extraordinary?

134: Yang Yang

Did he find a secret boss?

135: Yodel-Ay-Hee

No, nothing happened this time.

We each split up to collect the jewels, summoned the boss, and defeated it.

It barely took an hour or so.

A shame, really, but it's not like he's always pulling stunts.

136: Yang Yang

I guess so.

It must've just been an event where he couldn't pull any.

137: visitorfromanotherplanet

I wish I would've joined if there was a chance I could've teamed up with Silver-Haired.

138: Yodel-Ay-Hee

You didn't participate?

We even got a bonus point from it, so it wasn't a bad event.

There were plenty of chances to join, weren't there?

139: visitorfromanotherplanet

Well, I'm kinda shy, tbh...

And I heard there were a lot of disputes between players.

140: Yang Yang

I heard there's surprisingly a bunch of rude people among the second-wave players

That was true for the first wave too. Things might be noisy for a bit until they get weeded out for breaking the rules.

141: Willow

I had a bad experience with that.

142: Yodel-Ay-Hee

What happened?

143: Willow

There was a player on my team who really didn't seem like they wanted to be there.

They were on edge the whole time.

I wanted to nickname them Jackknife.

144: visitorfromanotherplanet

Were they a second-wave player?

145: Willow

Yeah. Here's a sampling of their finest quotes:

"Is there even a point to doing self-introductions?"

"I do what I want. Please leave me alone."

"You think you're so great just because you're a first-wave player?"

"I don't really mesh with super enthusiastic people. Let's just be more chill about this."

All they did in front of the altar at the end was bitch and moan. Then they took some second wave sympathizers with them and walked off somewhere.

146: Yang Yang

Sympathizers...?

Who would sympathize with that?

147: Willow

It was probably the exact opposite of that dream team with the two celebrities.

It was like a nightmare team.

148: visitorfromanotherplanet

I guess I really am glad I didn't participate in the mini event.

149: Willow

We ended up losing to the boss in the end and failed.

Well, you could keep joining until you completed it, so afterwards I just participated again and cleared it.

150: Yodel-Ay-Hee

You really had it rough, huh? We honestly had zero disputes.

We followed Silver-Haired's and the lewd blacksmith's directions and were able to finish things off pretty handily.

151: Willow

Well isn't that bc of the Silver-Haired effect?

152: visitorfromanotherplanet

You mean the fact there weren't any disputes?

153: Willow

Yeah. It was thanks to the Silver-Haired effect that you were able to smoothly clear the mini event, wasn't it?

154: Yang Yang

Rather than the Silver-Haired effect, isn't that just the power of celebrities?

The second-wave players know them too.

They can't just go and do something dumb in front of Silver-Haired, can they?

155: Willow

Not necessarily tho? Siegfried got into a huge fight.
Someone told him to give them his horse.

Sometimes celebrities are targeted precisely *because* they're famous.

156: visitorfromanotherplanet

And what if the very fact that those types of people didn't end up on their team was a blessing of Silver-Haired?

157: Willow

Indeed.

158: Yang Yang

I feel like we've meandered from just talking about his playstyle.

Blessing? lmao

159: Yodel-Ay-Hee

So the reason we were able to clear the event without any issues was thanks to Silver-Haired's blessing?

Praise be!

160: visitorfromanotherplanet

How reverent lolol

Speaking of, did you become friends with Silver-Haired?

That was your chance to do it.

161: Yodel-Ay-Hee

'Course not.

162: Yang Yang

That was a quick reply... But I understand.

I can't blame you for chickening out in front of him.

163: Willow

I totally get it! But I've gotta say it.

You chicken!

164: visitorfromanotherplanet

I have no right to say this, seeing as I have social anxiety, but...

You fried chicken!

165: Yodel-Ay-Hee

I'm not shy and I'm not a chicken!

I actually had a good conversation with him.

166: Willow

Then why didn't you send him a friend request?!

Scared of the Defenders?

167: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Well, yeah, that's part of it!

But seeing him—well, seeing him with his monsters...

And realizing it was him, I couldn't do anything more than have a conversation with him.

168: Yang Yang

Well, it is Silver-Haired.

169: visitorfromanotherplanet

Okay then, spill. What'd you talk about?

170: Yodel-Ay-Hee

About my job class. You know how I'm a Painter?

He seemed interested in hobby-type classes, so he asked me a bunch of stuff.

171: visitorfromanotherplanet

I see. That seems very like him.

172: Yang Yang

We don't even know the guy, yet here we are saying things like "That seems like him" hahahaha

173: Willow

Silver-Haired and a hobbyist job... They go perfectly together.

But is that really okay?

174: Yodel-Ay-Hee

What do you mean?

175: Willow

What do you think will happen if Silver-Haired becomes interested in a hobbyist class and picks something like Painter or Quilt Worker as a second job?

176: visitorfromanotherplanet

There's no use worrying about second jobs, they haven't even been discovered yet.

Plus, is there a problem with that?

Silver-Haired would actually probably be able to discover a lot of stuff about hobbyist classes.

177: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Oh, that'd be great! Painter could become a popular class thanks to a huge discovery by Silver-Haired!

178: Yang Yang

That'll never happen.

179: Willow

Yeah, no chance.

180: visitorfromanotherplanet

Really doubt it.

181: Yodel-Ay-Hee

I didn't think I'd say it either.

But isn't it just fine for Silver-Haired to pick a hobbyist class?

What's wrong with that?

182: Willow

He's a Tamer, which means he already has a low combat ability.

If he chooses a hobbyist class as his second job, then...

183: Yang Yang

Ah, gotcha.

If he does, he'll just become even weaker in battle.

184: Yodel-Ay-Hee

No no no, Silver-Haired's not *that* weak.

185: Yang Yang

I wonder how he feels about it?

186: Willow

If he becomes a Tamer x hobbyist combo, he won't be able to get much further out of the Town of Beginnings.

187: visitorfromanotherplanet

Isn't that just how it is now?

188: Yang Yang

That's the problem. If Silver-Haired won't be able to progress even while the world expands...

That means there'll be fewer chances to run into him.

Meaning his fans will lament, right?

189: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Ah, I see.

190: Willow

I say this lightheartedly, but if that actually happens, you might feel the pressure of it.

191: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Huh? Me?

192: Yang Yang

Think about it. What if Silver-Haired says something like "I became a Painter because Yodel-Ay-Hee recommended it."

You know how that'll play out?

193: Yodel-Ay-Hee

H-How?

194: Willow

You'll be talked about as the guy who recommended the already eccentric Silver-Haired pursue a hobbyist class.

In a bad way, of course.

195: visitorfromanotherplanet

They would probably just complain or something.

196: Yang Yang

I don't think people will directly harass you or anything, but...

197: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Silver-Haired! Don't rush into anything!

198: visitorfromanotherplanet

Don't worry. We don't even know if something like second jobs exists yet.

It's just a possibility right now.

199: Willow

I don't think it'd be weird for Silver-Haired to be the first one to discover second jobs, though.

200: Yang Yang

That's def a possibility.

So then what if he just picks Painter on a whim?

While we're over here wondering how we can stop him, he's

just gonna step on the gas.

That's his style!

201: visitorfromanotherplanet

I can imagine that. He's capable of doing something like that.

202: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Oh man, I really need to tell Silver-Haired that Painter's a trash job and not to pick it!

Ahhhh! But I don't know how to contact him!

203: Yang Yang

That's why I said you should've friend requested him.

204: visitorfromanotherplanet

Guess you have no choice but to go to his farm.

205: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Is my only choice to wait for him to come out, like I'm waiting for a celebrity after a concert?

206: Yang Yang

In front of the Defenders? I guess it could work out if he remembers you...

207: Willow

If he's forgotten you, you're just gonna be bothering him.

You'll definitely be reported.

208: Yodel-Ay-Hee

I-It'll be fine. We talked so much, there's no way he could forget...

209: visitorfromanotherplanet

You sure about that?

210: Yodel-Ay-Hee

I'm... I'm not sure! Does Silver-Haired have a good memory?

211: Yang Yang

I dunno. But he kinda seems like the type who doesn't pay attention to the little things...

212: visitorfromanotherplanet

Little things. Like some background player he had a short conversation with, right?

I could see that.

213: Willow

I don't think he'd forget a teammate that was with him in a mini event so quickly, but...

Not remembering sort of seems like something he'd do.

214: Yodel-Ay-Hee

You're right! My only option now is to pray!

Please, Silver-Haired, lose interest in being a Painter!

I'm begging you, God, Devs, Silver-Haired!

215: Yang Yang

Do you really think praying to him will work?

216: visitorfromanotherplanet

It'll be all right. I'm sure your wish will come true!

This is Silver-Haired we're talking about, after all!

217: Willow

I'm sure you'll be granted some great luck, within the confines of the game, heheheh

Epilogue

A vast meadow illuminated by the moon lay beyond the Subterranean Lake. We all kept silent and just gazed at the landscape before us.

However, a brash noise completely shattered that tranquility. It was the *ding-dong!* noise of an announcement. The devs really could have been a little more considerate! Hadn't they ever heard of letting their players bask in the glow?

"The Subterranean Lake has been cleared. In celebration of all the gate cities being unlocked, an event will occur in forty-eight hours in-game time. The event will be held at the most recently unlocked town, South Gate."

"The first players to clear the Subterranean Lake will be awarded the title 'Subterranean Lake Conqueror.'"

When that server-wide announcement played, we all looked at each other. We were glad that it turned out we had actually cleared it. That was what we had been expecting. And getting a title was great too. Other people had gotten similar titles before too. It was just an honorary title that came without any effects.

This all came, however, with something extra.

"So it's begun, huh? We got some details of the event..."

"Heh heh... A big raid boss..."

"Wh-What should we do?"

Hmm, a big raid boss, huh? Seems like it'll be trouble. Other than players who actually enjoyed fighting, people like me who weren't great at it probably had any joy overshadowed by other feelings.

The message was devoid of any information about the boss. It just said that in forty-eight hours, there would be a raid boss battle. Honestly, I was anxious.

"What do you think about this?"

"It sounds fun!"

“Heh heh... This is my chance to go all out with my bombs.”

Kurumi and Rikyu were smiling happily. Of course they were. They weren't some weaklings like me.

“How about you, Filma?”

“I don't really like fighting that much, but I guess I'll have to participate this time.”

“Yeah, I understand how you feel.”

This raid boss battle was something we had initiated. We couldn't really *not* participate. If someone were to run away from a raid boss battle they triggered, they'd definitely be made fun of. Before thinking about the boss fight, however, there was something I had to do.

“Let's keep going on to the safety zone and register a teleportation circle.”

That way if we were to die here, we could be respawned in town.

“Yes, we should. Okay then, let's keep moving onwards!”

“Hum!”

A Late-Start Tamer's
Laid-Back Life

A
LATE-
START

TAMER'S LAID-BACK LIFE

7





Bonus Short Story

Fau and Eine Playing Tag

“Aye! Aye!”

“Tra-la-la!”

“Whoa?!”

Something crossed right before my eyes at a tremendous speed as I stepped out of the barn, nearly crashing right into me. Taking a closer look, I saw that that something was Fau and Eine.

Apparently, the flying duo was playing a game of midair tag. Both the one who was “it” and the one being chased were all smiles as they whizzed through the air. It wasn’t often I saw them fly so fast. Maybe in battle, but not in town. When I took a longer look at the way they were flying, tremendous really was the only way to put it.

They looked like miniature planes doing aerobatics in the sky. Actually, they were probably more like acrobats than planes. At times they would ascend steeply, and other times they would make sharp turns. And sometimes they would slice right through obstacles in their way at high speeds.

“Aye! Yuh-aye!”

“Tra-la-la-laaa!”

It didn’t look like they were playing tag anymore so much as engaging in a total all-out aerial battle. Was that the falling-leaf technique? And then, a hineri-komi maneuver? And that last one there, was that an Immelmann turn?

Just kidding. I had no clue what they were doing. But I did understand that they were having fun as they went around in circles at breakneck speed.

The way the scales from Fau’s wings scattered in the air, glittering, was a sight to see. I was gazing up at that in wonder when suddenly, my smile faded.

“Aye?”

“F-Fau! Oh no, are you okay?!”

To my shock, Fau had miscalculated and crashed right into a nearby tree with an awful sound. The tree shook violently. She must have rammed into it pretty hard for that to happen.

Is she all right? That had to have hurt at that speed.

“A-Aye...”

Sh-She seems fine. She hadn’t taken any damage, and after a light shake of her head, she sprang back up into the sky.

You couldn’t actually take damage in towns, after all, mitigating even a collision that intense. Even the tree was left unscathed.

“Phew, that scared me. Seriously, I feel like that took years off my life.”

“Aye!”

“Tra-la!”

The two restarted their game of tag. Lesson not learned, I guess. Even that collision seemed to have been part of the fun for them.

“Be careful while you’re playing!”

“Tra-la-la!”

“Yuh-aye!”

They both saluted me, but they were bound to have another accident.
Speaking of—Eine! Don’t keep flying that way, there’s a bush right in front of—

“Tra-la!”

“That’s why I said be careful!”







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A Late-Start Tamer's Laid-Back Life: Volume 7

by Yuu Tanaka

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