

# A LATE-START TAMER'S LAID-BACK LIFE

12



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Illustrator:  
Nardack



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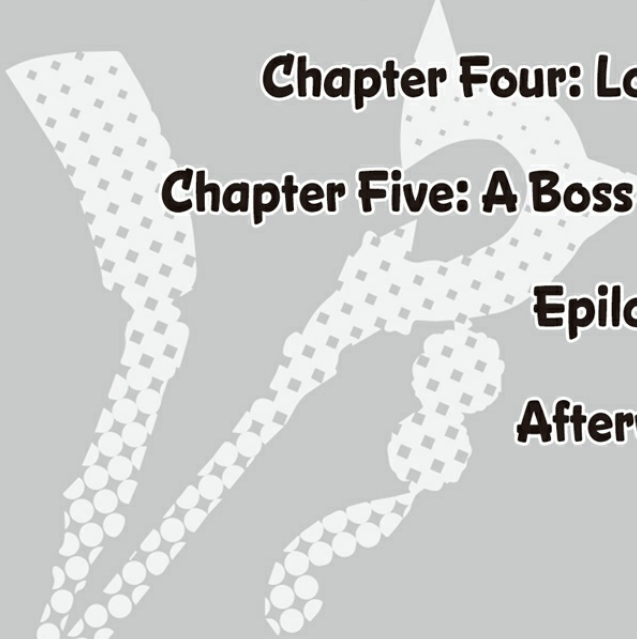
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A Late-Start Tamer's  
Laid-Back Life

# Prologue

## **SIDE: Management Acting Like Masterminds in a Dark Room**

“You called, Chief?”

“I did. How did people respond to the video?”

“The number of views has been skyrocketing ever since it was uploaded!”

“Well, certainly. We pulled out all the stops for it!”

“Yes, and we finally revealed more information about demons.”

“And we’ve made it known that items submitted to the auction can affect the game’s story.”

“That’s right. It also seems like players are theorizing that they themselves might be able to turn into demons.”

“Oho? So they noticed that?”

“It’s something they’re hoping for, not something they necessarily have conclusive proof of.”

“Well, in due time...”

“Frankly, it just hasn’t been implemented yet.”

“Don’t say that. We’re including it in our announcement about the extensive new content.”

“Making the implementation of a new race the centerpiece of the large-scale update is fairly boilerplate, I suppose.”

“They will of course need to discover the way to change into another race first.”

“Yes, players changing races is still far in the future. Some are already speculating on the existence of such a system, though.”



“And NPCs have been hinting about it too.”

“Some players, like those in the Verification Clan, are also tirelessly searching for it.”

“Heh heh heh. I like to see players getting excited about the game.”

“But the ones getting the most excited are those on the forums talking about the next event.”

“Well, that video we put out makes it pretty obvious, so I’m not surprised they’re making noise about it.”

“Precisely.”

“The video mentioned spirits and the divine. Do you think people picked up on that?”

“Hard to say. They were only mentioned briefly.”

“Knowing those beings exist is good enough at least.”

“The divine spirit flags aren’t that important yet anyway.”

“You know, Silver-Haired is the only one with a high favorability among the spirits...”

“Yes, that’s because he gains favorability by doing those delivery quests every day.”

“He’s one of those ‘slow and steady wins the race’ kind of guys, huh?”

“We really didn’t foresee there being a player who would waste such high-quality crops on throwaway quests like that.”

“Those were just meant to be a way to earn money at the beginning... Silver-Haired, why do you keep doing those quests every single day? It’s weird!”

“It’s because he’s Silver-Haired.”

“Grrr, there’s no rebuttal for that...”

“We may need to change the system that increases favorability from spirits when completing quests in the Town of Beginnings.”

“We either need to restrict it to only beginners, or tinker with the settings...”



Ahhh, I suppose another meeting is in order.”

“Your hard work is appreciated. Oh, and please remember to check the second installment of the movie.”

“Gaaah! I want to go home! I want to eat my daughter’s homemade cooking! Not that she has any plans to cook for me!”

“I-I hope you can enjoy her cooking one day...”

“Her homemade gyoza is the best! Not that I’ve ever tried it!”

“Okay, okay! I understand! Let’s prepare for the meeting already!”

“Gaaah!”



# Chapter One: An Outing with Cats?

“Hmm. I messed up.”

After I finished installing all the items I had purchased at the auction at my home base, I returned to my farm. I had bought the waterway for nagashi somen, but I realized it didn’t come with somen.

“Man, I even went out of my way to buy it.”

Sure, I could use it with soba instead, but I really wanted to use it for somen. I’d just have to wait until I could get my hands on somen. *I’ll put that at the top of my to-do list.*

“All right, next is this. Olto, could you sow this?”

“Mm!”

I handed Olto the unknown seed I’d bought at the auction. I didn’t know what would grow from it, but it’d be great if it was some undiscovered crop. As I watched Olto plant the seed, I took out other items I had won at the auction.

“Now for these items. I’m not sure what to do with them.”

They were the Awakening Incubator and Tamed Monster’s Awakening. Honestly, I’d bought the Awakening Incubator on impulse. I didn’t have a good reason to use it yet, so I’d have to put it to the side until I could get an egg.

Don’t get me wrong, I didn’t *regret* buying it. Buying this was the reason why I had gotten that title, after all. Though I couldn’t say the title came with any spectacular rewards... But I was sure this incubator would be useful to me someday. Plus, I could always just buy an egg at the Magical Beasts Guild, if need be.

“What about the Tamed Monster’s Awakening?”

This item was an off-white, crystalline jewel the size of a baseball. It was super pretty, so it’d probably work well simply as decoration.

But although it was classified as a jewel, its real value would be measured in



its special effects—or at least, you’d think it would. I appraised it, but its description only stated that it awakened a tamed monster’s power. To put it bluntly, I had no idea how to use it. I just sort of bought it without thinking. *I’ll admit, I bought it out of stubbornness!*

It *should* enhance a tamed monster’s power, though, so at least it wouldn’t be a waste!

“Can I use it...? I can!”

*See! I knew it!*

“Looks like I can use it directly on a monster.”

The names of the monsters I could use it on were displayed on the screen, but apparently I couldn’t use it on just anyone. The only monsters I could use the item on were Bear Bear and Fau. No one else.

*Why them?* I thought about it for a bit and wondered if it was because they had both hatched from eggs, but if that were the requirement, then it was weird Perca wasn’t included too. Although, on second thought, Perca was born under special circumstances, so maybe he wasn’t considered hatched from an egg?

As a test, I selected Bear Bear’s name, and my screen showed what the effects would be if I used Tamed Monster’s Awakening.

“Let’s see, Beast Blood Awakening and Poison Blood Awakening?”

It seemed if I used this jewel on a monster, they would acquire a special skill. In Bear Bear’s case, that skill was either Beast Blood Awakening or Poison Blood Awakening. Both skills had “Awakening” at the end, ergo, it was a tamed monster’s awakening. Could these be similar skills to Drimo’s Dragon Blood Awakening? If they were, then they were sure to be super powerful skills.

“I-I’ll test it on Fau too.”

In Fau’s case, the skills were called Earth Spirit Awakening and Tree Spirit Awakening? They didn’t have “Blood” in the title—a minor difference from Bear Bear’s skills.

Anyway, Earth Spirit and Tree Spirit, huh? That probably meant one granted

an earth elemental attack and the other a tree elemental attack... But why were those the only options? Fau was a fairy, which gave off more of an impression of air or light.

I pondered why the Awakening elements were limited to these two, when I finally hit upon something that seemed the most plausible. *Does this have something to do with Olto and Sakura?* Fau's parents were Olto, a gnome and an earth elemental, and Sakura, a tree elemental. That had to be it.

That would also explain why Bear Bear's obtainable skills were Beast Blood Awakening and Poison Blood Awakening. Honey Bears were a cross between a bear-type magical beast and a Honey Bee. That would make Beast Blood and Poison Blood make sense. Meanwhile, Fau, with elemental parents, would probably get Earth and Tree "Spirit" skills specifically because elemental spirits weren't considered to have blood coursing through their veins.

"Hmm, so they can definitely learn a skill, but the skills don't have a detailed description."

Beast Blood's description said, "Awakens a bestial power sleeping within," and Earth Spirit said, "Awakens the power of the earth sleeping within." *I guess I'll find out after I choose one... Oh well, that's fun in its own way!*

"Now, which to choose...?"

If Earth Spirit Awakening was something passed down from Olto, did that mean it was some sort of crafting ability? Or could she use it in battle? It felt like a waste if she couldn't use it at all for combat.

On the other hand, Beast Blood Awakening sounded like it'd have great synthesis with Bear Bear. My only concern was if it ended up not making much of a difference because Bear Bear was already a "beast."

Then, maybe I should go with Poison Blood Awakening? Bear Bear had the skill Poison Claw, and status ailments were powerful when they worked. But that could come with its downsides, since there was a chance high-leveled bosses were immune to poison. The reason status ailments weren't as good in the later games of most RPGs was because more enemies and bosses had status resistances. The same might very well hold true for LJO.



*So then, should I choose Tree Spirit Awakening?* But I already had tree elemental skills covered. Olea just recently evolved into a tree nymph, so it didn't seem like the right move to pile on more of that. In that case, Beast Blood Awakening might be the most versatile skill. I wondered if it would deal heavy damage in combat, like Drimo's Dragon Blood Awakening.

I was still curious about Earth Spirit Awakening, though. It'd be extremely helpful if it could promote crop growth, and if it was a fighting skill, then it would really be beneficial to the party.

"Hmm... All right, I'm going with Earth Spirit Awakening for Fau!"

I decided to head over to Fau and make sure she was all right with me using the item on her. Once I got back to the house, I saw all my monsters going wild on the playset I had just set up for them. It was quite a sight. The only ones playing normally were Sakura and Reflet, who were hanging on the monkey bars.

Olea and Himka were making full revolutions on the swing. I'd been scared out of my wits when I'd done that, but those two were having a ball. Rick, Perca, and Eine were chasing each other around the jungle gym at an absurd speed. I'd die instantly if I did that, or at least get stuck in the frame. My monsters were small, granted, but still the agility they maintained at that speed was unreal. Lilith and Olto were enjoying the thrill of going headfirst down the slide. These monsters of mine were a little too daring for their own good.

The most dangerous situation was probably occurring on the seesaw. Fau was sitting on one side, and Bear Bear and Drimo both jumped onto the other side, launching Fau up into the air with incredible force. If anyone else besides Fau, who could fly, was launched up like that, I would have had to put a stop to it right away. Even though I knew she wouldn't get hurt, the sight of it wasn't good for my heart.

While I felt bad interrupting her while she was having fun, I called her over.

"Aye?"

Fau came flying over with her arms out like a superhero and landed on my shoulder. I took out the crystal and held it out in front of her.

“I’d like to use this item on you. Are you okay with that?”

“Aye-aye!”

Once I showed her the Tamed Monster’s Awakening, Fau enthusiastically sprung up from my shoulder and flew around in a circle. *I’ll take that as a yes.*

“Aye! Aye-aye!”

It actually sounded like she wanted me to use it on her ASAP. I was glad she welcomed it so excitedly. It *had* been worth it to spend that ridiculous amount of money on it.

“Let’s do this! I’m using Tamed Monster’s Awakening!” I declared as I selected the item and then the option for Earth Spirit Awakening.

“Aye-aye!”

*It’s so bright! I’m used to this now, though!* I closed my eyes for a few seconds until the effect ended, and when I opened them again, a tremendous change...hadn’t occurred. Fau looked the same as always.

“Huh?”

“Aye?”

Fau stood on the palm of my hand, and I checked her from every angle. But nothing about her had changed a bit. Her stats, however, were a different story. Earth Spirit Awakening had been added to her list of skills.

“Success!”

“Aye-aye!”

There was still one question, though. It was great that Fau had acquired the Earth Spirit Awakening skill, but it was actually listed as Earth Spirit Awakening (Young Sprite).

Was this similar to Drimo’s Dragon Blood Awakening (Baby Dragon)? As I recalled, Drimo had started out with Dragon Blood Awakening, then when he evolved, it turned into Dragon Blood Awakening (Baby Dragon). I could only assume that it was the skill’s next highest evolution. Fau had evolved from a Pixie to a Fairy, so that was probably why she had the evolved form of the skill.



By that logic, if it became possible to have my other monsters learn Awakening skills in the future, then they would also acquire the evolved form of the skill that matched with their level of evolution. Also, judging by the fact that I couldn't use Tamed Monster's Awakening on Drimo, there was a high chance each monster could only learn one Awakening skill.

In that case, these skills would probably become very powerful the more they developed. It was already a strong skill, but it was possible it'd get strong enough to play a vital role in raid boss fights.

"All right, now I want to check out just what Earth Spirit Awakening can do."

The description hadn't changed. It still simply said that it awakened the power of earth sleeping within.

"Fau, can you use it here?"

"Aye..."

Apparently she couldn't use it on the farm, which must've meant it wasn't a crafting skill. I tried it out in the workshop just to be sure, but it seemed like she couldn't use it on the home base at all.

"Okay, let's test it outside."

"Aye-aye!"

And so, I decided to take Fau outside the Town of Beginnings to try out some combat. In addition to Fau, I brought Olto, Sakura, Drimo, Lilith, and Olea. I figured Olto might have some connection to Earth Spirit Awakening, and Drimo was an Awakening skill pro. I brought Sakura along too since she was technically Fau's parent. As for Lilith and Olea, I just wanted them to gain as much experience as possible since they were still low-leveled. Though the XP gained from enemies in this starting area would only be a drop in the bucket for them.

Under the cover of night, our entire crew set out for the Northern Plains. This area wasn't even a problem for me by myself anymore, so the combined might of our party was a bit overkill.

"Let's just wander around a bit and then try out your skill."

"Aye-aye!"

First step was finding a monster. I wanted to start by letting Fau fight normally without using her Awakening skill, so I could see if anything else had changed for her besides gaining a skill. What I found out was that nothing much had changed at all.

“Aye-aye-aaaye!”

Fau came in for a kick from midair that looked just like the one used by a certain masked rider. It lacked power, but she had a valiant look upon her face.

Fau’s physical attacks were as weak as usual. Fau was the only one of my monsters with lower strength than me, making her far and away the weakest. She still wasn’t able to take down enemies even in this beginner area with one physical attack. I’d probably never emotionally recover if Fau ever surpassed me in strength. *So please, stay your delicate and frail self!*

“Aye?”

“N-Nope, I didn’t say anything. Anyway, how about we test out Earth Spirit Awakening on the next enemy? You up for it, Fau?”

“Aye-aye!”

Fau nodded, fully motivated. She crossed her arms firmly in front of her chest, giving off an imposing aura. Her pose reminded me of one that a giant robot from a certain ’80s mecha anime would strike during battle.

As we went on to search for our next enemy, I spotted a dark figure in the distance. At first I thought it was a Rock Ant, but I was wrong. As we approached, I could see it was several times the size of a Rock Ant. Its carapace shone dully in the moonlight.

“A predator?”

“Aye!”

It was the Large Rock Ant, the predator of the Northern Plains. Predators were monsters that roamed the fields and struck terror into players’ hearts. When I first started playing, the Large Rock Ant had been a super strong enemy that I had no choice but to run away from, but now, it wasn’t all that difficult to defeat it. Even though it was a predator, in the end, it was still just a beginning



area enemy. Even Olto and I alone would have no trouble taking it on. The one thing it had going for it was its high HP, so it was the perfect enemy to test out Fau's new skill.

"Okay, how about we put your skills to the test against a predator?"

"Aye!"

There didn't seem to be any other players around going for the predator, so we wouldn't be stealing it from anyone. The players who were still fighting enemies in Zone One were probably second-wave players who were playing as crafting-type classes. Not many people were hunting predators in this area. Well, except for me. But I had a reason to be.

The predator had already noticed us. It glared at us with its emotionless bug eyes before swiftly changing course to head our way. At this point, even if we tried to flee, it would just keep chasing us. We probably only had a minute until it engaged us.

"All right! Everyone, get in formation! Olto, block that thing!"

"Mm-mm!"

"Fau's going to make the first move! No one else attack yet!"

"Aye-aye!"

I hadn't seen a Large Rock Ant up close in a while, but it was as intimidating as ever. Even though I could easily beat it now, the commanding presence predators gave off was nothing to sneeze at. Plus, I still remembered being chased around by it, so I couldn't help but feel like it'd give us a hard time.

"H-Here it comes!"

"Screeeech!"

The Large Rock Ant came charging at us as it unleashed a bellowing roar that seemed to reverberate through the entire playing field. *Huh? Was it this intense last time? This isn't at all like I remembered!*

"Mm-mmm!"

However, I was apparently the only one losing my cool. Olto solidly blocked

the Large Rock Ant's charge.

"Mm-mmm!"

"Screeech!"

Olto kept the predator from moving forward with his childlike form. Moreover, he was actually forcing the predator back. *Olto, you're so small but dependable!*

"Fau! Now! Use Earth Spirit Awakening!"

"Aye!" Fau exclaimed. A light enveloped her body. Drimo's Dragon Blood Awakening skill transformed him into a dragon, so I wondered what Earth Spirit Awakening would do. Would she transform into a gnome? Or something else?

As I watched in anticipation, the light settled down to reveal Fau standing there looking thoroughly changed. She hadn't turned into an entirely different being like Drimo did when using his skill, though. Her silhouette was still basically the same.

She still had her four wings, two on either side of her back, red hair, and a lute in her hands. But her size had changed. She'd grown to around the same size Reflet had been when I first met her. Her outfit was pretty different too. It was still blue, but she was now wearing a more grown-up-looking summer dress with spots of gold.

"Fau?"

"Aye!"

*That's her all right.* Even though she'd grown, she was still Fau on the inside. She was even doing her signature pose—throwing her arms up and smiling.





But—did she not realize how much she’d grown?

“W-Wait, don’t do that!”

“Aye?”

“You can’t do that! You can’t sit on my shoulder when you’re this size!”

*You’ll slide right off!*

“At least sit on *both* my shoulders!”

“Aye...”

*Sulking about it won’t change anything...* Fau was even bigger than Eine right now. She couldn’t fit on my shoulder. And she *definitely* couldn’t sit on top of my head.

“More importantly, the skill’s effect is going to wear off! Hurry up and use it!”

“Aye-aye!”

*That was close.* She had been comically close to wasting one round of the precious Awakening skill.

While Fau herself hadn’t changed, her new Awakening skill was tremendous in many ways.

“Aye-aye-aaaye!”

“Th-Those are huge!”

“Aye!”

Fau thrust her palms forward, and two enormous, shining, golden magic circles appeared in the air in front of the Large Rock Ant. In the middle of each circle was a hexagram encircled by a ring, the outside of which was inscribed with indecipherable characters resembling Sanskrit. Around that were even more designs. The circles looked just like what you’d imagine magic circles to look like. I had no idea what the characters said, but I knew something cool was about to happen! *Man, I can’t wait!*

Massive rocks shot out from the magic circles. They had to be over five meters in diameter—way bigger than me. They looked shockingly powerful as

they flew out at superhigh speeds.

“Ack!” I couldn’t help but shout.

The two giant rocks zoomed towards the Large Rock Ant, then hit it with full force. *Jeez*. I was watching from a spot a little farther away, but it was still an astonishing sight. It was more violent than a car crash. Would we eventually run into enemies that could attack with that amount of force? I was *not* looking forward to that.

Fau’s attack didn’t just look menacing, it also packed a powerful punch and sent the predator’s giant body flying way back. A giant monster like that wouldn’t go flying with just any run-of-the-mill attack. Only something with substantial destructive power could make something that big soar almost ten meters and flip it upside down.

The move also dealt way more damage than I imagined—over half the Large Rock Ant’s HP. I would have had to cast several water magic spells to do the same thing, even though water magic was its weakness.

A super powerful earth magic attack—that was Earth Spirit Awakening’s true nature.

By the time I turned around, Fau had already returned to her original form. She was her regular, tiny fairy self.

“Aye?”

Drimo was the same way. The short transformation time must be a common trait among Awakening skills.

“All right, let’s finish this thing!”

“Aye-aye!”

“Kee-hee!”

“Tri-triii!”

My monsters jumped enthusiastically into attacking the predator. The Large Rock Ant didn’t counterattack at all, so it must have been stunned. In the end, Drimo didn’t even have to use his Awakening skill—our all-out attack was enough for us to cinch our victory. This enemy wasn’t a match for us anymore.

The items it dropped were nothing to write home about either. I'd been internally hoping for an emblem, but no dice.

"Anyway, Awakening skills are something else. The only downside is only being able to use it once a day."

"Aye."

"Squeak."

I was all of a sudden more excited to use the Awakening Incubator. If my guess was right, whatever monster was incubated inside there would be born already equipped with an Awakening skill.

"I'll head back to the farm and see if I can upgrade the Awakening Incubator."

Maybe I could use it as a base to make a fighting skill awakening incubator with a fire attribute or something.

Despite my wishful thinking, it seemed to be impossible. I wasn't able to select the incubator as a target with my Alchemy. Evidently, it was already a finished product. I suspected that fusing Tamed Monster's Awakening with an incubator resulted in an Awakening Incubator. I had used Tamed Monster's Awakening right away since I was so excited to try it, but maybe I should have experimented with it a bit more...

"Hmm, maybe Sawyer would have better luck?"

Someone with a higher Alchemy level than me might get a different result. I checked my friend list and saw that Sawyer was online, so I contacted him right away. Once he responded he was free, I decided to head over to him.

He was in Zone Five today. I found him immediately after teleporting there and making my way to the square. Sawyer's stall was the only one that didn't have a line of people in front of it. *Why's that? I'm pretty sure he's got interesting things for sale, like sundries and scrolls...*

"Hey there, Sawyer."

"Oh, hello, Yuto. Thanks for contacting me."

"I should be the one thanking you."



“I’m getting something out of this too, since I’ll be getting to see something out of the ordinary. Well? What’s this incubator you won at the auction like?”

I had already explained the situation to him, so we cut right to the chase.

“Here it is. What do you think? It doesn’t look like I can fuse it with anything.”

“Hmm, give me a moment, I’ll take a look.”

“Please do.”

After I placed the Awakening Incubator in front of Sawyer, I took a look at his stall along with the monsters I had brought with me. Fau was on my right shoulder, Rick was on my left, and Perca was at my feet. Everyone else was probably playing on the playset right about now.

“He’s really changed up his product line, huh?”

“Chirp.”

Sawyer had completely revamped the goods he was selling. It was a general store no longer. Now, Sawyer’s stall sold spellbooks—twenty spellbooks were on neat display. He was a proper spellbook vendor now.

The leather covers were made to look antique, and the metal rivets and fittings shone dully, giving them a dignified look. They looked very cool and eye-catching, but I could see why they might not sell.

Spellbooks didn’t have bad abilities. Like staves, they could be used as a magic conduit, and although they could only cast one registered spell at a time, the spell didn’t require any chanting to activate. On the other hand, the power levels of the registered spells were reduced by half, and continuous use would erode the book’s durability. If that was all, people would probably use them, but the biggest roadblock was having the Spellbook skill. In order to learn Spellbook, several other prerequisite skills were needed as well as nearly thirty bonus points.

There was a high chance things would change in the future, but right now, it didn’t seem like many people would be using them. As for me, while I was curious, I was lacking that final decisive push to buy one.

“I see you’ve started selling spellbooks, Sawyer.”

“Yes, I have. They aren’t selling very well, but I think this is the best way to get spellbooks out there.”

“Are people buying them at all?”

“...A-Aha ha ha. Well, you know, let’s just say I have the occasional customer here and there.”

The path to circulating spellbooks seemed considerably rough.

Several minutes passed as we exchanged some small talk while I admired Sawyer’s wares.

“Okay, I’ll give this back to you now,” Sawyer said, handing me back the Awakening Incubator with a disappointed look on his face.

“Thanks for trying.”

“It was no problem. I had fun.”

In the end, Sawyer wasn’t able to upgrade the Awakening Incubator either. I supposed I would have to accept that there was no way to tinker with it further.

“Are you interested in using spellbooks, Yuto?”

“Hmm, I am, but I’m not sure about using my bonus points for that.”

“That does seem to be a common problem.”

Before getting the Spellbook skill, I would have to raise the skills Transcription, Decipher, and Alchemy to a certain level. To be more precise, I would need Transcription, Decipher, Alchemy, and two types of magic. Then, as I recalled, I would also need one type of Knowledge skill. Magic and Knowledge skills weren’t a problem for me, but I would have to level up my Alchemy skill *and* learn Transcription and Decipher.

And on top of *that*, if you wanted to make grimoires yourself, one needed to learn Leather and Concoct skills in addition to Spellbook. It would take me time and bonus points to level all those skills up. Sawyer, who had found the Spellbook skill on his own, was seriously amazing. It was a true testament to his persistence.

But I was interested in spellbooks, so maybe I should go ahead and try getting

Transcription and Decipher. It was better than having to rush to get them if I ever needed a spellbook someday.

I told Sawyer as much, and he started raving about how great spellbooks were. He looked genuinely happy to talk about them. At this point, I had a feeling Sawyer would get mad if I didn't raise my skill levels.

"If you know anyone interested in grimoires, please send them my way."

"I will."

If Sawyer gave a detailed explanation along with the spellbooks, I was sure he'd get a decent number of customers. He was a young elf boy, after all. He surely had some fans. Not that Sawyer was looking for people like that, but rather like-minded individuals who were actually interested in grimoires.

After parting ways with Sawyer, I started making my way back home.

"Tomorrow I'll go to the Magical Beasts Guild to buy an egg for the Awakening Incubator."

The more expensive eggs would run me hundreds of thousands of gold, but that posed no problem for me. When it came to money, I had plenty! *Yeah, I like the sound of that.*

Plus, the eggs sold at the Magical Beasts Guild were generally provided by players, which meant they definitely had parents. That had been true in Bear Bear's case too. Although, it was true that there was a high possibility eggs obtained as rewards and from events also had hidden parental data, so those might also be able to get Awakening skills.

"What's our team missing?"

"Mm?"

"For tanks, we have Olto, Drimo, and Himka. For our offensive attackers, we have Drimo and Bear Bear."

"Squeak."

For magic attackers, we had me, Sakura, Fau, and Lilith. Our healers were Fau and Reflet. Fau covered buffs, and Lilith handled debuffs. Perca could fight underwater, and Eine could fight in the air. We also had crafting skills covered.

Everyone could fulfill several roles, so we were actually well-rounded when it came to fighting power.

I was puzzling over what kind of monster egg to get as I arrived back home, where I ran into something shocking.

“What? Is that...an egg?”

“Tra-la!”

“Kee-hee!”

To my shock, on the ground in front of the veranda was a round, black object. I appraised it and found out it was an egg born between Eine and Lilith.

*I can't believe they made an egg right when I wanted one... Talk about good timing.* I was so flabbergasted, I stood frozen there for several seconds.

“Wait, hold on! Is this for real?!”

“Tra-la-la!”

“Kee-hee-hee!”

The two of them certainly got along—they could both fly, and I often saw them playing tag in the air. But I never would have thought that they'd be able to make an egg together, since I personally considered them both to be girls.

I had been under the assumption that monsters needed to be of the opposite gender to produce an egg together, since so far my monsters who'd made eggs together were Olto and Sakura, and Rick and Fau. But gender must not have mattered as long as the two monsters were compatible. Eggs were made by combining magical energies, anyway.

“Perfect timing, you two!”

“Tra-la-la!”

“Kee-hee!”

Eine and Lilith cheerfully high-fived each other.

“Okay, no time to waste. I'll put this egg in the incubator.”

I took out the Awakening Incubator and placed it on the veranda. This way,

everyone could keep a watch over the egg, and we'd know immediately when it started hatching.

"Hey, give me a hand with this."

"Tra-la!"

"Kee-hee!"

Eine and Lilith saluted me and worked together to pick up the egg. Then, they gingerly carried it over to me.

"Now, if you'd do the honors."

"Tra-la-la-laaa!"

"Kee-hee-heee!"

I opened the lid of the incubator, and the pair placed the egg inside. Even though they were both highly excitable, their movements were gentle.

"All right, now we just have to wait for the egg to hatch. I wonder what it'll be?"

"Tra-la."

"Kee-hee."

Eine and Lilith had their eyes glued on the egg inside the Awakening Incubator. That seemed to have piqued the interest of my other monsters who were on the playset—they came over too. Before I knew it, a large crowd had formed, jostling against each other to see. Everyone was here, monsters, mascots, and yokai alike. I almost wondered if whatever was inside would have trouble hatching under those intense stares.

"Welp, the incubator's all set now."

There were just a few other things I wanted to try out before logging off.

"I've got the ingredients I need to make more fertilizer and plant booster."

I was referring to the enchanted fertilizer and plant booster that I had made with the recipe I'd gotten the other day. I had previously used them under Olto's directions, but there were other crops I was interested in trying them on. I had gathered the ingredients I needed at the auction and elsewhere, so I was



able to make fertilizer and plant booster of all four elements.

And that wasn't all. I was even able to make the sanctified fertilizer I hadn't been able to make last time. I had already made the plant booster, so now I had a complete set of holy-type fertilizer and plant booster.

"I can't believe I can use scraps for this."

When I went to see Shuella, the coquettish lolita tailor, at her shop, she gave me some leather and other leftover materials she ended up with when creating equipment. She could apparently use them to make small accessories, but she'd given them to me for free since they could be used for Alchemy too. She'd told me it was a thank-you for helping her turn a profit with the Japanese clothes, but why was she thanking me in the first place? I had just purchased clothing that she'd made, after all. In fact, she'd actually given me a bunch of clothes for free, and I assumed she'd been in the negative.

Maybe the publicity I gave had actually been effective? My monsters were adorable, so that was only to be expected! At the very least, it seemed like she had recouped enough to not be in the red.

Among the scraps she'd given me was scrap cloth that was material from a holy-type insect. It had probably been made from the thread of a holy spider or something. Either way, now I had what I needed to experiment!

"But first I need to check with Olto if he'll let me use it."

This was my farm, but it also wasn't. Before experimenting with something, I needed to get permission from everyone who looked after the farm. Not long ago, Bear Bear got super mad at me for using the Engraving skill on their beehive, and they made me sit in the seiza position as punishment. Ever since then, I'd been making sure not to do anything without asking.

"Mm-mm?"

"I want to use all these fertilizers and plant boosters. Is that okay?"

"Mm!"

Olto formed a circle with this pointer finger and thumb, giving me the OK. He also seemed to be interested in accompanying me. He wasn't just tagging along

to make sure I didn't do anything weird, was he?

"Mm?"

"Well, not that I mind if you do. First place I want to test is *here!*"

I walked in front of the hydroponic pool, where I was growing the aquatic plants called air plants. They were water-type plants, but they produced air. I wanted to try using the aerated fertilizer and plant booster on them, with the thought that these plants were related to the air element.

"What do you think, Olto?"

"Mmm?"

Apparently Olto didn't know what to expect from it either.

"It won't do anything bad to the plants, will it?"

"Mm."

Olto shook his head forcefully. Even if the fertilizer and plant booster didn't produce an elemental effect, then maybe it would at least have an effect as regular fertilizer. If so, there was no harm in trying it.

"Okay, next is this."

"Mm."

I brought Olto over to the aeroponic fence. Here, I wanted to use the earthen fertilizer and plant booster.

"I'm curious to see what'll happen if I use these earth-type items on air-type plants."

Like water and fire, air and earth were considered opposites, so to speak, so I wondered if combining them would have some unexpected result.

"Any idea about this?"

"Mm."

I had been under the impression he knew everything when it came to farming, but apparently there were some things that were beyond even Olto's understanding. I guess that made sense. If he knew *everything*, then *everyone*

would have a gnome.

“And now, I’m going to use these here.”

“Mmm?”

“That’s right. It’s the same logic as with the aeroponic fence.”

My plan was to use the hydrated fertilizer on a portion of the firestarter plants. I had just used the inflamed fertilizer and plant booster on some of these plants the other day. Instead of interfering with those, my idea was to use the opposite element fertilizer and plant booster on firestarter plants that hadn’t had anything applied to them yet.

After that, I moved on to a vegetable patch. The crops I was aiming for were the most distinctive in my entire farm. What I wanted to experiment on were the giant pumpkins with holes carved in to make a face. They looked like jack-o’-lanterns that you’d see around Halloween time.

“These pumpkins have flames inside them.”

I peered into a lantern pumpkin at the small, flickering flame inside. The light it gave off was bright enough to make these pumpkins visible even from afar at night. But the flame wasn’t hot. Even when I stuck my finger in to check, I didn’t take any damage. I wasn’t sure if it was an illusion or just a simple special effect, but it didn’t seem like a regular flame. When I cut a pumpkin to cook it, the flame immediately went out. Still, it was an indisputable fact that it was fire, hence why I wanted to use the inflamed fertilizer and plant booster on it.

“Is it okay to use them on these too?”

“Mmm-mm? Mm-mm!”

Olto pondered for a moment, but then quickly smiled and gave me a thumbs-up.

“So you’re not sure either, but you’re telling me to go ahead and try?”

“Mmm!”

With Olto’s green light, I applied the fertilizer and plant booster to the pumpkins.

“Oh, I still have to use the holy-type ones.”

“Mm-mm!”

“What’s up?”

“Mmm!”

Olto started tugging on me hard. *Judging by this reaction, he probably—*

“You know where I should use this fertilizer and plant booster?”

“Mm-mmm!”

I wanted to do my own experimenting, but this was a valuable item, so I decided to follow Olto. He brought me over to a regular medicinal herb patch.

“Huh? Here?”

“Mm.”

I had thought he wanted me to use it on the Sacred Tree, so this was a bit of a letdown. But when it came to farms, Olto was never wrong.

“Okay. I’ll use them here.”

“Mm!”

And with that, I had applied the five different fertilizers and plant boosters to five different crops. I hoped that at least one of them resulted in some interesting change.



Following a long day of auctions, testing out Fau’s Awakening skill, the arrival of a new egg, and various other things, my monsters and I headed for Red Town in Zone Nine.

“All right, today we’re going to make it to Zone Ten! Just watch!”

“Mm-mm!”

My goal was to defeat the Zone Nine field boss and reach Zone Ten. At yesterday’s auction, the devs had announced the opening of a new establishment in Zone Ten. There were a lot of quest chains there too, so I figured it was about time for me to get my butt over there.

My ultimate destination was the large plaza in Red Town. The place was teeming with stalls where I could stock up on the items I needed to get through the field, which was crawling with fire-type monsters. After that I would have to defeat the boss, and once I was in Zone Ten, I still had to make it all the way to a safety zone.

I hadn't prepared enough when I first arrived in Zone Nine and had suffered as a result, so this time I wanted to make sure I was lacking for nothing.

"This place is really bustling."

"Mm-mm."

Droves of players—at least ten thousand of them—were crowded around the countless stalls that were crammed together in the large plaza of Red Town. All these people must have rushed here all at once with the same idea I had.

Town squares and the like expanded to fit the number of players present, but at this point I had to assume that this plaza was even bigger than the town itself. From where I was, I couldn't even see the perimeter of the plaza.

"Let's look for coolants and bombs first."

"Can I interest you in our shop, then?"

"Huh?" I said in slight surprise. I had been expecting a response from Olto, but when a human voice responded, I turned around to see a Cat-Human hybrid giving me a mischievous smirk.

As luck would have it, it was Alyssa.

"So you're stationed in this plaza today?" I asked.

"Well, you know! Everyone's in Zone Nine right now, right? And I chose Red Town because... Well, it was just on a whim, I guess."

"Really? So, um, are you selling items to beat the bosses too?"

"You bet! Want to come on over to our shop? I'll throw in something extra too."

"O-Okay, sure."

It must have been my world-weary cynicism that made me think Alyssa's deal



sounded a little suspicious. I was reminded of the time I first met her.

I followed Alyssa to the Quick-Eared Cats' stall. On our way there, Alyssa brought up the recent video that had just been released.

"Did you watch the official video?"

"The official video? They made an official video for the auction?"

I could understand making an official video for a large-scale raid boss fight, but the auction? I felt like there was a privacy issue with that, so it'd be hard for them to show who bought what items...

"The auction was only a small part of it. The second half was a movie that was basically an announcement of the next event."

"Ah, gotcha."

So the devs had released the video primarily to serve as an announcement? This hadn't occurred often in LJO, but it was a frequent occurrence in other games.

We walked and chatted, eventually arriving at the spot where the Quick-Eared Cats' merchants had set up a line of shops. They were selling a variety of items, from general goods, offensive items, and weapons. However, Alyssa took me to a stall that was completely devoid of products. Instead, it was set up like an office, with a counter and chairs.

I was familiar with this setup—it was a shop for buying and selling information. Alyssa tapped some settings on her window that silenced the surrounding noise. I assumed no one could hear us talk either.

"Now then..." she started.

"Huh? What's going on?"

"Again with that innocent look!"

I felt like Alyssa was giving me a reproachful look, but why? *Did I do something?*

"First, can you watch the video I was talking about earlier?"

"What? Right here?"

“Yup. It’s short, so it won’t take you long to watch. I want to ask what you think about it.”

“Uh, okay. I don’t really mind...”

The outstanding Quick-Eared Cats wanted to know my opinion on the video? Why? Surely they knew far greater individuals than myself, like people on the verification team or the front liners.

I decided to go ahead and do what Alyssa asked and watched the newest official video. It was only four minutes long, but it became clear why she’d asked me to watch it halfway through. You see, this video wasn’t exactly irrelevant to me.

The first half of the video gave a view of the auction. The second half in question showed a perplexing, sinister scheme. A man who looked like a noble and his subordinate were conversing in a room that looked like something horrific had happened in it. The room was dark, filthy, and filled with buzzing flies. Were those two men even human? They looked more like demons or some other evil creature. This movie must have been announcing the start of a new demon-related event.

The problem was a certain familiar item that made an appearance in the movie.

“Wait, what? Why was the Spirit’s Fruit there?”

The Spirit’s Fruit, which I had submitted to the auction, was unmistakably present in the video. I hadn’t known who won it, but I couldn’t believe it had actually been an NPC. And a clear villain at that. What did this mean? Did the fruit have the power to evolve a demon? And that line about the power of the divine’s spirit, what was that about?

“Now do you see why I wanted to hear what you thought about this video?”

“I do. But I have no idea what this means either.”

“Anything would help. You don’t have any ideas?”

“Hmm...”

It was the first Spirit’s Fruit that Olea had produced, but they would keep

producing Spirit's Fruits from here on, so it wasn't like it was a super rare fruit or anything.

"The bit about the fruit getting the attention of lots of people, maybe that's the more important part?"

"So you think so too, huh...?"

I wondered if maybe Alyssa hadn't been expecting to actually get important information from me, but had decided to just go ahead and ask me anyway since the fruit had been my auction item. But she looked strangely pensive.

"S-Something wrong?"

"No, but actually, some players who have seen this video have been saying that it's hinting at being able to become a demon through race reincarnation."

"Ahh, I see."

I could see that. The subordinate was a human, but there was mention of him becoming the same being as his master. Based on certain conversations with important NPCs, people were saying that there existed a feature to change into another race—race reincarnation. However, since the system still hadn't been discovered, no one knew if demons would be included in that.

"That's why there's also been some speculation that the Spirit's Fruit is a key item for changing races."

"Huh? Come on, that's impossible."

I decided to check the Spirit's Fruit's information that I had screenshotted to make sure there wasn't anything I missed.

Name: Spirit's Fruit

Rarity: 6 / Quality: 5★

Effect: Recovers 10% of hunger status when consumed.  
Raises resistance to magic spells for one hour. Five-minute cooldown time.

The effects were pretty great, but nothing was mentioned about changing into another race. And anyway, I had already sold Alyssa the information about the Spirit's Fruit.

"Am I attracting bad attention from this?"

If people thought I was hiding information about changing races or carrying around a Spirit's Fruit in secret so I alone could change races, that would definitely not be good! I wasn't going to be chased around by an angry mob again, was I?

"No, I don't think anyone's going to come after you, but there might be a lot of people who want to ask you about this."

"Guh..."

"Hmm. Right, is it okay if we spread around the information about the Spirit's Fruit? I think that's the best way to ensure no one's suspicious about you."

"Yes, please! I'll do anything!" I begged, slamming my palms on the counter and leaning forwards. Alyssa grinned.

*Oops, did I go too far saying I'd do anything? Am I going to have to pay with my body or something?*

"Why are you looking at me like you're some damsel in distress? All I want is for you to sell me some information. I'll even pay fairly."

"Information?"

"Last night. The Northern Plains."

"Ah, that."

Surprisingly, Alyssa had already found out about Fau's Awakening skill. Now that I thought about it, it had been a pretty flashy fight, so people must have been watching. It likely generated some conversation on the forums or something. Deducing the truth of the matter from such scant information... The Quick-Eared Cats weren't called quick for nothing!

"I'd love to hear about it in more detail. Do you mind?"

"I was planning on selling that information soon anyway, so sure. I was testing

out Fau's Awakening skill."

"Awakening? Is that the same type of skill as Drimo's Dragon Blood Awakening? Hmm, so that means the Tamed Monster's Awakening item lets a monster learn an Awakening skill?"

*Sh-She's as sharp as ever.* Leave it to Alyssa to figure all that out from just a few words! She knew the auction items like the back of her hand!

"Y-You got it. So, I used that to teach Fau Earth Spirit Awakening, which I was testing on the plains."

"I heard some information about you having a new monster too, though... Was that Fau's transformed state?"

"Probably. Awakening skills seem to make monsters transform and boost their stats."

I explained everything to Alyssa, starting from when I used the Awakening item. I also told her about how Awakening skills inherited characteristics from the monster's parents, and about the possibility that using an Awakening Incubator would grant an Awakening skill to the monster that hatched from it.

"I look forward to hearing about that too. Oh, and I'm pretty sure you got a lot of other things from the auction too. What are those items like?"

"Right, about those—"

I had sold the Cats information about my title right after the auction, but at the time, I still hadn't known everything about the items I had bought. She must have been curious about them.

Alyssa was such a good listener that I ended up spilling everything about the auction. Not that I was planning on hiding anything. Once she was done listening to me speak, Alyssa nodded to herself as she organized the information in her head.

"Could you spread this information to clear up the misunderstanding people have about the Spirit's Fruit?" I asked.

"That's all we could ask for and more! Oh and, as a sort of consultation fee, I have some information I'd like to recommend for you. How about we make it



even that way? I swear it'll be worth it for you."

"Oho? Information especially recommended by you?"

That sounded interesting. I could tell it was some great information by the confident look on Alyssa's face. It seemed like a good idea to take her up on it.

"Okay. I'm good with that."

"Hee hee, great. First is this."

Alyssa showed me a screenshot of someone's stats that had a column labeled "School Techniques." Listed under that was something called "School Technique: Tamed Monster's Rampage."

"Wh-Whoa! Is that a school technique for command classes?"

"There's an NPC Tamer in Zone Ten who teaches you that if you become their pupil."

"Oh, so there are school techniques for different job classes?"

"That's right. One of the things I want to tell you is how to learn this school technique. How about it?"

"Definitely! Please tell me!"

*Of course I want to learn what sounds like a secret technique for Tamers!*  
However, Alyssa was very good at keeping me in suspense.

"Well, all in due time. I'll give you more details after I tell you about the other information I have. The next thing I want to share is this!" Alyssa exclaimed as she pulled something out of her inventory.

"Personally, I think this is much more major than the school technique," she explained.

Alyssa presented before me two types of plants. That self-assured look on her face led me to think they were very rare items. After appraising the plants, I found out they were called Purified Grass and Desert Grass. I had never seen either of them before.

"Don't you want to know how to make *these*?"

"They can be made? They must be pretty useful if you're calling them major."

They both just looked like grasses that were slightly off in color, but if Alyssa was recommending them, they surely had some key uses.

“They can be used for many, many things. From alchemy, to making potions, to blacksmithing and farming.”

“Farming, you say?”

“Both can change the state of a field. The purified grass can give soil a holy-type attribute, and the desert grass can turn a field into sand. Olto might know a few other uses for them too, don’t you think?”

“Hmm yeah, that does sound interesting.”

Olto could certainly put those to good use. I definitely wanted to know how to grow them.

Alyssa still had more information to present.

“And finally, this!”

Alyssa took out something that looked like white noodles from her inventory. Hold on, they actually *were* noodles.

“Whoa! Don’t tell me, is that somen?”

“Sure is. You bought the bamboo for nagashi somen at the auction, right? I figured you’d be looking for this.”

“Nothing gets past you!”

“I know, right?” Alyssa said, puffing out her chest. She kind of reminded me of my monsters when she did that. Cute and silly. She was supposed to be a capable information broker and sharp as a tack, so for some reason, this felt a little beneath her. I wasn’t going to say that out loud, though.

“Hm, you were thinking something rude just now, weren’t you?”

“N-No, of course I wasn’t!”

“Hmm...”

*H-How’d she know?! Does women’s secret intuition work in the game too?! She’s giving me such an intense stare!*

“Well, whatever.”

“Phew.”

*Looks like I’m off the hook.*

Alyssa continued. “Information about these four things in exchange for your information—do we have a deal?”

“I feel like I’m getting too much out of this.”

The information about how to acquire the school technique alone already seemed worth more than my information... Plus, the Cats were even going to spread the information about the Spirit’s Fruit for me.

“I have my reasons. I’ll tell you about it later. More importantly, do you have any other information to sell me?”

“Hmm, let me think...”

“I wouldn’t put it past you to do something incredible in just half a day, after all.”

I appreciated her having such high hopes in me, but the only things I had done the day before were set up the items I had won at the auction and test out Earth Spirit Awakening.

*Oh wait. I did* have something else to share.

“Oh yeah, now that you mention it, I got an egg. It’s Eine and Lilith’s.”

“Wow, so Lilith’s become a parent, huh? I am interested in that, since Lilith is currently the only confirmed demon-type monster. But it’s still just an egg right now. That won’t be worth much.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

I didn’t know what would hatch from the egg, so of course it wasn’t information that would be in high demand. Alyssa’s lukewarm reaction was only to be expected.

“But definitely come back to sell us info once it hatches.”

“Let me think if I have anything else... Oh, I applied more fertilizer and plant booster on my farm. But I don’t know the results of that yet either.”

If some special change had occurred already, that might've changed things, but I doubted I'd be able to sell information just about me using fertilizer and plant booster on my farm.

Alyssa's expression, however, suddenly turned serious. Did something about that catch her attention?

"Yuto, do you mean you applied the enchanted fertilizer and enchanted plant booster?"

"Yes, the elemental versions of them. I also made the holy-type versions and used those too. But nothing's happened yet, so I'm not sure what effects they'll have."

"I-I see... Could you tell me a little more? Like, what you used them on and such?"

"Sure thing."

At Alyssa's request, I told her all the details about the fertilizer and plant booster I used. As I spoke, she started acting strange and her eyes started shifting about.

"Is something wrong?"

"Urk. I-I underestimated you..."

After some prodding on my part, I found out that the information on how to grow Purified Grass and Desert Grass would be worth nothing now.

Purified Grass could be grown by using sanctified fertilizer and plant booster on medicinal herbs. Desert Grass could be grown by using earthen fertilizer and plant booster on gale plants. The Quick-Eared Cats had apparently used a special potion to find that out quickly. The potion resulted in lower quality crops in exchange for faster growth, which was how they were able to find out the effects of those fertilizers and plant boosters in so little time. As for me, I had Olto, so we would be able to harvest some high-quality plants. I was looking forward to it. However, this presented a problem for the conditions of our exchange.

"Um, how should we do this? I know what the crops will turn into now, so I

don't mind if you consider that me buying the information."

As I had thought before, I already felt like I was getting more than enough, considering what she was going to do with the Spirit's Fruit information for me. Plus I was getting the information on the school technique. But Alyssa wouldn't have it.

"No way! I'm the one who pushed this information on you that you would've found out in a few days anyway!"

I guess her informant's pride wasn't going to allow compromise here.

"Besides, I was going to tell you this after I told you how to get school techniques, but I don't think learning Tamed Monster's Rampage is a good move for you."

"Why not?"

"That technique boosts your tamed monsters' physical attack power and also puts them in a berserk state. But I can't see it having much of an effect on your party since you don't have many physical attackers."

"Fair enough."

"So I don't think that information is really worth that much to you as it is."

The reason Alyssa presented that information to me despite that was because it was still important information for Tamers, and that information could be a stepping stone to find another school technique.

"Yuto," she said seriously. "You're going to Zone Ten from here, right?"

"Yes. That's why I came here in the first place, to prepare for that."

"Then, how about you let us support you?"

Amazingly, she was offering to help me get through Zone Nine. Though to be honest, I got the feeling the Quick-Eared Cats just wanted to bring me to Red City in Zone Ten.

"We'll provide all the necessary items for the journey."

"I can't accept that, it's way too much. It'd take so much time and money on your part."

“It’s really not a big deal. We get something out of accompanying you too. In fact, this is probably the best way to do risk management...”

“Huh?”

“A-Anyway, what do you think?”

I didn’t really have a choice to turn this down, did I? I had nothing to lose.

An hour later, we departed from Red Town and reached the boss in Eastern Zone Nine. The journey had been surprisingly quick. I did do some fighting myself, but the Quick-Eared Cats team that was accompanying me was super strong. Alyssa had changed job classes from Merchant to Thief, which she said resulted in her being much weaker than top players...but she was still stronger than me.

The Quick-Eared Cats members were Alyssa, Lewin, and Carlo, who was a fellow Tamer. He was a handsome Black Cat-Human hybrid, but he was kind of an odd guy.

Carlo had with him a Night Bat, a Brown Bear, and a Lilliput. The Night Bat handled the aerial maneuvers, the Brown Bear was a vanguard, and the Lilliput was a rear guard. The first two monsters’ species names more or less described their appearance. The first was a black bat bigger than a bird of prey, and the second was the size of a real-life brown bear.

The Lilliput wasn’t as straightforward. This was my first time seeing this monster. She looked like a cute dwarf about Eine’s height, but her proportions were more adultlike. Instead of looking like a child, she looked more like a shrunken adult.

She wore a traditional brown poncho with red and blue designs, a green scarf, and she wielded a tiny bow. Her outfit reminded me a bit of Fau’s initial getup, but that was only to be expected. Lilliputs evolved from Pixies, after all. More specifically, they evolved from Korpokkurs, which evolved from Pixies. And they were surprisingly talented.

First was her capabilities as a support. She had Potion skills, which allowed her to boost the effect of potions, and even though she didn’t have a musical instrument, she still had the Singing skill, and so could use buffs. She was also



very skilled at attacking and could shoot elemental arrows. If utilized well, they could even be a heavy damage dealer.

“Your Lilliput is awesome.”

“Isn’t she?”

In the fight we had just finished, the Lilliput had dealt incredible damage with just a tiny arrow. She must have launched an arrow with the enemy’s elemental weakness.

“Aye.”

“She sounds like Fau too.”

“Aye-aye.”

The difference lay in their excitement levels, though that probably wasn’t due to their different races, but their personalities. Carlo’s Lilliput, Maruko, seemed very apathetic. Kind of gloomy, but still cute.

“Well, well, we’re finally at the boss. Are you ready, Yuto?”

“Yes. My job’s easy, anyway. But are you sure that’s all I need to do?”

“Of course. I’m the one who invited you, after all.”

The plan was very simple. Lewin and Carlo would stay in front to lure the boss, while I would throw freezing bombs from the back. Lewin had focused his efforts on getting a provocation skill, so even while I attacked from the rear guard, he would be able to keep drawing the boss’s attacks to himself.

I was told that all I needed to do was heal and throw bombs, but was that really okay? The Quick-Eared Cats did say that they did this every time, though, so I guess I should just trust them.

“You guys ready too?”

“Tra-la!”

“Kee-hee!”

I wasn’t sure if it was because she was a parent now, but even Eine was full of motivation. My current party was Eine, Lilith, Reflet, Perca, Himka, and Drimo. Since we had to cross through the fire-elemental field from Red Town to the

boss, I had composed our party of monsters who'd be able to fight there. I really wished I could have brought Olea with me to level them up, but tree nymphs were weak to fire. They'd just be turned into a ball of flames.

"Be extra careful handling these bombs, okay?"

"Honk!"

"Hm!"

Perca and Himka happily took the bombs. These two were both mischievous types, so seeing them so hyped up actually made me nervous.

"Drimo, I'm counting on you."

"Squeak."

"Hum-hum!"

"No need to get upset, Reflet. I'm counting on you too."

"Hum."

Reflet nodded like she was saying *Glad you understand*. Drimo really was the only one I could count on for emotional support.

"Hum?"

"I-It's nothing! D-Do your best!"

"Humm!"

While I had been chatting with my monsters, Alyssa and the others had finished their preparations.

"All right, let's charge!"

The Zone Nine boss lay beyond a giant gate, which distinguished it from other field bosses. With Lewin in the lead, we passed under the red-painted gate, which looked a lot like a torii gate, and came out into a clearing fifty meters in diameter. Numerous red balls of fire floated above us, and flames occasionally burst out from the ground. The effect was fantastical yet frightening; it was obvious the devs really went all out making this field.

This clearing was pretty wide, but the field had actually been ten times this

size when players were fighting the raid boss to unlock the zone. Apparently there had been raid boss battles to unlock Zones Nine and Ten, and the boss we were about to fight now was the weakened version of that raid boss. When a zone was unlocked through a raid boss battle, after the boss's initial defeat, players could choose to fight it in a raid or as a party. Being given that option was honestly a godsend for loners who couldn't assemble a raid party.

"Whoa, it's gigantic... That's the *smaller* version?"

"It was three times that size when it was a raid boss."

"Yikes."

Standing imposingly in the center of the field was a massive four-legged beast. It looked a bit like a bright-red weasel, but it had long forelegs and a tail that was long and slender like a feline's. The boss's name was the Great Flame Beast. It was a powerful opponent that scattered flames as it sprinted about with predator-like agility.

The Great Flame Beast noticed our presence, and we were enclosed in a boss wall.

"Earplugs, everyone!"

"R-Right!"

"Squeak squeak!"

At Alyssa's prompting, we equipped the earplugs we'd brought with us. Naturally, since this was a game, even the tiny Lilliput and Lewin, who was wearing a helmet that covered his ears, were able to equip them with no problem.

Immediately after we equipped the earplugs, the Great Flame Beast shook the field with its deafening roar.

"Grrroooooaar!"

"Kee-hee!"

"Humm!"

It was fairly intimidating, but that was it. No one was affected by it otherwise.

Normally, it would inflict paralysis, but we were fine thanks to our earplugs. In fact, Lilith and Reflet even seemed to be enjoying the vibrations. The earplugs were for onetime use, but they worked perfectly to block the boss's preemptive strike. No surprise that the Quick-Eared Cats would provide such a helpful item!

"Grrraaagh!"

"H-Here it comes! Don't get in the Cats' way!" I called out to my monsters.

"Hm!"

"Tra-la!"

"B-Bring it ooon!" I shouted as loud as I could to fire myself up. Otherwise, I would have buckled in the face of the beast's overwhelming power.

Whether I liked it or not, the foreboding battle ahead stirred up my nerves.

*Twenty minutes later...*

"Groaaar..."

"Phew, we won..."

*Man, that was a tough fight.* The Great Flame Beast was terrifying. It had a massive body larger than an elephant and kept bringing down our HP with its flame attacks. Not to mention the AoE attacks it would throw at us periodically. I couldn't even keep track of how many times I had nearly died. It was truly a powerful foe.

"You all did great too."

"Mm!"

I had switched up my monsters during the fight for leveling purposes, so my current lineup was entirely different from the one I had started the battle with. The only ones I hadn't summoned in were Sakura and Olea, since I couldn't very well put tree nymphs up against so many flame attacks.

While I was celebrating our win with my monsters, I overheard the Cats' conversation.

"That was a piece of cake!" Alyssa exclaimed.

“Sure was,” Lewin agreed. “We knew all its moves already, so that was nothin’.”

“With all the items we invested into this, there was no way that fight was going to be hard,” Carlo added.

*Whaaat? Seriously? They didn’t think they were going to die? I-It was a piece of cake?*

“Thanks for your hard work, Yuto. Not that the enemy was very hard at all!”

“A-Aha ha ha. You’re right about that! That was a breeze! A-All I did was use items you gave me, though!”

“And you threw them brilliantly!”

I guess I had no chance of pulling my weight on the front line if I couldn’t say that fight was easy for me... *Front liners are insane! Are we really even the same species? Are we even playing the same game? Were they actually playing a fighting game or something?*

*A-Anyway.* The battle had been won, so I decided I should check the results. Everyone had leveled up, but no one had evolved. Himka and Drimo did learn new skills after reaching level 40, though.

Himka had learned Product Disassembly, which allowed him to dismantle anything he crafted himself and return it to its raw materials. It reduced the rank and the quantity of materials, though. I wondered if it would make it easier to practice?

Drimo learned Underground Exploration, which allowed him to obtain information underground. It seemed like a useful skill for mining and detecting enemies underground.

Lilith had also reached level 22, so she might evolve after three more levels.

Next, I checked my drops. Alyssa had actually requested something from me before the boss fight. She wanted me to transfer a certain rare drop I got from the boss to her. This boss dropped two rare items: the standard rare drop, Flame Oil, and the super rare drop, Flame Bone. The Quick-Eared Cats were collecting Flame Bones and so were willing to pay me a high price for one. I

wouldn't have been able to make it here without them in the first place, so I had no problem with that. For that, they let me use a super expensive item called Lucky Drop that would make it easier for me to get a rare drop.

This item increased the rate of obtaining a rare drop during a boss fight. The higher quality Lucky Drop you had, the higher that rate was increased, with high-quality versions being extremely expensive. It had become a sort of joke that they were even more expensive than the rare drop you were trying to get.

"Let's see, I got Great Flame Beast's Hide, Great Flame Beast's Claw, and... Ah, no luck."

"You didn't get a Flame Bone?"

"No. Just the hide and the claw. Oh, and a saber tooth."

"Wait, a saber *tooth*? Not a *fang*?" Alyssa said, giving me a weird look.

What was up with her? Was this a rare item too?

"No, a saber tooth," I repeated.

"Urgh..."

"Alyssa?"

What happened? Why did she just hang her head all of a sudden? *Oh no, is she mad? Did I do some—*

"WAAAAAAH! I never imagined I'd be surprise attacked here of all placeeees!" Alyssa screamed, clutching her head.

"Hwah?!" I cried, letting out a weird voice and bending backwards.

*Ah, I've seen this before.* This was her usual "acting surprised" routine she did when I went to sell information to her.

"Umm...is it rare?"

"Rare? Oh, it's rare, all right! I've never even heard of it before!"

"Really?"

*She's never heard of it before...?* That meant this was super, *super* rare! I was shocked, but Alyssa quickly recomposed herself. She wasn't subpar Alyssa



anymore, but sharp and capable Alyssa.

“No matter how rare that item may be, other parties have been grinding this boss, so it’s been defeated thousands of times already. So how’s it possible that you got one, after only beating it once?”

“Yeah, yeh’ve got a point. That’s gotta mean there’s somethin’ at work here. It doesn’t sound likely that every other party that’s gotten hold of one is keepin’ it under wraps.”

“I’ve seen this happen before,” Alyssa said.

“Well, ain’t that a coincidence. So have I. You mean the Foam Emblem, right?”

“Yeah.”

Now that they said it, this did seem like a similar situation. I had been the only one to obtain a super rare drop because an item I had boosted my chances of getting one.

“Hmm, I wonder what made that happen?” I mused aloud.

“Logically speaking, it probably has to do with your skills or equipment. Do you have anything like that that would have an effect on drops? I won’t force you to tell us if you want to keep it a secret.”

“Ha ha, don’t worry about that. I don’t have any information to hide. But let’s see... Calling Blessing is the only skill I can think of that would affect my drops.”

“That skill! That could be it!” Alyssa cried. She must have remembered it because she had been with me when I had acquired the skill.

“There’s also Olto and Mamori’s Luck. But I’m not sure if they do the same thing, even though they have the same name.”

“The Zashiki-Warashi’s Luck skill, huh? I didn’t consider that, but it could be possible.”

“There’s a chance they’re all workin’ together, rather than it just bein’ the effect of one skill.”

*Now that’s an idea.* So this could be the result of stacking several skills that raised the chances of a rare drop? That sounded like the most likely possibility.

“Either way, it’s basically impossible to verify.”

“We can’t get anywhere without Yuto helpin’ us.”

“Heeey, Yuto?”

“Y-Yes?”

Alyssa’s kittenish coaxing was too powerful for me to defy. Well, it was less kittenish and more like a stalking tiger.

“Do you think you could help us verify this?”

“Uhh, do you want me to use Lucky Drop while fighting the field bosses in the western, southern, and northern parts of Zone Nine?”

“Right on the money! Just like this time, we’ll supply all the items we’ll need to beat the bosses, and any drops you get are yours to keep! In fact, we’ll even give you our drops!”

Not only would we be defeating the bosses, but they’d even bring me all the way to the Zone Ten towns.

“I have no reason to refuse. I see no downsides for me.”

I felt like I should have been asking *them* if they were sure about this.

“Sounds like we have ourselves an agreement.”

“Thank you, Yuto!”

“It looks like we’ll be spending some more time together,” Carlo said.

“Maruko is thrilled.”

“Aye.”

“Is she really?”

Maruko the Lilliput had her eyes half closed and looked as apathetic as ever. Carlo seemed to have a good understanding of Maruko’s mood, though.

“Look, you can see the corners of her mouth are slightly raised, can’t you? She’s beaming!”

“Aye.”

*Yeah, I don’t see it.* But Maruko held Fau in the palm of her hand and they

were communicating with their respective “Aye” and “Aye!” Judging from Fau’s excitement, Maruko must have been having fun too.

“Well, okay. I appreciate your help for the next few days.”

“No problem, please leave it to us. We will assume the responsibility of escorting you to the Zone Ten towns!” Carlo declared.

We still hadn’t even made it to Red City, but apparently they decided they were going to take me to the other cities too. But first on the list was Red City. I wanted to look around since we’d made it to this point, plus there was someplace I wanted to go.

With the Quick-Eared Cats as my escorts, we left the boss area and stepped foot into Zone Ten. We had to fight some enemies on the way, but those were no sweat. Everyone besides me was strong, after all.

With the help of the Quick-Eared Cats, we safely made it to Red City.

“Whoa, this place is big.”

“It *is* the largest city that’s been found so far.”

For the past thirty minutes, Alyssa had been guiding us around to all the major establishments—the guilds, shops, squares, and crafting facilities.

The Town of Beginnings and Red Town were also big, but Red City topped both of them. This city was probably anticipated to be used by thousands of players as a strategic base in the future. Someday this place would be teeming with third-and fourth-wave players, but since there weren’t that many people here right now, the city felt needlessly spacious.

“Man, I’m glad we came here. I stocked up on a bunch of materials and even got a lot of different vegetable seeds.”

“That’s great to hear. I’m glad I gave you the tour, then!”

I was able to get my hands on some new vegetables like ruby radishes, blue lettuce, purple chrysanthemum greens, red broccoli, and amber greater burdock. I had also obtained various seasonings like black and white chili pepper.

I knew that Blanche, a foreign player, had been on the hunt for chilies, but I

guess she needed to come all the way to Zone Ten for that. She was much stronger than I was, though, so there was a chance she'd already found them a long time ago.

"Oh, and the collector's shop is over there."

"So it is!"

The number one reason I wanted to come to Red City! This shop was the place to get all sorts of valuable items. I'd been wanting to come here ever since I heard about it. The collector's shop was located in a chic building made of stylish, dark-brown wood. It had the look of an old-fashioned English corner pub, but maybe that was just my stereotypical view.

Stoked, I stepped inside. The interior was completely different from what I was expecting. There were rows of cases in the same style of the building's exterior that had various items on display—that much I had expected. But the weird thing was that we were the only ones inside. It was beyond strange that the place wasn't bustling with customers... The only explanation had to be that, like the realtor, it was the type of shop that was instanced by the team. I actually preferred it this way, since it meant I could shop in peace.

"Welcome to the Collector's Exchange Shop."

"Oh, thank you."

"Would you like a detailed explanation of this shop?"

"Y-Yes please."

The black-haired maid at the reception desk gave me a rundown of the store.

*Oh jeez, a maid.* This was my first time seeing one up close. She was an old-fashioned, long-skirted, prim and proper maid. The ruffled bonnet was also a nice touch.

"Yuto? Are you listening?" Alyssa asked.

"Huh? Oh yeah, I'm listening!"

I was lying. I was so excited by just seeing the maid that I hadn't been listening to her at all. I bowed and asked her to repeat herself. I felt the sense that both Alyssa and the maid were looking at me with exasperation. *Crap, I*

*messed up! I'm sorry! I just really like maids!* This time, I made sure to pay attention to the maid's explanation. I didn't want to lower my favorability score with her any more than I already had.

She gave the same general overview of the collector's shop that I had already heard, but she also provided some new information. Which items were able to be bought and sold here would change depending on what was in circulation, which zones had been cleared, and the progression of game events. It was also possible that the shop would stop buying certain items, and that the items for sale at the shop would also change over time.

For example, items that we could sell to the shop right now might eventually be refused down the line. That meant deciding whether to sell or hold on to rare items would require even more resolve.

"Which of my items can I sell currently?"

"Here is our catalog of items that can be bought and sold at the moment."

"Ah, that's helpful to have."

"Yes, but keep in mind that this list is not exhaustive. This catalog only contains items that have been submitted to the auction and those that over a certain number of players have in their possession."

That must mean unique items only owned by one person weren't on this list, right?

"Even if an item is not on this list, you may bring it directly here for appraisal," the maid added.

"I see."

I checked over the list and saw that emblems could be sold for a high price. My Foam Emblem specifically wasn't listed, but other emblems were. There probably wasn't that much of a difference between them. Right now, emblems could be sold here for 500,000 G, but Alyssa would buy mine for 2,000,000 G. However, I couldn't say that selling it here would definitely be a loss, since I could earn special points by selling items in this shop. And those points could be exchanged for various rare items.

I looked at what I could exchange them for and saw the lower-quality imitations of Sakura's kotatsu and Himka's tableware set, which matched what the devs had previously told me. The imitation tableware set cost ten points and the kotatsu cost forty points. The kotatsu must have been valued higher since it could be used for game progression.

The imitation of Mattsun's revival cigarettes were also on the list, in the form of revival candies. If you ate them while fighting, you could automatically revive. It sounded pretty difficult to fight while eating candy. Plus, you would revive with only 1 HP, which also made things hard. Still, it was a coveted item for solo players. For a six-candy set, it cost fifty points.

"I want these revival candies!" I exclaimed.

"Those are great, but isn't fifty points kind of expensive?" Alyssa pointed out.

It wasn't easy to earn points, after all. In my case, if I sold my emblem, I'd earn one hundred points, which I could then exchange for the candies. But considering how valuable emblems were, that probably wasn't the right choice.

Among the other items I could sell were the yokai hanging scrolls, but each was only worth 50,000 G and would earn me only five points. Moreover, aside from the Zashiki-Warashi scroll, I didn't know what effects they had. I didn't want to sell them just yet.

"Hmm, I actually don't have much to sell."

"Mr. Yuto, you seem to be in possession of an item you may sell that is not in the catalog."

"What? Which one?"

"The Great Flame Beast's Saber Tooth. That is worth 100,000 G and you will receive ten points."

"Hm, interesting."

"Don't sell it!" Alyssa exclaimed.

"I-I won't."

"You paused for a second, though."



“Y-You’re imagining things.”

*Yeah!* Unfortunately I would have to leave here today without buying or selling anything. But I knew I’d be back before long to sell something!

## Chapter Two: Squire's Forest

"All right, I'll leave the vegetables to you two."

"Mmm!"

"...♪"

After seeing the sights of Red City, I split up with Alyssa and went back to my farm. Starting tomorrow, I'd be busy traveling to the other cities and helping out with verification, so I wanted to finish planting my new seeds before the end of the day.

Though truthfully, I had entrusted the farmwork to Olto and Sakura while I did stuff like taste-testing the chili peppers and reaching out to Blanche. I had just wanted to inform her just in case, but I really hadn't expected her to not have found chilies yet. I was surprised when she responded expressing her heartfelt appreciation.

After I replied to her message and finished up some other tasks, a visitor appeared.

"Mister!"

"Capri? What are you doing all the way out here?"

It was the young farmer boy NPC from the quest chain, Capri.

"I have a message for you from Sagitta!"

Capri had apparently come here to deliver me a message from Sagitta, whom Capri was planning to help me meet.

"He's in Red City right now. He's doing some work for the Magical Beasts Guild, so he said you should come visit him there whenever!"

"Oh, good to know!"

Arriving in Zone Ten seemed to have triggered the progression of my long-standing quest chain. Or maybe the trigger was making it to any of the four

cities? If the way to progress the chain quest was to keep making it to farther zones, then there may very well come a point where my progress was stalled. I had a feeling I still had a long way to go until I completed the final quest.

Now that we were done planting our new crops, we headed back to Red City. I had been planning to explore the city anyway, with or without Sagitta being there. I already knew where the Magical Beasts Guild was, so I took a roundabout route to browse some stalls on the way.

As one might expect from the largest city to date, there were more NPCs here than I'd seen anywhere else. But it wasn't just their increased number that was remarkable, but also the myriad of races that I saw. So far, I had mostly encountered human NPCs, but more than half of the NPCs in Red City were nonhumans.

There were several types of animal-human hybrids, as well as elves and dwarves. There were even races that were few in number even among players, like nereids and halflings. This had to be the reason why it was rumored that the system to reincarnate or change into another race was hidden somewhere in this city. Looking at them, I started to think it'd be interesting to be an animal hybrid too, so I could understand people's desire to change races.

After buying some tasty-looking food from an NPC vendor and some clothes that I thought would look nice on my monsters, I arrived at the Magical Beasts Guild. It was located a little ways away from the city center in a district where guilds and other large establishments were concentrated. The Adventurers' Guild was also close by.

Out of all the guilds, the grounds of the Magical Beasts Guild was perhaps the largest. Its ivy-covered building resembled a Christian church, and it had a courtyard the size of several elementary school playgrounds for monsters to use.

"Whoa, that's awesome."

"Mm!"

Quite a few monsters were playing in the courtyard, beast-type and elementals alike. There were even skeletons and slimes roaming around in there. My garden got to a pretty high level of rambunctiousness too, but it was

nowhere near the level of the guild. The number of monsters and the size of the courtyard were unmatched.

“Are those all NPCs? Or are there some monsters belonging to players in there too?” I said to myself.

“Both.”

“Huh?”

I wasn't expecting someone to respond to me. I whipped around to see a familiar petite blonde elf standing behind me. *I wasn't expecting to run into her here!*

“Amimin!”

It was Amimin, a top Tamer. Her website where she compiled information had been super helpful to me since before I even started the game. It wouldn't be an overstatement to say she was the person I revered most in the game.

“Hello there. You know you can use this courtyard if you're a guild member, right? My monsters are in there too.”

“They are? Where?”

“That big tortoise over there.”

Amimin pointed to a small hill in the center of the courtyard. From afar, it just looked like any ordinary artificial hill. What looked like a pine tree was growing at the very top of it, and it was covered in moss. But when I looked closer, I saw a marker above it. That was no artificial hill, but the shell of a giant tortoise.

“So Nagamasa has evolved, huh?”

“Yup. He's a Garden Tortoise now. He can manage a farm, he's tough, and he's super strong.”

A squirrel and rabbit were sunbathing on top of the massive tortoise. They must have been Amimin's monsters too. It was like a scene out of a fairy tale!

“They get automatically transferred to the courtyard when you enter the city. You can't beat that convenience.”

“Ah yeah, it must be hard walking around with a monster that big.”

“Yeah, larger monsters get automatically taken in by the guild. You have to enable that option for smaller monsters. Once you leave the city, they’re put back in your party, so you don’t have to worry about that.”

There might have been few now, but as the game progressed, there was the possibility that more Tamers would be walking around with gigantic monsters. Having towns filled with giant monsters would be chaotic for other players and NPCs. This automatic transfer system was in place to prevent that.

“How do you navigate dungeons and fields? There must be places he can’t fit in, right?”

“It depends. Some areas expand to accommodate his size, while some dungeons can only fit monsters that are small enough.”

“It sounds like there are some disadvantages to bigger monsters, then?”

“Well, there are also cases where having large monsters comes in handy, so I’ve come to accept the trade-off. Besides, boss fights always happen in fields big enough to accommodate monsters, so there’s no restrictions when it comes to participating in those.”

When it came to clearing a field, monsters had advantages and disadvantages based on their sizes. But part of the thrill of being a Tamer involved having to take that into consideration when forming your party.

“But anyway, doesn’t it seem like there are an awful lot of elemental monsters?”

When I took a good look at the courtyard, I could see that over half of the monsters were one of the four elemental crafting monsters, like gnomes and undines. Wasn’t that way too big a proportion?

“Recently, more crafters have been taming elemental monsters, not just Tamers. That’s why there are so many. They probably don’t have a garden at home, so they let them play here.”

Apparently more and more people were starting to see just how useful gnomes, undines, and other elemental monsters were. According to Amimin, half of the people playing as crafting classes had tamed or summoned monsters now.

“I see, I see. Finally, more people have noticed just how adorable elementals are! That’s great. Though with so many Tamers with elemental monsters, they were bound to stand out!”

Amimin stared at me wordlessly. No, she was glaring at me! *Huh? Did I do something?*

“A-Amimin?”

“...Never mind. More importantly, do you think you’ll let your monsters play here?”

“Oh! Great idea! Guys, do you want to play here?”

“Tra-la-la!”

“Chirp chirp!”

My monsters looked very intrigued about the new playground. I decided to let them play here while I went and talked to Sagitta.

“You can complete the process inside,” Amimin said. Then she accompanied me into the Magical Beasts Guild.

“Welcome, boy! This here’s the Magical Beasts Guild!”

“Oh, thanks.”

We were greeted by a very commanding voice, but standing behind the counter was a dainty, beautiful girl with long black hair and porcelain skin. That’s right. The one who delivered that brash greeting was a cute girl with idol-level beauty.

“First time here, boy?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Then let me explain things to ya! Listen up!” the receptionist said with a loud guffaw.

I couldn’t get over this disconnect. The devs were having too much fun! But maybe this wasn’t so bad. She was more approachable and easier to talk to this way.

After getting an explanation of how to use the courtyard and what items were

for sale here, I wasted no time in using the guild's features. They were very simple. All I had to do was select which monsters I wanted to have sent to the guild's courtyard when I entered the city. I could select them individually, or select the option for sending monsters based on their sizes.

The only thing I couldn't change were the auto-transfer settings for the monsters over a certain size. I wondered how it worked for the guilds in other towns, and was told they had a similar transfer system, but only for large-sized monsters. However, instead of letting those monsters play in a courtyard, they had to stay put in a special waiting room next to the guild. That made me feel a little sorry for them. The receptionist explained that it didn't cause monsters to have any negative feelings towards their masters, however, so that probably meant it wouldn't have an effect on their favorability scores either.

Also, even if I didn't enable the option to have the guild take in my monsters automatically, I could still apply at the guild to let my monsters play in the courtyard. In my case, I had a large garden on my home base for my monsters to frolic in, but this was a nice amenity for players that didn't have that. It was basically like a dog park. And naturally, I could use it too.

"Okay then, can I leave my monsters here for a little?"

"You got it! They're safe with us!"

A question popped up confirming that I did want to leave monsters here, and I selected "Yes." Then, my monsters were instantly teleported away. I couldn't enter the courtyard, so I headed for the second-floor terrace that looked out over it. From there, I got a whole view of my monsters playing. There were a lot of other players here gazing at the courtyard too. We were all on the same page.

"Look at that, everyone's having a blast!"

My monsters were already energetically running around the courtyard. They weren't acting shy or showing any hesitation towards playing in a new spot. They looked like they were genuinely having fun. They were even going up and talking to other monsters. It looked like they were fully integrating into the courtyard. I figured they should be fine if I left them there for a while. It'd be pandemonium if they started fighting with some monsters they didn't get along

with, but I doubted anything like that would happen while we were here.





With peace of mind, I went back to the reception desk and asked where Sagitta was. It didn't take long to find him.

"If it's Sagitta ya want, he's over there."

"Huh?"

I turned around. Behind me, a man having tea at a table in the lobby slowly stood up. Then, he walked right over to me.

"Hey there. Are you Yuto?"

"I-I am. Are you Sagitta?"

"Sure am. It's a pleasure," he responded, holding out his hand in a friendly manner. He was a tall, blond, handsome guy who looked to be in his late twenties. He wore a robe but had a wooden bow slung on his back, making it hard to tell if he was a Mage or an Archer. "Capri told me you had something you wanted to ask me?"

"That's right. He mentioned you might know something about evolutions from crops."

"Well, that is sort of my specialty. All right, I'll teach you. Mind if we move locations? It'll be easier to explain things with my monsters around."

So saying, Sagitta turned around and started walking away. I hurried after him towards the guild interior. He was heading down a hallway that I was sure was a dead end. *Where's he leading me?*

Then, at the end of the hallway, I saw an unfamiliar door. It seemed this didn't lead to a dead end at all. Instead, a doorway appeared here when doing this event. I followed Sagitta through the doors.

"We're...outside? In the courtyard?"

"Mmm!"

"Olto!"

Sure enough, the doorway led to the guild's courtyard. My monsters came crowding around me, as did some other monsters. I extended my hand towards these unfamiliar monsters and touched them without thinking. Apparently, I

could touch NPC monsters. Fluffy fur, smooth scales, hard shells—there were endless things to appreciate. *Oh no, I'm going to pet them forever!* Was I in paradise? Being surrounded and fawned over by monsters was pure bliss.

“You look like you’re having fun, but think we could get down to the matter at hand soon?”

“Oh, sorry!”

“No worries. Now I can see you’re a good person.”

*Yikes, that was close. I almost took a trip to monster heaven.*

Sagitta dispersed all but two monsters. “Let me start by introducing my monsters. This is my Ent, Meer, and my Verdure Spirit, Moor.”

“Triii!”

“Fwa-fwaaa!”

Meer the Ent looked exactly like Olea when they were an Olive Treant, down to their wooden puppet appearance and the way they said “Triii!” The two even had the same stature, so I wondered if Ents evolved from Treants.

I had never seen anything like Moor the Verdure Spirit. It looked like a strange, tightly packed ball of leaves that was floating in midair. In the middle of the green ball was an emoji-like face drawn on in black lines. That must have been its actual face, since I could see it emoting when I looked closely.

“First, I’ll start by telling you about these two monsters’ evolutions.”

*Oops, Sagitta looks serious. He’s probably about to say something important.*

“Y-Yes please.”

“Both of these monsters derived from a Treant.”

“Does that mean they can also evolve from an Olive Treant?”

“Yes, even from subspecies of Treants.”

Sagitta continued on to teach me several things. Apparently, it was irregular for an Olive Treant to evolve into a Tree Nymph, like Olea had. The proper way was to devolve from a High Treant to a Tree Nymph.

“Devolve?”

“I suppose you could think of it as the opposite of evolution? It’s when you purposely return a monster to a weaker form so you can have it evolve into the race you want. That’s the normal way to evolve a Treant into a Tree Nymph.”

Thinking back, I remembered that Tree Nymphs could evolve into High Treants. That meant you could get a Tree Nymph by going backwards on the evolution tree like so: Treant → (evolve) → High Treant → (devolve) → Tree Nymph.

“I-I didn’t know that was possible... How do I use devolution?”

“I think the only ways are by learning the Monster Devolution skill or using a Devolution Potion. Both those options might be a little out of your reach, though.”

It seemed like the only thing I could do was achieve devolution by using sorcery. Though that had let me evolve an Olive Treant into a Tree Nymph, so maybe it was different from devolution? That had been more like a special evolution.

In any case, that had been achieved by Forest Sorcery, so I probably couldn’t use it on anyone else besides Sakura and Olea. In order to devolve any of my other monsters, I needed the devolution skill or a potion. Sagitta couldn’t give me any more information on it, so I’d have to look into it myself later.

“Back on topic, Ents can be attained through regular means. You’d just have to evolve a Treant into a High Treant, and then from there you’ll be able to evolve your monster into an Ent.”

“Can Ents separate from their main tree body?”

“Yes. Ents are completely split from their original tree, and their tree becomes an ordinary tree.”

So it was a route where the monster could separate from the main tree. In that case, it was like a Tree Nymph with different abilities and appearance.

“Now this Verdure Spirit here is a special evolution route. It can be attained by using enchanted fertilizer and enchanted plant booster.”

“Fwa-fwaaa!”

I wasn't sure where its voice was coming from, but it sounded happy. Two larger leaves that were growing out the sides of the leaf ball were flapping happily. I could only guess those were supposed to be its arms.

“If you use enchanted fertilizer and plant booster on a Treant, there is a low chance it will evolve.”

“I see. So all I need is regular enchanted fertilizer and plant booster?”

“Correct.”

And here I was getting so carried away making elemental fertilizers and plant boosters the second I discovered I could.

Sagitta continued. “It's good at using magic, so it's a very reliable monster.”

“Fwa-fwaaa!”

Moor the Verdure Spirit flew around energetically. A monster that could fly and was good at magic definitely sounded strong. On the other hand, it had low HP, but that was to be expected from a rear guard. That couldn't even be called a shortcoming.

“Other plant-type monsters besides treants have various special evolution routes as well. I encourage you to try things out.”

“Are there any other races I can use the enchanted plant booster on? Like a Tree Nymph?”

“Yes. Of the monsters under your command, you can use it on your Tree Nymphs.”

“Should I use it on the Tree Nymph's main tree?”

“You can spread the fertilizer and plant booster at a Tree Nymph's feet while they're in the middle of photosynthesis, and they will absorb it.”

“Whoa, really?”

No matter how human they looked, they were still a plant spirit after all. Since I had evolved Sakura into a unique evolution, if I was going to test it on anyone, it would be Olea. I decided to try giving them enchanted fertilizer and plant

booster every day.

“That’s all I can teach you. The rest you will have to find out on your own. So? Did I help some?”

“Yes, you did. Thank you very much.”

Help was an understatement—I was able to get some extremely useful information. I tightly grasped the hand Sagitta held out to me and shook it up and down vigorously.

“I enjoyed our chat too. By the way, it looks like you’re not affiliated with a school, are you?”

“Huh? A school?” I asked, caught off guard by his sudden change in topic.

“That’s right. I’m studying under the Centaur School, which is a special school combining disciplines for Archers and Tamers. What do you think? Does it sound interesting to you?”

*Whoa! Sagitta’s a key character for joining a school too?! Come to think of it, it made sense. He was a Tamer, but he had a bow. Sagittarius was represented by a centaur. That was where Sagitta’s name came from too, hence the connection. It seemed to be a school that combined the riding skills of a Tamer and the bow skills of an Archer.*

“I can’t use bows at all, though.”

“The teachings of our school aren’t restricted to bows, but can be applied to long-range attacks like spells and throwing. Also, you can learn from our school as long as you have a monster under your command that can be ridden.”

“Um, a monster that can be ridden?”

All my monsters were small-and medium-sized. I couldn’t ride on any of their backs. Maybe Bear Bear could carry me on their back...but somehow I felt like being carried piggyback-style wasn’t the way to go.

“Your Drimole could fit the bill in its transformed state.”

“Ah, I didn’t think of it that way.”

He was talking about Drimo in his dragon mode form. His transformation only

lasted a very short amount of time, though. Could that actually work? But maybe the game would acknowledge me having a rideable monster even if it was just momentary.

“Is the secret technique of that school an attack skill?”

“Yeah, it sure is. I can’t tell you the details, but I guarantee it’s useful.”

Hmm, I had just recently raised my own attack power... Honestly, I was hoping for a technique that could strengthen my monsters instead.

“I can only become a pupil of one school, right?”

“Not at all. Though you can only enroll in one right now, eventually, you should be able to learn multiple disciplines.”

“Huh? Really?” I sputtered, unable to hold back my surprise.

“Yes.”

It was a secret technique, so I assumed that I could only learn one. Even though I could only learn one at the moment, if I could eventually become a pupil of multiple schools, then it wouldn’t matter if I just went ahead and enrolled in one now without worrying too much about it. Plus, if enrolling now was the way to continue the quest chain, then refusing might end the chain here.

“Okay. Please let me become a pupil of the Centaur School!”

“I like your attitude. You’re in!” Sagitta grinned. I knew enrolling was the right move. “All right, now for your first trial.”

“I’m ready.”

“Do you think you could raise your Riding skill to level 10?”

“What?”

How was I supposed to do that? Drimo could only transform for a short period of time. I’d get barely any XP during the short amount of time I could ride him.

School Quest

Description: Raise Riding skill to level 10.

Reward: 1,000 G

Time Limit: None

Thankfully there was no time limit, but I felt weird about getting a reward from this. I was the one receiving instruction here. But this was a game. No use worrying about it.

I could learn Riding immediately using my bonus points, but in order to level it up, I needed a monster that I could ride.

“There doesn’t happen to be somewhere that loans monsters I could ride, is there?”

“Hmm, I don’t know about any place that does rentals. If you want a monster to ride, you’ll either need to catch one or buy one at the guild.”

“Those are my only options, huh?”

Sagitta reminded me that monsters were for sale at the guild, but I wondered if they actually sold ones as valuable as riding monsters. Otherwise, there might be somewhere in Zone Ten where rideable monsters appeared. I hadn’t heard of any such place, but it was worth looking into. After all, the fact that this quest triggered in this zone meant there had to be a way to ride monsters here.

“Oh, and I’ll give you this.”

“What is it?”

Sagitta held out a shiny, flat metal plate inscribed with strange lettering. There was one part that was written in Japanese—Sagitta’s name and the words “Squire’s Forest.” The fact that I could read that part must have been thanks to my recently learned Decipher skill.

Leveling up the Decipher skill allowed one to read the language of this world, which would lead to being able to read books and other reading materials. There hadn’t been any books discovered that gave any particular benefit just from reading them, so aside from needing it to learn the Spellbook skill, it didn’t have a clear use. But since I doubted there would be any skill in the game that



was completely pointless, though, I figured it would be useful at some point. *Probably. I hope.* Anyway, my plan was to just keep steadily leveling it up.

“That’s a permit allowing you to enter a special area called the Squire’s Forest. There, you’ll be able to catch a rideable monster, so I suggest you check it out. The forest is home to many different types of monsters, so you can find one that suits you best. Having this permit lets you choose the forest as a teleportation destination.”

*Whoa, for real?!* That meant this was a super rare item, right? Maybe they gave it to players like me who were capable of riding monsters but needed some extra help.

“One thing, though. Since you’re still an apprentice, there are some restrictions.”

“Restrictions?”

“Yes. You can only catch one rideable monster in the Squire’s Forest.”

Sagitta continued to explain that, as was indicated by the fact that entrance into the forest was restricted, it was under the protection of several organizations.

I was given access into the forest since I was now a pupil, but excessive capture of rideable monsters was prohibited. If I wanted to catch another rideable monster in the Squire’s Forest, I would first have to release the monster I had previously caught there.

“Is there a monster you recommend I tame?” I asked.

“Monsters are all equally valuable. But some monsters have stat restrictions required for riding them, so pay attention to those.”

“I will.”

After Sagitta wished me good luck, I headed to the guild’s reception desk. Not the main reception desk, but the counter for buying and selling. The clerk in charge here was a blonde elf girl.

“Excuse me.”

“Yes, welcome!”

Unlike the other clerk, she was just an ordinary girl. Was it just me, or was this kind of a letdown?

“Um, could you please show me the list of tamed monsters I can buy here?”

“Certainly, here you go!”

I looked over the list of purchasable monsters. There were quite a few. There were even some rare monsters I’d never heard of before.

Tamed monsters hatched from eggs made up an overwhelming majority, so there must have been people selling monsters they didn’t need. I could see people selling monsters who turned out to be the same species as one of their parents and had overlapping skills. Especially for Tamers fighting on the front lines, having redundant monsters would be an issue.

I was having fun just reading all the monsters on the list, but it was hard to tell which ones could be ridden.

“Are there monsters on this list that I can ride?”

“Ah, no. We don’t have rideable monsters.”

I knew it. It wasn’t going to be easy to find valuable monsters like that for sale. That meant I had no other choice but to catch one myself. I decided to head to the Squire’s Forest right away.

“Could I take back my monsters that are playing in the courtyard?”

“Sure, boy. Just a sec.”

“Okay.”

I listened as the black-haired receptionist talked to herself in that commanding voice of hers, then my monsters instantly returned.

“Mm-mmm!”

Olto came barreling into me and threw his arms around me. *Watch it! I almost fell over! Be gentler! Even though I’m bigger than you, you have much higher strength!*

“Did you have fun out there?” I asked.

“Hum!”

I didn't often see them so ecstatic. I'd have to bring them back here soon.

"Mm-mm! Mm-mm!"

*I guess they're telling me what they played in the courtyard?* My monsters' excitement didn't die down even after we left the Magical Beasts Guild and walked to the square where the teleportation circle was. Olto was running circles around me, so I assumed that meant he had played tag.

"Chirp chiiirp!"

"Hum-humm!"

Rick was in front of me glancing around, while Reflet quickly ducked behind me, with only her face peeking out. This little charade must've been hide-and-seek.

"Why don't we bring a gift next time? I don't know if the NPC monsters will eat, but having a snack all together might be fun too."

"Mm-mmm!"

"Hum-hummm!"

I wasn't sure if I could enter the courtyard again, but at least I could admire their cuteness from the second floor.

After leaving the Magical Beasts Guild, I headed straight for the Squire's Forest. Getting there was simple. I was able to teleport there using a teleportation circle, the same way I could hop to other towns. It was even free, probably thanks to the permit I was given. The scenery around me changed instantly from a city square to a lush forest.

"Oho! So this is the Squire's Forest?"

"Chirp!" Rick trilled from on top of my shoulder, his nose twitching. He looked ecstatic. As a squirrel, it was only natural for him to like being in a forest.

We had teleported to a small, man-made clearing in the forest. In the center of the clearing was a stone teleportation monument and a log cabin. It was pretty drab, but perhaps it was best this way so as not to detract from the forest scenery.

In front of the log cabin stood an NPC dressed like a lumberjack. He was a tall, stern-faced, middle-aged man with rippling muscles wielding a giant ax. He had an intimidating aura about him. *H-He's friendly, right?* I doubted I had any chance of winning if we had to fight each other to the death!

Before I could say anything to him, he started walking towards me.

"Welcome to the Squire's Forest. Are you here for training?"

*Phew! He is friendly!*

"Umm, I came here to befriend a monster I can ride..."

"Oh, so you're a Tamer! Do you need an explanation of the forest?"

Apparently this lumberjack guy was here to explain things to players, but that role wasn't obvious from that intimidating energy of his. I could imagine him being a super strong support character in a different event.

"First of all, this forest has a total of three sections."

"Sections? So the forest is divided into three different areas?"

"Yes. The areas of the forest with more light, like where we are now, are categorized as the sparse forest. This area is considered a beginner area, so you'll find only common materials and monsters here."

The other two areas were known as the middle zone and the dense forest, distinguished by the density of the trees. The dense forest was always dim even in daytime as a result of its thick canopy, and since it was inhabited by powerful monsters, it was a suitable training ground for knights.

The lumberjack warned me not to go farther than the sparse forest under any circumstances. I wasn't even strong enough to enter the middle area, apparently. Not that I needed to be told to avoid such a terrifying-sounding place anyway.

"What kinds of rideable monsters are there for me to tame in the sparse forest?"

"There are generally three kinds, with a few exceptions."

The lumberjack went on to explain the characteristics of the monsters. The

most common monster here was the Branch Deer, which was, as its name implied, a type of deer monster.

“However, there is a trick to riding on their backs. In order to ride them successfully, you need a good sense of balance.”

“Um, could you be more specific?”

“You need 20 or higher in both strength and agility.”

“Ah, that’s what you mean.”

I was glad I didn’t need actual motor coordination, but 20 strength and agility was out of the question for me. I just barely had 20 agility with my equipment, but my strength was only at 14.

“What are the other two monsters?”

“The second most common after Branch Deer are bipedal birds called Dash Birds.”

Dash Birds were similar to ostriches. They attacked by kicking and could be raised to be strong monsters. However, Dash Birds naturally had their own status requirements needed to ride them—20 endurance and dexterity. Never mind dexterity, that high of an endurance was definitely impossible. *Wait, this isn’t looking good. Are there any monsters I can ride? Am I just that much of a weakling?*

“That brings us to the last monster.”

Oh yeah! There was still one monster left! *I’m begging! Please be a monster I can ride!*

“They’re quite rare, and they don’t usually appear in front of people.”

Was it a rare monster? If so, it sounded unlikely I’d be able to ride it...

“What kind of monster is it?”

“It’s a horse-type monster called a Cute Horse.”

“You mean like, a horse that’s cute?”

“Exactly. They’re small, immensely adorable horses. They’re unpopular among knights for that reason.”

“I don’t mind if they’re cute as long as I can ride them. I actually prefer that. But I’m sure they have status restrictions too, right?”

“They do. They require 20 intelligence and sanity to ride. Seem feasible?”

*Yesss! I’m safe! That’s no problem for me!* Thank god there was a monster here that was in my reach.

“So...where can I find them?” I asked.

“Ha ha ha, you’ll have to find that out for yourself!”

*Guess he wouldn’t tell me that much.* The idea of going into an unfamiliar forest alone was terrifying, but it looked like I needed to make an active effort to find that particular monster.

“All right, let’s head to the sparse forest and just check things out. You guys’ll protect me, right?”

“Mm-mm!”

“Squeak squeak.”

“Trrrr!”

Olto, Drimo, and Olea responded enthusiastically as they held their weapons high. *I-I knew I could count on them! Our vanguard trio for today is beyond reliable! I feel like we can really do this!*

I had popped back to the farm to reassemble my party to prioritize balance, so I now had with me Olto, Drimo, Olea, Rick, Reflet, and Lilith. This was my first time in this forest, after all; caution came before anything else. Besides, it was already dusk. Nighttime posed all sorts of dangers, so we couldn’t explore for long. Today, we’d just be scoping out the situation.

With Olto in the lead, we dove into the Squire’s Forest. The area around the entrance was invigoratingly scenic. It made me think of the forests one might find in Finland—not that I had ever actually been there. Right now, nothing sounded better than sitting back in a lounge chair and soaking up the forest.

Since I had teleported here, I didn’t know exactly where on the continent I was, but the plants and insects all looked familiar. If I remembered right, the vegetation seemed similar to that found in Zones Three and Four.

It didn't take long for me to gather some low-quality medicinal herbs and poison hemlock. The lack of novel materials made me think this area really was in Zone Three.

After we had progressed about thirty meters into the forest, my Presence Detection skill picked up on a monster. Rick, with his Vigilance skill, seemed to have also felt the monster's presence.

"Guys, it's over there!"

"Chirp chirp!"

We braced ourselves as a rustling sound came from a patch of grass. Then, a rat with huge incisors poked its head out.

"Oh, it's just a Fanged Rat."

"Mm-mm."

It wasn't even that high-leveled. The lumberjack wasn't lying when he said the sparse forest was geared for beginners. Maybe we actually wouldn't have an issue exploring at night?

"But first, let's take that thing down!"

"Mm-mmm!"

"Don't underestimate it just because it's a Fanged Rat. It's still an enemy from a new area. We don't know if there's something special about it!"

"Squeak squeak."

We ended up killing it instantly anyway, though!

After the fight, we continued walking around the sparse forest for about thirty minutes, until we finally ran into a new monster.

"Ka-kaaaw!" a tall bird shrieked at us threateningly.

This was unmistakably one of the rideable monsters in this forest, the Dash Bird.

"That thing's huge!"

The size made sense, since people had to be able to ride on it, but it was still

bigger than I was imagining. It wasn't as large as an ostrich, but it was probably bigger than an emu. It had a jet-black torso, and was gray from its neck all the way up. It had thick, gnarled legs and massive claws like a dinosaur. Its realistic appearance made it pretty menacing to see up close.

"Ka-ka-kaaaw!"

"Mm-mmm!"

The battle began with a preemptive strike from the Dash Bird, but the fight didn't end up being as much of a struggle as I thought it'd be—probably because it was low-leveled. Olto and Drimo blocked the Dash Bird's hits while Lilith and I attacked it, and before long, the bird dissolved into polygons and disappeared.

"This sparse area really is for apprentices and beginners, huh?"

"Kee-hee!"

"Good job, Lilith. You did great."

"Kee-hee-hee!"

I patted Lilith's head and her eyes half closed in happiness. She had pulled off a spectacular move in that fight. The Dash Bird had low Sanity, so Illusion Magic worked exceptionally well, and when combined with Imp's Gaze it had an outstanding effect. She made the bird face backwards in the middle of battle and miss its attacks. It was all thanks to Lilith throwing the bird off its game that we were able to easily hit it and finish it off.

"Looks like we got a bezoar, meat, and an egg."

Just like with Garuda's egg, this one wasn't meant to be hatched, but instead used as an ingredient. I was very happy to get plenty of edible drops.

I had already found several types of bird meat, but this was my first time finding ostrichlike meat. I was curious what it tasted like. Dinosaur meat was sort of like ostrich meat, so I wondered how it would compare to that. I'd have to try cooking it later. As for the Dash Bird's bezoar, that seemed to be an alchemy ingredient. I wanted to test out some things with this too once I had more of them. Seeing all these new materials increased my drive to explore



even more!

We continued walking through the forest, but we weren't able to find the monster I was looking for in the end. We encountered very few rideable monsters at all, in fact. So far, we'd only encountered two Branch Deer and two Dash Birds. The Cute Horse that I was after was nowhere to be seen.

It was already nighttime, so maybe it was better to head back for now. Though honestly, with how weak the monsters were, we might be fine fighting at night too... And there was the possibility that Cute Horses were nocturnal, so I figured maybe we should stick around a bit.

With that thought, we continued exploring the forest, but without much to show for it. We did find some interesting areas, like a flower garden, marshland, and an isolated, open clearing in the middle of the forest. But we triggered no events, and we weren't able to find a Cute Horse. In fact, since not a single rideable monster appeared at night, I had to assume they were only active during daytime. The one thing we did accomplish was filling out most of the map of the sparse forest.

"Oh well, I guess we should just head back for today."

"Kee-hee."

The next morning, I was going to Green City with the Quick-Eared Cats, so I needed to finish the farmwork in the early hours.

Once we were back home, I decided to do some cooking experimentation before logging out. If the ingredients I obtained in the forest were tasty, that would do wonders for my motivation.

"Hum."

"Oh? Are you curious?"

"Hum-hum."

Reflet, our resident cook, had followed me to the basement's crafting room, expressing interest in the new ingredients.

"Okay, let's cook together."

"Humm!"

“Now then, Assistant Reflet. Our first step is to check over our ingredients.”

“Hum.”

“Today’s main course will be meat! Dash Bird meat and Branch Deer meat! And we also have a Dash Bird’s egg!”

The drops I’d received from the Branch Deer were its meat, hide, and antlers. As had been the case with the Dash Bird’s bezoar, the antlers were a crafting material. They could also probably be used to make weapons, but not ones that I could use. Deer antlers were an ingredient used in traditional Chinese medicine in the real world, so I decided I’d try using it in a similar way.

“First, we’ll just try grilling the meat with salt. I’ll grill the bird meat, so Reflet, you take care of the deer meat.”

“Hum-hum!”

Both dishes we created came out with a rarity of three and no special buffs. They recovered a good amount of hunger status, but that was all. I guess that was about right considering the difficulty of the area they came from?

“Okay, next let’s try something a little more complicated. I’ll roast the deer meat with herbs. Got any ideas for yours, Reflet?”

“Humm.”

Reflet stood in front of the bird meat, crossed her arms, and started pondering. She looked like a professional chef surveying the choicest ingredients.

Reflet pondered motionlessly for a few seconds, then her eyes flew open and she grasped the bird meat and held it up high above her head.

“Hum-hummm!”



Reflet looked inspired, but I had no idea what she was planning to cook. *Oh well, I'll just look forward to the finished product.*

Five minutes later, we showed each other our dishes. My herb-roasted deer meat came with a slight HP-recovery effect. It looked delicious too, so I'd call this a success. Reflet made bird meat tataki—seared bird meat topped with herbs and drizzled with ponzu sauce.

"This one has a slight HP-recovery effect too."

"Hum!"

I sampled our dishes. They were both mouth-wateringly delicious. Their effects might not have been extraordinary, but what mattered was the flavor. The more I visited the Squire's Forest, the more meat I'd be able to stock up on, which made me even more excited to continue exploring there.



## **SIDE: Management Quaking in Fear at the Promise of Silver-Haired's Destiny**

"What's the status of the events?"

"Several quests have been started."

"Has any information about the demon come out yet?"

"Ah, well... I don't believe anything related to the demon's involvement has been revealed in any quest yet. The demon comes out at the very, very end, after all. We should be fine not touching the quests for a while."

"I suppose what's more likely to happen soon is the appearance of the followers."

"It's possible they may connect it with that event movie and think of it being a demon-related quest..."

"Well, they haven't received definitive proof, right? There are some routes that don't even have anything to do with the demon."

"Yes. In fact, there is also the quest where they have to shut down the

followers' scheme before and prevent the key item from being stolen."

"Oh? That's started already?"

"Yes, by the hero."

"The hero?"

"Holland."

"Ah, the current strongest player!"

"People have taken to calling him the 'hero' recently."

"Well, he does give off that impression. If Silver-Haired weren't around, Holland would have been the player who stood out the most."

"He's already standing out quite a lot in his own way. Silver-Haired is more frightening from a management point of view, which makes us pay attention to him more."

"Silver-Haired's Silver-Haired, after all."

"Yes, he is. Ah, speaking of, I expect Silver-Haired to trigger an event quest soon as well."

"Seriously?"

"He's been visiting the Squire's Forest."

"Silver-Haired, on the knight route—no, the special route?"

"Precisely. While we weren't paying attention, he received the permit from Sagitta."

"But that requires being in possession of a rideable monster, doesn't it? Are Honey Bears rideable?"

"It seems the Drimole's Dragon Awakening form was judged to be rideable."

"You're kidding... I mean, you *can* ride a dragon, but...that worked?!"

"We completely overlooked it."

"Ugh... Now we need to have another meeting to change the specs!"

"...My condolences."

“Gah! We need to review the other settings too! Hey, you go take care of that.”

“And condolences for myself too!”

“Hey.”

“Yes?”

“Silver-Haired won’t defeat the demon, will he?”

“No, not even he could do that, right? He can’t defeat the demon without it having appeared, can he?”

“But maybe it *will* appear?”

“...Could you remind me about the current configurations?”

“Uh, yeah, we’ll review those specs.”

“Sounds good...”

“Hey! Don’t cry!”

“Another all-nighter!”

“Now I want to cry!”



“I look forward to working with you again today.”

“Yeah, same here, Carlo.”

The next day, the Quick-Eared Cats and I met up before our journey. Today’s lineup was a little different from the day before. We still had Carlo, his three tamed monsters, and Lewin, but in Alyssa’s place was a man who looked like a swordsman.

“Hey, it’s been a while. I’m Highwood, the Quick-Eared Cats’ clan master.”

“Oh, thanks for coming today.”

I remembered then that he had introduced himself to me once before. Highwood, the handsome blond elf. His easygoing attitude reminded me of Sukegawa or Sakkyun, but he was actually a famous player who fought on the very front lines. I was happy he was here—he definitely looked reliable. I hadn’t

interacted with him much, but I felt like I could relax around him.

Alyssa wasn't here today because she had some real-life things to take care of. I had been planning to sell her my information about the Squire's Forest, but I guessed I could just tell her everything I found out later. I was pretty sure that Highwood, Lewin, and Carlo mainly did verification work and didn't take care of the buying and selling of information.

"Okay, time's wasting, so let's head out! We wanna get to both Green City and Blue City today," Highwood said before sauntering off.

"So is our plan Green City in the morning, and Blue City in the afternoon?" I asked.

"Yep. We've done all the prep work, so we shouldn't run into any surprise problems."

What'd he mean by that? Like triggering some flag? Would we be okay? Well, either way, Highwood was a well-known, strong player. As long as he was around, there was nothing to worry about. What I had to be most careful of was being careless and dying.

"All right, time to head out!"

"Yeah!"

"Mm-mmm!"

Our first stop was Forest Town in northern Zone Seven. I actually hadn't even gotten to the northern part of Zone Nine yet. From Forest Town, we'd go through the Dark Forest in Zone Eight and Green Town in Zone Nine to make it to Zone Ten. The way there proved immensely challenging, but thankfully the Cats were there to help me.

Here was the abridged version of our journey: the Quick-Eared Cats were unmatched—or more accurately, *Highwood* was unmatched. He instantly killed most enemies with his dual swords and elemental magic. Seriously, if I was a girl, I might've fallen for him. The laid-back, princely elf showing his serious side only in the midst of combat? *What a treat! He's so dreamy!*

Thanks to him, outside of me having to help a little during the boss fight, I was

mostly just hanging out. I got quite a few items since I was able to focus on gathering. Since the Cats were also giving me the materials they obtained during the journey, I was, without a doubt, mooching off them. I needed to make sure not to get used to this. This time was just a special case.

In the afternoon, we tackled the southern parts of the zones in the same way. This meant that within one day, I had successfully made it to every area of Zone Ten except for the western part. The results of the verification process itself, which were the main reason for doing this, left a lot to be desired. None of the bosses dropped any super rare items, though the Cats had already been aware of that possibility. Later, I would be accompanying them to grind the bosses some more.

The items weren't the only things I got out of this excursion. Everyone had leveled up, with Lilith especially benefiting from the experience. In fact, she evolved. It happened right after we defeated the Maelstrom Beast, the boss before Blue City.

"Kee-hee-hee!" Lilith cried, thrusting her spear up high as she danced in midair.

"Whoa! Lilith, you can evolve!"

"Kee-hee!"

It was a little hard to tell from her round, swirly eyes and her mouth full of sharp fangs, but Lilith was happily smiling.

"Is your little demon evolving?" Highwood asked.

"Yeah, finally."

"Make sure you sell the info to Alyssa once she's back."

As I had thought, the Quick-Eared Cats members currently present couldn't buy and sell information. I'd have a nice heap of information to sell later.

"There are three evolution routes."

"Kee-hee!"

There were two standard evolutions, and one unique evolution. One of the standard evolutions specialized in physical attacks, while the other specialized



in magic attacks.

Name: Lilith Race: Mini Devil Base Level: Lv. 25

Master: Yuto

HP: 98/98 MP: 9999

Strength: 23 Endurance: 18 Agility: 21

Dexterity: 11 Intelligence: 22 Sanity: 17

Skills: Absorb, Illusion Magic (Advanced), Imp's Gaze → Demon's Gaze, Tree Killer, Mental Resistance, Spear Skills (Advanced), Flight, Dark Magic, Night Vision, Magic Detection, Vital Point Detection, Instant Death, [TBD]

Equipment: Imp's Trident, Imp's Outfit, Imp's Barrettes

Name: Lilith Race: Petite Devil Base Level: Lv. 25

Master: Yuto

HP: 94/94 MP: 103103

Strength: 21 Endurance: 16 Agility: 21

Dexterity: 11 Intelligence: 26 Sanity: 17

Skills: Absorb, Illusion Magic (Advanced), Imp's Gaze → Demon's Gaze, Tree Killer, Mental Resistance, Spear Skills, Flight, Dark Magic (Advanced), Night Vision, Magic Detection, Vital Point Detection, Shadow Magic, [TBD]

Equipment: Imp's Trident, Imp's Outfit, Imp's Barrettes

Illusion Magic (Advanced) and Demon's Gaze were the default skills. Her equipment changed from Little Devil equipment to Imp's equipment. Also, if she evolved into a Mini Devil, she would gain advanced Spear skills, and Instant Death, a skill that had a low chance of killing enemies in one hit. Petite Devil would give her more advanced Dark Magic and also a new skill called Shadow

Magic. I was sure that Dark Magic stated that it was magic that controlled shadows too, so I wondered if Shadow Magic was even more specialized in that area. The “TBD” part meant I could choose any skill I wanted from a list.

If I chose Mini Devil, I could choose from spear techniques like a charge attack and one that dealt consecutive stabs. If I went with Petite Devil, I could choose one elemental magic technique, like fire magic. Either option would make Lilith a considerably stronger attacker.

Next was the unique evolution, which was the one I was looking forward to the most. This one had a skill that was impossible to ignore.

Name: Lilith Race: *Pretty Devil* Base Level: Lv. 25

Master: Yuto

HP: 92/92 MP: 105105

Strength: 20 Endurance: 16 Agility: 20

Dexterity: 11 Intelligence: 27 Sanity: 18

Skills: Absorb, Illusion Magic (Advanced), Imp’s Gaze → Demon’s Gaze, Tree Killer, Mental Resistance, Spear Skills, Flight, Dark Magic (Advanced), Night Vision, Magic Detection, Vital Point Detection, Bewitching Smile, Dark Sorcery

Equipment: Imp’s Trident, Imp’s Outfit, Imp’s Barrettes

Pretty and Petite Devil might’ve sounded similar, but Pretty Devil was a route even more specialized in magic. Bewitching Smile was a skill that was used at the beginning of battle and had a chance to charm an enemy, which could be very powerful depending just how high that chance was. My attention was on a different skill, however—there was a sorcery skill, of all things.

Dark Sorcery. What was that? It was just one word off from Forest Sorcery, but it sounded monstrously more sinister, like it’d require a living sacrifice or something to activate it. But I couldn’t just disregard it. This was the unique

evolution, after all, so I had been planning to choose it from the start.

“What in the world? She can learn sorcery?”

“Holy crap! S-Silver-Haired never misses!”

The others expressed their shock once I showed them the data of the evolution routes. *Yes, yes, great reactions!*

“All right! I’m choosing Pretty Devil!”

“Kee-hee!”

Lilith was enveloped in light, illuminating our surroundings.

“Ahhhhhhh! My eyes!”

*Highwood, of all people?! There’s a flash of light anytime something happens in this game, so you should be used to it already! Aren’t you a front liner?!*

At the cost of Highwood’s eyes, Lilith’s evolution was complete. As for her appearance—

“You look basically the same?”

“Kee-hee?”

“No way, her spear looks more vicious now. And her horns are bigger,” Highwood pointed out.

“Yeah, I guess that’s true, but I thought she would look more like a demon.”

She still looked like a ferocious stuffed toy. It looked like the only changes were what Highwood pointed out. Oh, and maybe her hair was a little longer? She looked a little more elegant.

“Well, you’re still cute, so it’s fine.”

“Kee-hee!”

After that, I thanked the Cats for carrying me and then we parted ways. Carlo alone stuck around. During our journey, we had decided we would form a team and continue exploring.

“Thanks for coming with me, Carlo. Sorry to put you out like this.”

“It’s no problem at all. I was planning on grinding some levels around here

anyway, so we might as well go together.”

The area we wanted to explore was around Green City. My goal was to find an ingredient called a snowfall mushroom that could be harvested in this area. It was a rare, difficult-to-find ingredient in the Northern Great Snow Forest that spanned the area around Green City in Zone Ten. Not only were the mushrooms absolutely delicious, but they could even be used to make broth *and* they granted a cold resistance effect. I was on the hunt for them so I could grow them myself.

Carlo had kindly said he planned to come here anyway, but it was obvious to me he specifically intended to protect me. This area was clearly dangerous, so maybe he didn't feel right letting me go alone. He sounded pretty adamant when he said he'd go with me. If I was able to obtain a lot of snowfall mushrooms, I'd treat him to some mushroom hot pot.

“I found some mushrooms, but it's just more snow white mushrooms.”

“Can't eat those.”

Snowfall mushrooms were beautiful mushrooms that had a light blue gradient pattern and a white cap. Snow white mushrooms, contrary to their name, were poisonous mushrooms that were white with toxic-looking red specks.

They probably got their name from the character Snow White. The mushrooms contained soporific toxin, and were used as ingredients for poison. Ninety percent of the mushrooms I had found were snow white mushrooms, while snowfall mushrooms were few and far between. It was hard enough to harvest anything with how much snow was on the ground...

Incidentally, all four of the Zone Ten areas had fairly harsh environments. The Great Snow Forest, where we were now, was cold and dense with snow, which made movement difficult, the occasional strong blast of icy wind only making matters worse.

Plus, the monsters had adapted to the environment and were able to move around nimbly. This forest was crawling with vicious monsters like Snow Rabbits, Snow Gorillas, and most dangerous of all, Snow Wolves. If Carlo hadn't been here with me, I probably would have already died by now.

Around Red City was the area called the Eastern Great Mountains. With the exception of the rivers of flowing lava, the gently sloping hills made it the easiest place to get around as long as you had good endurance. Although, the level of the monsters skyrocketed the further you progressed, so I was probably better off just gathering ingredients around the perimeter of Red City.

Near Blue City was the Southern Great Rainforest, which was like a giant wetland and a tropical rainforest merged together. It was home to poisonous insects and lizards that attacked you underwater, making it an area where you had to be constantly on guard. There were also few places to rest, so it was the area players hated the most.

Lastly, around Yellow City, where I had yet to arrive, was the Western Great Wilderness. Although it was called a wilderness, it was actually half a desert and half a rocky area, and one of its features was having extreme temperature differences. That area was also comparatively easier to move around in, but the enemies and field gimmicks changed drastically between day and night, so it hadn't been explored much yet. Each of the four areas required ingenuity to get through.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Oh, nice, Rick! That's number three.”

“Chirp!”

Even though the mushrooms were buried under snow, having gathering skills made a gathering node appear, which helped us find the mushrooms. But it seemed the gathering nodes I saw and the ones Rick saw were different. The frequency and quantity of the mushrooms Rick gathered clearly outstripped what I could find. That made me think there were some special nodes that could only be seen by those who had a high-level Gather skill. Progressing this far ahead meant even gathering and logging became more complicated.

We continued walking around the area surrounding Green City and managed to gather snowfall mushrooms while we fought fierce battles against monsters. Or more accurately, Carlo was the one fighting those fierce battles while I cheered him on and gathered mushrooms nearby. I did try to help out in the fights, but it was mainly Carlo and his monsters.

Carlo's current party included his Lilliput, Night Bat, and Brown Bear that I had met the day before. Additionally, he had a Lesser Carbuncle and a Snow Gorilla. The Lesser Carbuncle, which had a green jewel on its forehead, was the evolved form of a Wood Grain Squirrel. It deftly used tree magic and was impressively strong.

The Snow Gorilla was a gorilla with white fur, and was one of the monsters found in this field. It was a ruthless attacker that could also use ice magic. Carlo had just recently welcomed it into his party and was in the middle of leveling it up.

"I'm starting to see the appeal in cool-looking monsters like that."

"Oog!"

They were terrifying as enemies, but once tamed, they were intellectual and very wise in the ways of the forest. A monster like that could definitely hold its own in the vanguard. However, Carlo had a strange look on his face.

"What's up?" I asked him.

"No, um, it's just, I was thinking a Snow Gorilla wouldn't really fit in with your party."

"Huh? Why not?"

"Um, well, how should I put this? It can't do any crafting."

"I mean, neither can Lilith."

"Th-That's true. Oh! And they've just been discovered, so it'd be better to wait until there was more information on them, right? Like about their evolutions and stuff."

"Hmm, that's a good point."

The fact that Carlo was leveling one up meant the Quick-Eared Cats would release information about them eventually. It wasn't like I wanted a gorilla right this second, so I could wait a little.

"Maybe it *is* better to wait until there's more information on them," I said.

"Phew."

*Is it just me, or does he look relieved?*

“D-Don’t worry about it. R-Really.”

*He’s acting weird...* Was he the type that didn’t like it when other players tamed his favorite monsters or something? I didn’t really mind, but I knew some Tamers did. Was Carlo like that too? I didn’t know he was such a fan of gorillas. I owed a lot to Carlo, so I decided I’d hold off on getting a gorilla for a while.

“Oh, it looks like there’s a safety zone over there,” I said. “Let’s take a break. I want to see how the snowfall mushrooms taste.”

“Are you sure I can have some too?”

“Of course, hot pot meals always taste better when you share them with other people. Can any of your monsters eat hot pot?”

“Gori and Paddy can. You don’t mind?”

Gori was the Snow Gorilla, and Paddy was the Brown Bear. Paddy’s name was definitely skirting the line of copyright infringement! Though I wasn’t really one to talk. I had almost given Bear Bear the name Akakabuto.

I threw snowfall mushrooms and Snow Rabbit meat into the pot with some other ingredients, like radishes I had bought in Green City. Other than controlling the strength of the heat, it was a simple process. Within five minutes, there was a delectable aroma wafting in the safety zone. We were in a circular clearing without any snow, and other players were staring at us intensely. I felt bad about creating such a tantalizing scent, but there wasn’t enough to share.

I took out two kotatsu Sakura made and placed them side by side to make enough room for everyone to sit. Even the monsters who couldn’t eat hot pot loved the kotatsu, so everyone wanted a spot. Gori and Paddy were pretty large, so they both needed an entire side all to themselves. The rest of us squeezed together to make room for them, but I didn’t really mind these cramped quarters.

“All right, here’s to our successful exploration! Cheers!”

“Cheers!”

Instead of alcohol, we toasted with grape juice. We weren’t celebrating some grand adventure, but we were still in a festive mood.

“Eating hot pot under a kotatsu surrounded by snow! What could be better than this?” I said.

“I’ll explore with you any time if these are the perks that come with it.”

“Wow, that’d be great! I’ll probably take you up on that again soon.”

“Yeah, please do!”

On top of the kotatsu, Rick was sharing some nuts with Maruko. The tiny twosome seemed to be getting along well.

“Kee-hee?”

“Hey, Lilith! The pot’s hot! Don’t touch it!”

“Kee-hee.”

“Mm-mmm.”

“Oog?”

Why was Olto serving vegetables to Gori? Oh, was he showing off the vegetables he grew himself? *Come on, don’t just give Gori a bunch of the same veggies! Make it more balanced!*

“Jeez! Can’t you ever settle down?”





# Online Forum [The Master Celebrity] Silver-Haired, Amazing as Always, Part 35

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.

---

643: Takashima

Anyone else think Silver-Haired's been pretty relentless these days?

---

644: Tarukus

Well yeah, isn't that what he does?

---

645: Tundra

I don't think he's ever taken it chill.

He's constantly doing something and making a spectacle of himself.

---

646: Tetsu

Actually, I disagree.

There's been plenty of times where he doesn't do anything for a few days.

---

647: Tomato Mato

Like when he's exploring a newly discovered dungeon?

---

648: Tarukus

Or like when he's progressing a newly discovered event?

---

649: Cho

You could say the calm during those moments...

---

650: Tomato Mato

Is exactly like the calm before a storm.

---

651: Takashima

When Silver-Haired disappears, you know something's about to happen!

That's when the roars of turmoil thunder far and wide!

---

652: Tundra

Right...

It's not that he's always relentlessly in motion—he's actually always changing up the pace!

---

653: Cherry

Um, this is the Silver-Haired forum, right?

I have a question.

---

654: Tetsu

I don't think Silver-Haired's changing up the pace on purpose, though.

>>653

What's your question?

---

655: Cherry

I'm a second-wave player, starting out as a Tamer since I was inspired by Silver-Haired and his fairy.

I read all about fairies in the game before starting.

---

656: Tomato Mato

Ooh, a follower of Silver-Haired, I see!

---

657: Cherry

I don't think I deserve to be called his follower...

At most, I'm a fan.

---

658: Tarukus

So a follower is higher up than a fan?

---

659: Tetsu

Not exactly...

I think it's like, if you're a fan of fairies, that's kind of different from a follower.

But if Silver-Haired inspired you to become a Tamer, you'd be a follower?

---

660: Takashima

Let's set aside talking about what's a follower or not. It's not like there's a clear distinction.

More important right now is Cherry's question.

---

661: Cherry

I had the honor of seeing Silver-Haired on the playing field the other day.

The fairy on his shoulder was absolutely adorable. She even sang a song.

---

662: Tomato Mato

Oh man, that does sound adorable.

---

663: Cherry

Yes. She was very cute.

---

664: Tarukus

I wish I could've seen that!

---

665: Tundra

Me too!

---

666: Tetsu

Okay, wait. This conversation won't go anywhere if we react to every single thing.

So, is your question about that fairy?

---

667: Cherry

Yes. I've been scouring the info boards and the forums for anything that would help me get a fairy someday, so I've got almost all of the information memorized.

However, the fairy I saw with Silver-Haired used a skill I had never seen before.

It looked incredibly powerful, so I thought someone here might know about it.

---

668: Tundra

Ah yeah, that. The info about that skill's already circulated around. Apparently it's an Awakening skill.

---

669: Takashima

The Quick-Eared Cats' forums have more details about it. Why don't you go check there?

---

670: Cherry

That's a good idea. I will do that.

I thought I knew everything about fairies, but I guess I was completely wrong.

---

671: Tundra

Have you started realizing Silver-Haired's brilliance too, second-waver?

---

672: Tarukus

Pretty sure they knew from the beginning?

They already said they were a Silver-Haired fan.

---

673: Cherry

Yes, that's right.

It's like I realized that I only thought I knew something but I actually didn't.

---

674: Tetsu

You were elucidated, in a way.

---

675: Tarukus

Whoa, what a fancy word!

Elucidated? Is that like enlightenment or something?

---

676: Tomato Mato

Oh, that sounds awesome!

Aha ha ha! We have been elucidated! Behold, the power of our elucidation has been unleashed!

Kneel before us!

---

677: Tarukus

Whoa!

---

678: Tundra

It's not fancy.

You can just look up what it means online.

---

679: Cherry

It is true, though, that I have grown as a fan of Silver-Haired.

I have learned that he is not someone I can understand just by collecting a little information.

---

680: Tetsu

That's right. He's the type of person to do something unbelievable the second you look away.

---

681: Cho

Silver-Haired had a kotatsu hot pot party in the Great Snow Forest! He was hanging out with a bunch of monsters too! I'm so jealous of the guy that was with him!

I got a glimpse of the kotatsu. It had a fancy tabletop! It was probably the same type that he put up for auction.

---

682: Tundra

H-He's just going ahead and using it like normal, huh?

He'd make a killing if he sold it...

---

683: Tetsu

See? What'd I just say?

---

684: Takashima

That timing was hilariously on point.

---

685: Cho

A bunch of forums are in an uproar.

The monster forums are like: I'm jealous of the guy with him! (bitter tears)

The crafting forums are like: Of course he'd just use that kotatsu like it's nothing!

The cooking forums are like: Let's have a hot pot party!

The strategy forums are like: If Silver-Haired's there, that means something's gonna happen in the Great Snow Forest! Let's go right now!

That about sums it up.

---

686: Cherry

I'm not sure what to say, but he is brilliant, isn't he?

---

687: Tomato Mato

We'll teach you the best thing to say when stuff like this happens.

Silver MVP!

---

688: Takashima

Silver MVP!

---

689: Tarukus

Silver MVP!

---

690: Cherry

Silver MVP?!

---



691: Tundra

Mm-hmm, very good. The next generation is learning well.

---

692: Tetsu

I wonder how many people are part of the Silver-Haired Defenders by now?

---

# [Gather 'Round Tamers] LJO Tamer Megathread,

## Part 39

Share the deets on new tamed monsters, show off your companions, etc.—this thread is for everyone!

Bad-mouthing other Tamers is not permitted.

Screenshots gladly accepted.

Avoid double-posting.

Be mindful of what you post.

---

884: Amelia

There's a new Mamori's Diary video. It was really good!

---

885: Eulenspiegel

Seeing Silver's monsters and mascots playing on the playset...

Now that was a sight to behold.

And the video gave a glimpse of some paintings and calligraphy in an interior tatami room.

Art is pretty cool.

---

886: Amelia

People have been ordering calligraphy scrolls left and right.

I kinda want one too.

---

887: Eulenspiegel

Do you think the artist would paint me a picture of an

undine?

---

888: Amelia

For artistic purposes, right?

---

889: Ursula

I ordered a playset.

I'm going to ride together on a swing with my monsters!

---

890: KingOysterMushroom

I missed the boat!!!

It seems woodworkers are getting a huge rush of orders.  
There's a weeklong wait everywhere.

---

891: MorningStarMeow

Yeah, I missed the big boat too, meow.

Damn it!

---

892: Eulenspiegel

I managed to secure a slide!

I installed it in my pool!

---

893: Ursula

That nightclub-style pool of yours finally has a water  
slide?!

I'm scared to see it!

---

894: UdagawaRollerCoaster

I was only able to get a seesaw.

I set it up in the middle of my pool, and my undines are  
having a great time playing on it.

Water splashes up each time they go up and down, which makes it even more fun for them.

---

895: Eulenspiegel

You're a genius!

---

896: MorningStarMeow

Are you a newtype?!

---

897: KingOysterMushroom

You really just casually came out with the fact that you have multiple undines.

---

898: Ivan

Guys, I just saw the most unbelievable thing!

Silver MVP!

---

899: Amelia

We'd know who you're talking about even if you didn't tell us.

---

900: Ursula

What's this unbelievable thing?

---

901: Ivan

You know how there's a courtyard at the Magical Beasts Guild in Zone Ten that takes in your monsters?

---

902: KingOysterMushroom

Yeah, you can watch other players' monsters there. Time slips right by me when I watch them.

---

903: Ivan

So yeah, you know of it.

And players normally can't go in there, right?

---

904: Amelia

Wait, are you saying...

No, but maybe he could!

---

905: Ivan

Silver-Haired entered that courtyard and was playing with the monsters there.

It looked like he could only touch the NPC monsters, though.

---

906: Amelia

I knew it! That's our Silver-Haired!

That's what he's capable of!

---

907: Ursula

A place where you can touch NPCs' monsters...

Surely there couldn't be such a paradise!

Ugh, I feel the bitter tears coming on!

I'm sooo jealous!

---

908: MorningStarMeow

Even though they're just NPC monsters, that's still enough!

I wanna touch them!

---

909: Ursula

How can I get in there?!

Money? Is it money? I'll pay my entire life savings!

---

910: Ivan

Lots of people want to enter the courtyard, huh? I'm pretty sure Silver-Haired is rich, but...

I don't think you need to pay to enter.

---

911: IrumaBlack

I saw it too. I think he was with some NPC-looking guy. Maybe he was doing an event?

Or maybe he became friends with a caretaker NPC?

Or was it a reward for contributing to the guild?

---

912: KingOysterMushroom

All those seem plausible.

At any rate, he wasn't satisfied with just his home, and even went as far as to conquer the guild's courtyard...

Where there is a fluffy paradise, there is Silver-Haired.

I wouldn't expect anything less.

---

913: Eulenspiegel

There are so many adorable monsters there! I want to go in too!

---

914: UdagawaRollerCoaster

Couldn't agree more!

---

915: Amelia

That sort of sounds impure coming from you two.

---

916: Eulenspiegel

Um, excuse me?!

I just want to pet cute monsters, just like the rest of you!

---

917: Ursula

And why, exactly?

---

918: Eulenspiegel

Geh heh heh heh, there might be an undine among the NPC monsters there.

Then I can touch one legally!

---

919: Ivan

Eulen, you're out!

---

920: Eulenspiegel

Hey, wait! I was set up! Those aren't my real intentions, I mean it!

I just got caught up in the moment! I was tricked!

---

921: KingOysterMushroom

So? What *are* your real intentions?

---

922: Eulenspiegel

Geh heh heh— Gah, enough already!

---

923: IrumaBlack

Right before Silver-Haired went in, he talked to Amimin, so I think it was some event for Tamers.

---

924: Eulenspiegel

So Amimin probably knows something?

---

925: Ivan

I can't just go up and talk to Amimin.

---

926: Ursula

There's no way Amimin is going to leak someone else's information anyway.

---

927: MorningStarMeow

There's no way someone like me can approach Amimin.

---

928: UdagawaRollerCoaster

I'm sorry for even playing the same game as Amimin.

---

929: KingOysterMushroom

Yeah, we really shouldn't bother Amimin.

All Tamers owe a great deal to her.

---

930: Amelia

Both Amimin and Silver-Haired are highly respected top Tamers.

If we bother them, their fans—that is, every Tamer will come after us.

---

931: Ursula

Yeah, they will.

---

932: IrumaBlack

I'm sorry! Don't punish me!

---

933: Eulenspiegel

I guess we just have to wait for the Quick-Eared Cats to



publicize the info.

---

934: Ivan

I'm sure the Cats will be able to get all the info out of Silver-Haired! Maybe they already have!

They're the Quick-Eared Cats! That's what they do!

---

935: Ursula

You can do it, Quick-Eared Cats! I believe in you!

---

936: MorningStarMeow

You got this, meow! I know you can pull it off!

---

937: KingOysterMushroom

You all have such overflowing faith in the Quick-Eared Cats...

Well, Silver-Haired has surely done other things besides enter that courtyard, so I'll rely on them to get that information from him too.

---

938: Amelia

So basically, it's business as usual!

Go, Quick-Eared Cats!

---

## Chapter Three: Welcome, Horse!

Yesterday, I made it to Green City and Blue City. Today, as planned, I was heading to Yellow City. I had the same companions with me today as yesterday —Highwood, Carlo, and Lewin.

Presently, we were fighting against the Zone Nine Boss, the Great Earth Beast. It was similar in form to the Great Flame Beast, but its body was covered in rocks. They were incredibly solid rocks; of the four bosses standing in the way of Zone Ten, it was the boss most specialized in defense. It even had a reflective barrier for counterattacking with, making it a very troublesome enemy to face. In fact, this boss was the strongest among all four bosses, so we had left this one for last to let our levels get as high as possible before we tackled it.

“Graaaaaagh!”

“...!”

“Thanks, Sakura!”

“...♪”

And it was worth it to wait. Even my monsters and I were able to lend some help in the fight now. Anyway, this was the only boss we couldn’t pelt with bombs. If we used bombs indiscriminately, the boss would send them back to us with its reflective barrier, which would wipe us out in no time flat. Because of that, my monsters and I had to actually *participate* in the battle too. Though I suppose that was typically the normal thing to do. Up until now we’d just been throwing bombs from the back, so fighting up front actually felt fresh now.

The ones who played a really active role in this fight were Perca and the newly evolved Lilith. Perca’s attacks lined up with the Great Earth Beast’s attribute weakness, so each time he hit its vital points, he had a high chance of making it flinch. I was especially impressed with the damage he inflicted by following Penguin Highway up with a charge attack. I couldn’t even count how many times he saved us with that combo.

“Honk honk hooonk!”

“Nice, Perca! Keep attacking it when you see an opening!”

“Honk honk!”

Lilith’s advanced Illusion Magic also did some great work. While the Great Earth Beast had high defense, it also had a weakness.

“Kee-hee-hee!”

“Lilith, inflict it with a status ailment!”

“Kee-heeee!”

The boss’s attacks missed us several times after Lilith hit it with her Illusion Magic. In the meantime, its reflective barrier dropped, giving us our chance to attack it all together.

It wasn’t often that my party and I could contribute this much to fighting against a boss as strong as this one. I’d have to praise Perca and Lilith later. On second thought, if I only praised those two, everyone else would sulk about it, so I’d have to be sure to compliment everyone who participated in the battle. They were all working hard against this dangerous opponent.

“Silver-Haired! We’ve almost got it! Keep going!”

“Right! Olea, Sakura! Just a little longer!”

“Tiiii!”

“...!”

For this battle, in addition to Olto, I had brought Olea and Sakura as my tanks. This boss was an earth type, but it wasn’t particularly weak against trees. However, Sakura and Olea both had a resistance to its attacks. Olto was also resistant to earth, as was Drimo, who I was planning to switch in. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say that I had made my frontline roster one specialized in combating earth-type monsters, so my party might have been doing even better than Carlo’s.

Since it had been written on the forums and elsewhere that we couldn’t use the bomb saturation attack strategy on this boss, I had been expecting the boss

to be super strong...but this in fact might've been the only boss among all four that my party could defeat with our own strength.

“Grrraaagh!”

“Oh crap!”

The Great Earth Beast took up a strange stance. It splayed out its limbs and lay flat on its belly. We'd learned in advance that this was the stance it took before using its killer move. A lot of players took this moment as a chance to attack, only to fail to escape in time and fall prey to the boss's attack. The suggested strategy was to move away from the Great Earth Beast once it assumed that position and focus on defense.

“Run, run, run!”

“Mm-mmm!”

“Hummm!”

We all sprinted away from the boss, and as soon as we did, the Great Earth Beast unleashed a roar and made its move. From its prone position, it jumped up with great force, its ten-meter-long body launching almost twenty meters into the air. Then, it came falling back down in the same position.

*Fwooosh—WHABAM!*

While the sound effect might have been comical, the power behind that attack was nothing to laugh about. It wasn't a simple body slam—the force of the impact of its fall made the ground rise up in spikes, turning the area around the boss into a pincushion.

If we'd gotten caught up with the assault, we'd have been skewered. And that wasn't all—countless smaller rocks were sent scattering, and some even came flying as far as the area in which we'd taken refuge.

“Mmm-mm!”

“O-Olto!”

Olto moved in front of me and Reflet to protect us. The rocks pelted against Olto, but he didn't waver one bit. He was able to block the spray of rocks with ease. Once the Great Earth Beast's attack was over, Olto turned around to look

at us. *His smile, it's so radiant!*

"Mm!"

"Y-You saved us!"

"Hum!"

Reflet and I clung onto Olto and he gave us a thumbs-up. *Dang, he's just like Drimo! Olto, you're so cool!*

"Now that that attack's over, this is our chance. Everyone, attaaack!" Carlo cried. He and his monsters jumped right in to attack. *That's our cue too!*

"Guys! Let's go!"

"Kee-hee!"

"...!"

We attacked with all our might, and eventually, we managed to bring down the boss. I was pretty sure my party alone had shaved off about twenty percent of its HP. For a weak party like ours to contribute even twenty percent was a spectacular achievement.

Now, to check the results.

"Whoa, this Great Earth Beast's Spear Splinter. Is this...?"

"You got it?!" Carlo exclaimed. "That's definitely a super rare item."

"Leave it to Yuto to find it fer us."

"That's Silver-Haired for you!"

Was this really thanks to the combined effect of Calling Blessing and Luck after all? This made me more motivated to keep grinding the bosses.

Other than that item, we didn't get any other rare drops. Though to be fair, we had only beaten each of the four bosses once. I'd be accompanying the Cats for one more day, so tomorrow, we'd narrow our focus to grind one target.

Now that we were done with fighting for the day, it was time for me to head back to the place I'd been waiting impatiently to return—the Squire's Forest.

"We're gonna fill out the map today."

“Growl.”

“Chirp chirp!”

It was probably going to be difficult to find a Cute Horse today, though—it was already nighttime. That was why I decided that my goal for the day was simply to map out the entirety of the sparse forest.

“Tiiii-triii!”

“Someone’s peppy, huh?”

“Tiiii!”

“Is this because you met the Sequoia Dryad?”

“Tiiii?”

Actually, before we came here, we paid a visit to the Lakeside Sequoia Dryad’s altar. Usually I went there just for Sakura, but this time was slightly different. Since our party had a new tree nymph, Olea, I wondered if that might trigger some sort of event. So, I decided to bring them along with me and Sakura. Of course, there was the possibility that Sakura received special treatment since she was sort of like the Lakeside Sequoia Dryad’s daughter. Still, something might happen since Olea was also a plant spirit—that was the idea, at least.

When we got there, the Dryad not only stroked Sakura’s head but Olea’s too. Moreover, she even smiled kindly at Olea, who was standing calmly by Sakura’s side.

“You have someone new with you today, I see. What a lovely child.”

“Tri-triii!”

“Make sure you work hard alongside your master.”

“Tiiii!”

Well, that was basically all that happened in the end. Oh, but Olea’s favorability score had probably increased, since that seemed to be the case for Sakura. Besides, it was fine that nothing special had happened. The visit had made them both happy.

“Tii-triii! ♪”

The sight of Olea humming happily next to me made me think their favorability *had* increased, at least.

“Chirp!”

“Another squirrel?”

Once again, we encountered no rideable monsters, only squirrels, rats, and other small fry. At first I figured it was the perfect opportunity to check out my party’s coordination with Olea thrown into the mix, but I was already tired of this. With monsters as weak as these, this couldn’t even be called level-grinding. It was just tedious work.

“What should we do? The map’s complete too.”

“Mm?”

“Triii?”

Everyone else looked like they still had some energy left in them, but I was bored!

“Hmm, how about we have a picnic in an empty clearing?”

Our snowy hot pot party the other day had been a blast, so I kind of wanted to try something similar here. *Chowing down in one of the game’s stunning locations? Sounds great.* There were fluorescent gentians growing in the clearing, so it would be plenty bright enough at night too. Plus, it would be even brighter with the full moon out tonight, and a picnic under the moon sounded pretty classy.

“All right! We’re not fighting or exploring any more today! We’re having a picnic! Let’s head to the clearing!”

“Mm-mmm!”

“Trii-triii!”

“Tra-la-la!”

Everyone was fully on board with the idea. They all celebrated as we rushed over to a clearing in the forest, mowing down any enemy that crossed our path instantly. That was how excited they were for the picnic. My monsters must

have really enjoyed that snowy hot pot party with Carlo.

We sprinted into the clearing, which was even more breathtaking than I was anticipating. The fluorescent gentians scattered particles of light as they swayed in the breeze, and a big, silver moon shone down from above. The forest looked mystical bathed in the moonlight, almost like a scene straight out of a Ghibbley film. I half expected Todorō or a certain deer forest spirit to pop out.

“Kee-hee-hee!”

“Chirp chiiirp!”

“Grooowl!”

The second my monsters stepped foot in the clearing, they immediately dispersed to vigilantly survey our surroundings. They must have been watching out for any enemies who might interrupt our picnic. *I can feel their resolve! They’d do anything to have this picnic!*

“I like everyone’s motivation. Okay then, go on and keep watch. I’ll get everything ready.”

“Mm-mm!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl growl!”

My monsters gave me a salute and then jumped right back into searching for any enemies in our vicinity. They were being so brave even though we weren’t in combat! If they were looking forward to the picnic *this* much, I couldn’t just serve them tea and call it good. *Very well, I’ll do everything in my power to give them the best picnic ever!*

“I think I’ll spread this cloth on top of the straw mat. Eine, could you hold that side over there?”

“Tra-la-la!”

“That’s right, and spread it out that way.”

The cloth we were spreading was one of the largest cloths Eine had made so far. It was white with a flower pattern along its border, which I had drawn. I was



thinking of eventually making it into a bedspread, but it worked nicely as a picnic blanket too. I also wanted to use Himka's silverware set. Himka had made several more silverware sets, like the one he had made for the auction. From the plain wooden trunk, I took out the gorgeous plates and cups and set them down on the cloth. Just looking at them all was getting me excited. In addition to everyone's favorite meals, I also set down some sandwiches. Honestly, they were just for atmosphere. A set of fancy silverware and standard picnic fare on top of a pretty picnic blanket? *Now that's what I'm talking about.*

I ended up taking a bunch of screenshots of the picnic set I had set up. This was exactly what people meant by "picture-worthy." I called my monsters back, and once everyone had a cup of tea in hand, we began our picnic.

"Okay, cheers!"

"Kee-hee!"

"Tra-la!"

We started off with lively chatter as we dug in to the food. Everyone looked content as could be as they stuffed their faces with their favorite foods.

As we were chitchatting, everyone seemed to get more and more caught up in the moment. True, the excitement was already high from the start, but now it was growing even more. It was almost like everyone was drunk. Or maybe they really *were* drunk on the atmosphere. My monsters started dancing, singing, and chasing each other around. I drank my tea as I watched them simply being cute. This was bliss.

Lilith was standing solo, raising her spear up high and turning around in circles, like she was doing some cultic dance in worship of an evil god. As I watched her have her fun, I suddenly thought of something—Dark Sorcery. I wasn't sure how to use it, but it was currently nighttime. Weren't the conditions to use it better right now than during daytime?

"Lilith, got a sec?"

"Kee-hee?"

The second I called her name, she stopped dancing and came over to me.

“Do you know how to use your Dark Sorcery?”

“Kee? Kee-hee!”

“Oh! So you do!”

Lilith thumped her chest, flew a short distance away from me, then thrust her hands out in front of her. It was the same sort of pose Rick struck when he used Forest Sorcery. That must mean she could use the skill here and now.

“Do you mind if we test it out a bit?”

“Kee-hee-hee!”

“There it is! A magic circle!”

An ominous, glowing, dark-red magic circle emerged on the surface of the ground. It looked unmistakably like black magic...

“Uh, is this safe?”

“Kee-hee?”

I nervously inched towards the magic circle on the ground to see it more clearly. Just like with Forest Sorcery, it was a double pentagram magic circle. The color made it look like something wicked; seriously, *was* this safe?

While I was standing there uneasily, a window popped up.

“Spell of Dusk?” I read aloud.

“Kee-hee.”

The spell’s primary effect was to imbue and strengthen the nighttime properties of the surrounding field. When this spell was used on the field and home bases, it would make the area in its range of effect be treated as if it were nighttime, even if it was the morning or afternoon. In other words, skills and such that were only effective at night could be used during daytime too.

Also, when using the spell at night, it would make the night attributes even more powerful. This spell would be super useful for players like Necromancers, since undead monsters became more powerful at night. I knew someone like Chris would definitely want this.

I could use the skill by offering ten items with a dark attribute, which I just

barely had enough of. I had enough for one usage, but I was also interested in seeing what the other spells were. In Rick's case, he had been able to use four spells from the start. I asked Lilith, and apparently she also had four types of spells too.

I asked her to use the second magic circle, which brought up a spell called Spell of Dawn. This was the opposite of the Spell of Dusk. It weakened the power of night and darkness within range. Monsters who became stronger at night would instead be weakened.

The third one was called Nocturnal Spell. It was a spell that granted the blessing of darkness to your party members, allowing them to perform actions at night or under darkness without any issues. In addition to giving Night Vision, the spell also prevented your party members from becoming weak at night and granted them resistance to darkness.

The fourth and final one was Dispel, which canceled the effects of the previous three spells. No offerings were required, but the longer the remaining time on the effect it was canceling, the more mana it consumed.

"Hmm, looks like each one requires the same number of items."

I wanted to try at least one of them, but I only had enough items to do it once. In that case, Spell of Dawn or Nocturnal Spell was probably a better choice than Spell of Dusk. There was probably a special spell, like the Demon Summoning spell I used to get Lilith, but I didn't have the ability to look into that right now. That time with Demon Summoning had really just been a stroke of luck.

"I can imagine what Nocturnal does, but Dawn is a little less clear."

If I used it now, would it only turn my surroundings into daytime? Or would it just weaken night attributes, and there would be no visible change?

"Well, let's just use it and find out. Lilith, activate the Spell of Dawn!"

"Kee-hee-hee!"

Once I offered up the dark-type items needed to activate the spell, the magic circle instantly lit up. The flickering, dark-red light gave off an undeniably evil vibe. Not that anything I was worried about actually happened, though. No

demon with a sheep's head or indescribably evil god appeared. It was just an ordinary light. The light took on the shape of a dome, then burst open and vanished. The spell's range of effect must be this entire clearing.

"It's still nighttime."

"Kee-hee."

We weren't illuminated in light—the field remained unchanged. It was like nothing had even happened. Did the same go for my monsters?

"Does anyone feel any different?" I asked.

Two monsters raised their hands—Olea and Lilith.

"What changed about you, Olea?"

"Trrrr."

"Hmm?"

"Trrrr-trrrr."

Olea walked in front of me, then stood there looking up at the sky. Their mouth was half-open and they looked like they were spacing out. Was that drool I saw?

"Um, what're you doing?"

"Trrrr!"

"Y-You don't have to get mad. One more time, please."

"Trrrr."

*Hmm.* No matter how many times I watched them, it just looked like Olea was standing there with a cute, dumb look on their face. Were they enjoying themselves? It sort of looked like they were sunbathing or something.

"Oh! Sunbathing! As in, photosynthesis!"

"Trrrr-trrrr!"

Apparently, they were trying to tell me that they could now perform photosynthesis at night too. Thanks to the Spell of Dawn, even though there was no sunlight, the area we were in wasn't considered entirely nighttime.

“What changed for you, Lilith?”

“Kee-hee.”

Lilith thrust her hands out in front of her, then crossed her arms in front of her, making an X.

“Are you saying you can’t use Dark Sorcery here now?”

“Kee-hee!”

This time I got it right in one guess. As I had suspected, Dark Sorcery could only be used at nighttime. Also, since Lilith had negated the nighttime properties with her own spell, the conditions to activate Dark Sorcery were no longer fulfilled. If we moved outside the range of the spell, she could probably use it again. Either way, I confirmed that the spell affected her too.

I couldn’t find anything else that had changed. I’d have to gather some more dark-attribute items and test things out more. I also wanted to know if I could use Dark Sorcery on my farm. I wanted to find out what would happen if I grew crops continuously at night, among other things.

“Sorry for interrupting things. Let’s get back to our picnic.”

“Kee-hee!”

“Trrrr!”

And so, we restarted our picnic. It was then that Rick suddenly sprung up.

“Chirp chirp?”

“What’s up, Rick?”

“Chiiirp.”

He was looking at the forest. Or no, in *front* of the forest? But nothing was there. It was just the same open field we were sitting in. Rick seemed to sense something, though. His nose was twitching as he stared at the open field.

“Hmm, should I go check it out?”

Judging by how intensely Rick was staring in that direction, something was probably there. I slowly walked over in that direction. I glanced behind me and saw Rick still had his eyes trained on that spot. Sure enough, something had to

be there.

“But I can’t see anything.”

It was very faint, but my Presence Detection skill was picking up on something. But it was so subtle that if Rick hadn’t piped up, I wouldn’t have noticed it at all. I didn’t know exactly where it was, and I couldn’t tell if it was a monster or not. Something strange was afoot.

“Hmm. Is this the spot, Rick?”

“Chirp.”

“Further?”

“Chirp chirp!”

Rick was moving his tiny right hand in a pushing motion, like he was telling me to move a little more. I followed Rick’s instructions and walked a little—*Fwump*.

“Agh!”

*What the? I tripped on something!*

I went falling face first in the open field, hitting my face hard against the ground. It didn’t hurt or anything, but what happened? I looked over my shoulder. The grass looked a little odd. When I focused my eyes, I could see the grass was unnaturally bent, as if there were an invisible stone weight resting on top of it. Actually, there probably really *was* something invisible there. I must have tripped and fallen over that.

I strained my eyes to concentrate on that spot, but I couldn’t see anything. As usual, my Presence Detection only had a slight response, and my Trap Detection and Yokai Detection didn’t pick up on anything.

“Here goes nothing.”

My only option at this point was to reach out and touch it directly. I gingerly reached a hand out towards the spot where I suspected the invisible object was. *I-I’m not going to get bit, am I?*

*Floof.*

“Huh?”

I felt what I could only think was the sensation of soft hair. Apparently this invisible thing had fur. I was sure that from an outsider’s perspective, I just looked like some weirdo moving his hand in empty air, but there was no doubt that there was something here that was furry and soft.

*Floof floof floof.*

*Uh-oh, it’s so nice and soft, I can’t stop petting it.* It had short, smooth fur, but the softness of it made it feel fluffy too.

“What *is* this?”

A creature? But my Presence Detection was saying nothing was there. As I petted it for a few more seconds, I started to feel the shape of the transparent fluffy thing. It was about the size of a large dog, it had a bushy tail that felt like long hair bundled together, and what felt like four legs folded up. It also had a neck and a head. On the back of its neck it had slightly coarse hair that felt like a mane. I could probably assume it was some four-legged animal.

This ability wasn’t like a chameleon’s—its body was perfectly see-through. Also, it wasn’t moving at all. Wouldn’t an animal that was hiding normally make a bolt for it once it was discovered? Was it because I wasn’t doing anything outwardly hostile towards it?

“Hmm, what should I do...?”

Attacking it was a last resort. First, I’d try a friendly approach.

“I wish I knew what it liked to eat.”

I didn’t even know if it was a carnivore or a herbivore. Actually, if it was a carnivore, was I in trouble? Was it going to take a bite out of me when I was least expecting it? Though I didn’t even know if it really *was* a living creature in the first place. It’d be super embarrassing if I was just petting some inanimate object. Oh well, if that was the case, then I could at least share this story with Alyssa and we’d have a laugh over it.

I took out a bunch of different foods from my inventory and spread them out in front of the invisible furry thing. This was the method I used to find out what

my Obake, Rinne, liked to eat too.

Cooked meat, cooked seafood, cooked veggies, dessert, and juice. No reaction.

Raw meat, raw seafood, raw vegetables—a reaction! Did it respond to the blue carrot? I picked up the raw blue carrot and held it close to what I thought was the thing's head.

Yup, it reacted to the carrot all right. I could sense the fluffy thing was quivering. Then, I heard a crunching sound as the end of the blue carrot vanished. I guessed that the munching noise was the sound of it chewing? I couldn't see the thing, so it just looked like bits of the carrot were suddenly getting chopped off along with the crunching sound. But judging by how enthusiastically it was eating the carrot, it must have really liked it. It had already eaten the whole thing except for the stem. I placed that on the palm of my hand and let it eat it while I took out another carrot. The transparent fluffy thing ate that right up too.

Wondering if it might like to eat something else too, I took out several other vegetables, and the thing seemed to like amber pumpkins, cure carrots, and lantern pumpkins. I was pretty shocked when it even ate the flame of the lantern pumpkin. The flame always went out whenever I cut it, so I had never eaten it. *D-Does it taste good?*

“Chirp chiiirp?”

“Tra-laaa?”

My monsters were also interested in this invisible fluffy creature. They lined up by my side and watched the vegetables disappear. Though I had a feeling they just found it entertaining to watch the vegetables suddenly vanish.

And so, as the munching and crunching continued, the vegetables gradually all disappeared. At last, after polishing off two blue carrots, amber pumpkins, lantern pumpkins, and cure carrots each, the mysterious fluffy thing finally did something new.

“Neigh!”

“Oh? Was that its voice just now?”



The moment I heard an adorable whinny, a change occurred in front of my eyes. First, a silhouette emerged in midair, revealing a figure with black fur. It was finally showing itself to me. After a few seconds, I was able to see it clearly.

“Neigh!”

“A black...pony?”

“Neigh.”

That now-opaque figure was a small horse with bluish-black fur. It was a horse all right, but it didn’t look realistic. It looked like a cartoonified wooden horse with soft facial features, like a certain cute-faced mule in an old-school manga. It was about the size of a real-life miniature horse.

“Are you a Cute Horse?”

Its fur color was different from what I’d heard, though. My source was the lumberjack at the entrance of the Squire’s Forest. We exchanged some small talk when I arrived, and he mentioned that Cute Horses had cream-colored fur. While they might have some individual differences, they probably wouldn’t be entirely different colors. Was this a unique specimen?



“Appraise— Whaaa?”

The second I appraised it, a weird sound came out of my mouth. This horse was called a “Moon Pony.” A moon horse? The characters for writing “palomino,” a type of horse coat color, were “moon” and “hair,” but...didn’t palominos have a more yellowish coat? I gave the horse a closer look and saw it had a yellow crescent on its forehead. *Aha, so that’s where the moon comes in.*

“Neigh?”

“Let’s see, what’s the best move here?”

It didn’t seem like it was hostile towards me. It gave no indication that it was going to attack. It was smaller than I was expecting, but was this my chance to tame a horse?

Although, since it was a non-active monster, if I tried to tame it, there was a high possibility I’d get thrown into battle, since doing so would increase its hate towards me. Could we win if we fought it? If it was the same level as everything else in this field, then it should be an easy win. But if it was a special monster, there was the chance that it alone was high-leveled. And most importantly, was this even a monster I could tame in a fight? If it was an event-related monster, then it might be untameable.

“Man, I don’t know.”

“Neigh?”

“Uh, I still have some time, so I’ll keep petting you until then.”

It was letting me pet it without putting up much of a guard. I decided to hang out with it a little longer.

“Chirp chiiirp!”

“Tra-la-laaa!”

“Neigh-neigh!”

As I was petting the Moon Pony’s head, Rick and Eine started clinging onto it. Rick sat on its head, and Eine on its back. My monsters weren’t the only ones having fun—the Moon Pony seemed to be enjoying itself too. It circled around

me with the two of them riding on it. The Moon Pony's hooves made a pleasant clip-clopping sound as it leisurely trotted around. It almost looked like it was skipping.

My other monsters started pushing each other out of the way to gather around the pony too. The pony didn't mind at all, and let them all ride it one by one. I had no concern about Olto, Olea, and Lilith riding it, but I was worried Bear Bear would be too big. However, there seemed to be no problem. It might have been small, but it was still a horse. Transporting heavy things on its back was its specialty.

After trotting one lap around the clearing with Bear Bear on its back, the Moon Pony came up to me and whinnied lightly.

"Neigh!"

"Are you telling me you'll let me ride?"

"Neigh-neigh!"

I was right. The Moon Pony lifted its front legs high off the ground enthusiastically. I took the pony at its word—I mean, its neigh—and decided I would try to ride on its back. I was expecting to be stopped by the status restrictions, but I wouldn't know until I tried.

I hopped on its back, worried I might crush it, but the horse looked completely unruffled.

"Does this mean I cleared the status requirements?"

"Neigh!"

It seemed that just like with the Cute Horse, my stats were enough to ride the Moon Pony without issue.

"Aren't I heavy?"

"Neigh-neigh!"

In response to my words, the Moon Pony took off running. It was actually going the same leisurely pace it had been with my monsters, but riding on its back made it feel much faster. Still, I wasn't wobbling as much as I thought I'd be. I wasn't able to keep completely still, but I was mostly just bouncing up and

down. If I had to compare it to something, it would be similar to riding on a bicycle.

I wasn't sure how it'd feel if the pony went any faster, but I had no problem riding at this slower pace. *Man, if this is how fun it is to ride, I definitely want to befriend this pony.*

"Hey, would you want to be one of my monsters?"

"Neigh?"

"I'm asking if I can tame you. I'm not going to force you, of course."

I couldn't help but feel reluctant to fight a monster I was having so much fun with. The best scenario would be if I could tame it without having to fight it. I had tamed Lilith without fighting her, so it didn't seem totally impossible.

"If you join my team, you'll be able to eat plenty of vegetables and you'll have tons of friends."

"Neeigh!"

The pony turned around to look at me and gave a quick tilt of its head. Did I pique its interest? It looked like it was considering it. It just needed one more push!

"I have lots of monsters, mascots, and yokai. I also have a home where you can play with everyone whenever you want. You'll never be lonely."

While I talked about all the benefits of becoming my monster and petted the Moon Pony's neck, something happened. Its body suddenly started glowing. *I've seen this light before!*

Then, the pony whinnied adorably.

"Neigh-neigh!"

*Ding-dong.*

*"You have tamed a Moon Pony."*

*I did it! That actually worked!*

"You're one of my monsters now! Happy to have you on the team!"

“Neigh-neeigh!”

The Moon Pony lifted its front legs up like a wild horse and whinnied happily, then suddenly, it vanished. I was already at my party limit, so it had been sent to my home.

I had now gotten what I came here for, so I decided to go back for the time being. With my monsters in tow, I headed for the entrance of the Squire’s Forest. The lumberjack came up to me with a smile and said, “Looks like you tamed yourself a monster. Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“And a Moon Pony, at that. Now that’s a rare one.”

Thanks to game logic, the guy already knew I had tamed a Moon Pony. He was nodding admiringly.

“Is it a special monster?” I asked. “I thought it might be.”

“It sure is. They only appear on a moonlit night, and they’re no easy feat to find. Good job.”

“It was just luck. My monster picked up on its presence.”

“They’re hard to please even if you do notice them, so you never know if you’ll be able to befriend them.”

Apparently even acting slightly antagonistic towards one ruined your chance of taming them. I really had been lucky. I had to hand it to Rick for noticing something was off, and to me for not attacking it.

“You probably know this, but you can only take one monster from here.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Glad to hear it. Take care of that one, then.”

“I will!”

I said goodbye to the lumberjack and then left the Squire’s Forest.

Once I got back home, everyone came rushing over to me, including the Moon Pony. It looked like the pony was already getting along with everyone. Reflet was riding on its back, and Fau was on its head.

“You look right at home.”

“Neigh!”

“Hum!”

“Aye!”

*Time to check out this little guy's stats.*

Name: Carro Race: Moon Pony Base Level: Lv. 15

Master: Yuto

HP: 50/50 MP: 5151

Strength: 10 Endurance: 14 Agility: 13

Dexterity: 7 Intelligence: 13 Sanity: 10

Skills: Hiding, Riding, Silent Step, Moon Magic, Dash Attack, Augment Magic, Night Vision

Equipment: None

A unique specimen! It already had a name. Was Carro from carrot? Or maybe carriage? Abilities-wise, it seemed more magic oriented, but its decent endurance and agility meant it would do a fine job as a monster mount.

The breakdown of its skills went something like this:

**Hiding:** Conceal oneself from enemies when standing still.

**Riding:** When being ridden, strengthens both self and rider.

**Silent Step:** Suppresses all sounds made when walking.

**Moon Magic:** A magic technique that harnesses the power of the moon.

**Dash Attack:** Attacks by running and hurling self at enemy.

**Augment Magic:** Grants part of own magic power to rider.

**Night Vision:** The ability to see in dark places.

Carro possessed two skills that I had never heard of before. Augment Magic sounded like it would give a boost to my own magic when I was riding Carro. Since Carro was still low-leveled, the effect wouldn't be anything spectacular yet, but I was grateful to have it as a magic user. Plus, as Carro grew stronger, that skill was sure to offer some amazing power.

The other skill, Moon Magic, still had me flummoxed. Honestly, I had no clue what it might do, but I had a feeling it might have been the skill that had made the pony invisible. It couldn't have been Hiding—even though that was supposed to suppress the horse's presence, it wouldn't have been able to make Carro invisible.

“What does Moon Magic do? Can you use it here?”

“Neigh-neigh!”

Carro responded to my question with a quick nod, glowed for a second, then disappeared. I was right—turning invisible was an effect of Moon Magic. Also, the pony didn't just turn invisible. Its scent, presence, and any noises it made had all been eliminated.

The reason why Rick had been able to pick up on Carro's presence while it was hiding might have been because the pony hadn't been *perfectly* invisible. It had been in the range of effect of Lilith's Spell of Dawn that she had used in the clearing, which was able to eradicate the nighttime effects in an area for a certain length of time. Moon Magic's effects probably weakened during the day, leading to the pony's presence filtering through and getting noticed by Rick.

There was another surprising thing: Fau and Reflet, who were riding on top of Carro, had turned invisible as well. The skill didn't just affect Carro, but also its riders. I wondered if that was an effect of the Augment Magic skill.

I decided to verify further. I hopped onto Carro's back, but I didn't turn invisible. Also, when Fau and Reflet got off Carro, they became visible again. To



put it simply, someone had to be riding Carro when it activated Moon Magic and then remain touching it to remain invisible. Also, the pony couldn't do any vigorous movement. Anything more than a leisurely walk and the invisibility would drop. The effect time also seemed to be around three minutes maximum.

Still, this skill was an extremely beneficial ability for someone with my playstyle. It could be used for surprise attacks or escaping, so it was sure to come in handy.

Another effect of Carro's Moon Magic, Carro was producing a light that replenished others' MP. The amount recovered was less than the amount of MP it cost Carro to use, but it seemed useful as a last resort in a pinch. Moon Magic had its quirks, but its range of techniques would increase as Carro leveled up, so I was excited to see how it would develop.

"It looks like you can be equipped with a saddle, as well as neck and leg accessories."

Where could I possibly get a saddle? At a time like this, it was best to call on an acquaintance who already rode a mount.

I checked my friend's list and saw that the person I was looking for was logged in. I sent him a message, and he immediately called me.

"Why hello, Yuto. It's a pleasure to hear from you again!"

It was Siegfried, everyone's favorite gallant knight role-player. His boundless charisma came through even over the call.

"Yeah, same here," I said. "Do you have a few minutes?"

"Certainly. I was just taking it easy at home."

Siegfried had apparently acquired a Western-style house, but since he had installed a stable along with it, the house itself was small, and he still hadn't set up any furniture to have guests over. Too bad. I wanted to check it out.

"So, I actually just acquired a horse, and I wanted to ask you how I'd go about getting a saddle. Where can I buy one?"

"Oh wow! You've finally gotten yourself a horse companion too! What a

delight to hear! There still aren't many of us."

In truth, it wasn't as if there were no players who rode monsters. Players could obtain a mount by using their starting points, like Siegfried, or through an event for knights. Of course, the monsters received from those events were random and were a special type that didn't evolve. It was like the game was telling you it was in your best interests to go and find one for yourself. Plus, the starting monsters weren't horses, but mainly ostriches and donkeys.

There were actually surprisingly few horses around, and Siegfried himself stood out, the white horse he'd had from the start still being the only one around. All this combined made him incredibly famous.

"I bought my first saddle from the Knights' Guild, but recently I've been requesting them from leatherworkers."

"The Knights' Guild, gotcha."

Honestly, I felt awkward going to ask a leatherworker when I didn't know anything about saddles, so I preferred to start with getting one for beginners. As I was thinking that, Siegfried made a surprising suggestion.

"Instead of buying one, why don't you take one of my old ones?"

"You have extra?"

"I replace my saddle every so often. Each one has different abilities. But I can't help but feel a bit bad throwing away something with such sentimental value."

Siegfried was apparently the type to hold on to old equipment instead of getting rid of it. Though with how sophisticated this game's equipment was, I could understand why he'd feel it was a waste to get rid of them.

"I'm not sure I want to take something that holds memories for you."

"Ha ha ha. While they *do* hold sentimental value, they're just collecting dust right now. I'm sure any one of them would be much happier being used by you. Besides, I can't hoard it forever."

"Hmm. I guess I'll take you up on that, then. What do you want for it? Is money okay?"

“That’s fine. But I have several types, and I don’t know which one will best suit your horse. How about I bring them over so you can pick?”

“Sounds good.”

Siegfried told me about some other equipment he had, and then we decided to meet up right away. All I had to do was wait for him to arrive, though.

After barely ten minutes of me hanging out in my garden, Siegfried showed up. His home must have been much closer than I had thought. I asked him where he lived; he said he was in the next housing block over.

“Aah, the night air is quite refreshing. ’Tis fine weather for a long ride.”

“You sound like an aristocrat...”

“Ha ha ha. I look forward to the day when the two of us can go on a long ride together, Yuto. So, what is this horse of yours like?”

“I’ll introduce you.”

I led Siegfried over to my garden. I planned to add something like a horse track to my house someday. I had the money for it, after all! *Ahh, that phrase is like music to my ears. It’s not something I can ever say in real life, though!*

“Neigh!”

“This is Carro, my Moon Pony,” I said.

Siegfried beamed widely and walked over to Carro. He must have been a big fan of horses in general.

“Wow! What a lovely pony! I’ve never seen one like it before.”

“You haven’t?” I asked in surprise.

“No. My Silver started out as a Packhorse, which is a species undiscovered in the wild. From there, he evolved into a Kind Horse, then a Knight Horse. I don’t know any other types outside of those evolutions.”

As a unique Packhorse, Silver had a special evolution route.

Of course, other people had also obtained horses with their initial bonus points, but Silver was *Siegfried’s* beloved horse. There was a big difference between Siegfried, who had sunk all of his points into enhancing Silver, and

other players who were happy enough just to have any old horse.

Apparently it was possible to receive bonuses if you gave your horse aspects which were considered negative, which was how Silver had turned out so ugly. Siegfried didn't seem to mind that, though.

"Carro's pretty small, though. Will Silver's saddle fit?"

"That won't be a problem. The saddle changes to fit the wearer. Your horse will change size as it evolves, and the saddle will adjust to that."

"Makes sense. Sometimes monsters really shoot up in size when they evolve."

Other equipment did the same thing. As long as the monster didn't get absurdly huge, it wasn't a problem.

"Your pony's stats are also important to consider. Do you mind if I take a look?"

"Right, go ahead."

I showed Siegfried Carro's stats.

"Oh ho ho. Interesting."

"So Carro *is* different from other horses? I knew it."

"Well, this is my first time even seeing a horse that can use magic."

Horses that evolved from Packhorse generally had high strength, endurance, and agility—stats geared for the front line. Silver was also decked out with skills to heal his rider, and defensive skills.

Compared to him, Carro, who possessed hitherto unknown magic, might have been better off with getting a custom-made saddle eventually. It would even be possible to have a saddle made that could enhance Carro's magic.

"Once it evolves, you can get a custom-made saddle suited to its abilities."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Until then, it would be fine to use one of Siegfried's saddles. They were all artisan-made and had great abilities.

"Out of the ones your horse can equip, I think this one is the best, ability

wise.”

Out of the five saddles Siegfried had brought, it was the one with the most middle-of-the-road abilities. Carro didn’t meet the status requirements for any of the saddles that were better.

Name: Black Bear Leather Saddle

Rarity: 3 *Quality*: 8 ★ Durability: 290

Effect: Defense +22, minor bonus to Riding, Agility +5

Requirement: Strength 10 or higher

Weight: 8

Name: Silver Horseshoes

Rarity: 4 *Quality*: 4 ★ Durability: 330

Effect: Defense +24, slight bonus when riding over rough terrain, slight bonus to auto-MP recovery.

Weight: 4

“I can have these horseshoes too? Really?”

“Actually, those are failed horseshoes I made for Silver. They’re low in quality, and didn’t turn out having the ability I wanted them to have.”

I was surprised to hear that Siegfried had a Smithing skill and made some of Silver’s horse gear himself. He had even handcrafted these horseshoes. He really cared about Silver.

Though as the man himself said, they were failures. He had apparently planned for the effects to be stronger, but it was because they were less powerful that they didn’t come with any stat restrictions. Plus they offered pretty good defense.

“I present them to you as a memento for today. I would be honored if you would use them.”

“But these are pretty great. I think you could sell them. Are you really sure I can have them?”

“Even if I tried to sell them, there aren’t many players who are looking to buy them.”

“Ah, that makes sense.”

No matter how good a piece of gear was, if there was no demand for it, it wouldn’t sell. Since there weren’t many players who rode horses, that meant there weren’t many buyers.

“Most players who ride horses are already my clients, after all.”

Apparently, Siegfried had a monopoly on all the horseshoe shares in this game.

“How should I pay you back for the saddle? You’ve done a lot for me, so I could tell you about the place where I got my horse.”

“Ha ha ha. I already have Silver, so I have no need for a new horse. I’d rather you take me up on that invitation to go on a long ride together someday.”

I thought Siegfried would be happy to have that information, but he was solely devoted to Silver. Although when I thought about it, I didn’t think I’d want to replace any of my monsters with another of the same type.

“Outside of money, it would be nice to have a share of your vegetables.”

“You’re okay with just vegetables?”

“While I also have a farm, I can’t compete with an expert. I’d like to give Silver some delicious vegetables to eat.”

“Wait, no, I’m not an expert either...”

*I’m a Tamer, you hear? Not a farmer.*

“Ha ha ha. What a fine joke.”

“Well, it is true that I get high-quality crops thanks to the help of my monsters.”

“See?”

I ended up giving Siegfried 10,000 G and an assortment of veggies in exchange for the saddle. I tried to pay him more at first, but he refused on the grounds that he couldn't sell used items for any more than that. So instead, I gave him a *lot* of vegetables. He was in for a surprise when he got back home!

The next day, I hurried over to my farm before heading to the Quick-Eared Cats. Today was the last day I would be helping out the Cats with their verification, and we'd be grinding a boss. I was honestly scared of just how much money they were sinking into this endeavor, but without those bombs, grinding any of those bosses would take much longer. Plus, the information about bosses' super rare drops was sure to sell for a lot of money, so they were probably confident they could make it all back.

Anyway, since I wouldn't have enough time to do farmwork when I got back, I decided to finish everything before leaving.

"Mm-mm!"

"Morning, Olto. You're looking as full of energy as ever."

"Mmm!"

Olto had come to greet me, so I headed to the farm with him. There, I was met with a shocking sight.

"Whoa! Fire! The farm's on fire!"

I could see red, swaying flames on a patch where I had planted firestarter plants. I rushed over there, but Olto didn't look panicked at all. *Why not? Was there nothing wrong?*

The fire was coming from the field with firestarter plants, and while I knew they were called *firestarter* plants, they weren't actually on fire. They were just red plants that contained a fire attribute.

But the plants I saw before me now were definitely on fire. The shape of the plants reminded me of an oversized calla lily, making it look like in fact a fist-sized flame was burning inside the bell of a red calla lily. I inched closer to appraise one, and I saw it was called a *Flarestarter* Plant, the advanced strain of a firestarter plant.

They were said to be found in the eastern Great Mountains near Red City, but since I still hadn't explored the area in depth, I hadn't seen them.

"What're they doing here? Is it a mutation? Oh wait, that's right! This is where I used the fertilizer!"

These were the firestarter plants I had used the inflamed fertilizer on. They had mutated, just as Olto had intended. Flarestarter plants were now easy for me to get. I could harvest them, and they were available in shops. However, the fact that they had mutated due to the fertilizer was important.

"Wh-What about the others?"

"Mm-mm!"

Olto and I took a look around the farm together, and we found that several other crops had also mutated.

Among those were the aquatic plants in the hydroponic pool. The Air Plants had turned into Bubbling Spring Plants. The Medicinal Herbs had also been enhanced by one rank, and were now called Medium-Grade Medicinal Herbs.

They looked like medicinal herbs with white lily-of-the-valley petals attached. Looking at their effects, they were undeniably one level better than regular medicinal herbs. With these, I would be able to make medium-grade potions, which were currently the best healing potion available. I only heard about them through the grapevine, but the way to acquire them was still unknown. The player in possession of one had acquired it from a random box at the previous auction.

This was an amazing piece of information, wasn't it? Or did Alyssa already know about this? Either way, I'd tell her about it later too.

I had also used the fertilizer and plant booster on the gale plants and red panther caps, but neither seemed to have mutated. Some did have a very high quality, though, so I wondered if that was thanks to the fertilizer. *So if a crop doesn't mutate, it gets a quality boost?* I wondered. It was unclear if the mutation had just failed, or if this combination of crop and fertilizer had resulted in an increased quality.

I had applied the fertilizer and plant booster under Olto's directions, so I had



expected something more to happen than just the quality going up... My only choice was to keep spreading fertilizer and do more investigating.

“Should we check the fruit trees next?”

“Mm-mm!”

I had used several types on the green peach trees, and lo and behold, they had undergone some changes. First, the green peach tree I had used enchanted fertilizer and plant booster on had some different-looking fruits growing on its branches. They actually just looked like normal peaches. There were now light-pink peaches growing among the green peaches on the tree.

“A Spirit Peach? Looks like it can heal poison, paralysis, and curses. Hold up, isn’t this pretty amazing?”

People would definitely want something that could cure them of poison and curses just by eating it.

The green peach trees I had used the attribute fertilizers on also had some unusual peaches growing on them. All their fruits were still green, but they were glowing slightly. When I appraised them, I saw they were called Green Peach (Magic Fruit). They were green peaches, but they now had a special effect. Their description wasn’t helpful, only stating that they were green peaches that held magical power.

“Hmm, these need to be researched too. Olto, will this tree keep producing magic fruit?”

“Mm? Mm-mm.”

Apparently not. Which meant I needed to apply fertilizer again. It would take a lot of time for me to just get enough magic fruit to experiment with.

“For now, I’ll just see how they taste.”

I was interested in the fruit’s effects, but first and foremost was the flavor! If they were tastier, I wanted to use them in my cooking!

“We’ll propagate the medium-grade medicinal herbs, flarestarter plants, and the bubbling spring plants. Hey, if we propagate these peaches, will they grow into their respective fruit trees? Or will they just become green peach trees?”

“Mmm-mm.”

“Hmm?”

I had handed Olto a peach, and he thrust it back at me while shaking his head. Apparently, neither the spirit peach nor the magic fruit could be propagated.

“That’s too bad. But I can keep harvesting them if I use the fertilizer again, right?”

“Mm!”

“Great, then I can just make some more. But first, time to taste-test these peaches!”

“Mm!”

Ever since I picked up on its sweet scent, I couldn’t wait to try it. And the scent was only getting even stronger.

I cut the peaches, which led to some interesting discoveries. First, the spirit peach. It was truly delicious—a juicy, sweet, premium peach. It was probably even better than one of the peaches my boss once gave me that cost 1,000 yen each. I wanted even more of these. I could eat these every day. Maybe I should start considering mass-producing enchanted fertilizer and plant booster.

Next were the magic fruit, which were interesting. Each one provided a different flavor experience. One was overflowing with fruit juice. One was incredibly fragrant. One had an intense, sweet flavor. One was particularly chewy. Each one seemed to have been influenced by the attribute of the fertilizer used on it. The juicy one was water, the fragrant one was air, the sweet one was fire, and the chewy one was earth.

“I want a bunch of these too. I knew it—fertilizer. I need fertilizer.”

“Mm-mm!”

I couldn’t keep sampling the fruit forever, though, so I left Olto to the task of harvesting the fruit and then went back to weeding. I had spent a little too long tasting the peaches and was now running short on time. I really had to buckle down.

“Hraaaaah!”

*Behold my superspeed weeding skills!*

“Tiiii!”

“Huh? Olea?”

“Tiiii! Tri-triii!”

“Oh, I missed a spot. You’re telling me to be more careful.”

“Tiiii!”

Even with an angry Olea watching over my shoulder, I managed to finish up the farmwork in time. In fact, I even had some time to spare.

“Maybe I’ll make some fertilizer with the ingredients I have.”

Setting aside mass production for now, I still needed to secure enough for me to use starting the next day. With that thought, I made enchanted fertilizer and plant booster, and by the end, I had maxed out my Alchemy level.

“Whoa, my Alchemy’s finally at level 50!”

*Now I’ll be able to work even more efficiently than ever!*

After maxing out a crafting skill, it was possible to obtain a higher-level skill derived from the original skill. I went ahead and used my bonus points to get Alchemy (Advanced).

“Now I need to figure out what derived skill I want.”

Alchemy had its own derived skills, just like Arboriculture and Hydroponics were derived from Farming. Being able to choose one of those skills once the main skill was maxed out was a major feature of crafting skills.

“Instant Alchemy, Alchemic Items, Alchemic Potions, Alchemic Materials, Combat Alchemy?”

Instant Alchemy made it possible to use Alchemy even without any tools, but it would result in items with lower quality and effects. It was probably a priceless skill for frontline parties who explored deep into dungeons and fields where it was difficult to exit from easily. They would be able to replenish their items on the spot that way. Being able to easily use Alchemy on the field sounded convenient, but I doubted how useful that would be for me.

Alchemic Items, Alchemic Potions, and Alchemic Materials were skills that granted a bonus when making items, making potions, and processing materials, respectively. There were also some items that could only be made using those skills.

To continue the Farming comparison, these were similar in vein to Arboriculture and Hydroponics. Each one seemed beneficial, so it was difficult to choose. I couldn't go wrong with any of them. Combat Alchemy was a skill that would allow me to create special items during battle by using materials. It could be used to make several handy items, from potions to bombs. However, the quality would be low, and the skill used up a lot of materials and magic, so it would be kind of hard to use. This one seemed the least useful to me, since I wasn't much of a fighter.

"...All right, I'll go with Alchemic Potions. That seems like the best option."

Derived skills were important, but there was something even more important right now. And that was the Water Production skill I had learned from getting Alchemy (Advanced).

As its name implied, it was a skill that just produced flowing water, but it was actually very practical. Believe it or not, it turned almost all types of materials into water. The quality, rarity, attribute, and other characteristics could change depending on the original material.

The good thing about this skill was that since it turned materials specifically into water rather than simply liquefying them, they could be used in place of water as an Alchemy component. The Liquefy art that I already knew only turned solid forms into liquid, and didn't go as far as to change the material's type.

"Now I'll be able to make even more fertilizer and plant booster!"

Both required water as an ingredient. If I could make water with an attribute...just imagine the possibilities! I would be getting plenty of items later that day, so I was looking forward to performing some Alchemy after I got back.

"Whoops, we're gonna be late. Guys, it's time to leave!"

"Neigh-neigh!"

“That’s right, today is your debut, Carro! You got this!”

“Neigh!”

I headed for Green City in the north with my monsters. The plan was to repeatedly hunt the Great Tempest Beast, the boss in northern Zone Nine, until we got a super rare drop.

“This will be your first real battle, Carro. Are you nervous?”

“Neigh?”

The pony was completely fine. It was looking up at me with its big, round eyes. That gesture, which made it seem like it was saying *Whaddya mean?* gave me the impression that it wasn’t scared at all of the powerful boss. Well, I suppose it was Al, after all. But still, this was its first boss, so I couldn’t help but be a little worried.

Incidentally, my party members were Reflet, Rick, Olea, Perca, Lilith, and Carro. We’d be using the bomb saturation strategy again, so we didn’t have to worry too much about power. Highwood and Carlo had assured me I could prioritize leveling up my party, so I decided to take them up on that. Though I did bring Reflet as a healer and Rick as an attacker, just in case.

“Hey, is that—”

“I’ve never seen a horse like that.”

“No surprises there.”

As I had expected, we were being gawked at. Anyone with a monster mount attracted attention, so of course having an unusual horse would stand out.

“You’re popular, Carro.”

“Neigh?”

“Everyone’s looking at you and saying how cute you are.”

“Neigh!”

I patted Carro’s head, which was down at my waist, and the pony whinnied happily. I heard a murmur pass through the peanut gallery as they watched.

Carro was cute, so there was no avoiding this. Rick and Perca were riding on

its back too. A cute squirrel and penguin riding on a black pony? *Nothing could be cuter!* Anyone would stop and stare.

“Heh heh heh. Go on and look. See how adorable my Carro is!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Honk honk!”

“I know, I know. You two are adorable too.”

“Chirp.”

“Honk.”

I’d accidentally made them jealous by giving Carro all the attention. *Man, it’s tough being popular!*

“Humm.”

“Kee-hee.”

“Trrrr.”

“Y-You all too?”

Yup, I had to fawn over all of them equally. Reflet, Lilith, and Olea stuck their heads out towards me, so I gave all three of them some pats. Then, Carro, Rick, and Perca looked up at me. *Oh, are they telling me to give them pats too? Okay, okay. Aww, you’re so cute! Huh? Now you guys again? Well, all right.*

That went on for a while, almost making me late. Man, my monsters were just too darn cute! It was their fault!

“Neigh?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Chirp?”

“Look, I know it’s my fault for getting carried away, okay?!”

*Please, just don’t look at me with those innocent animal eyes of yours!*

And so we walked, chatting as we went, until we arrived at the meeting point—the square in Green City. The Quick-Eared Cats were already there waiting.

“Oh! Alyssa! Sorry to keep you waiting!”

“...”

“Huh? Alyssa?”

“...”

*What’s up? Does she not see me?* I waved to her, but she didn’t react. There was a sizable crowd, so maybe she didn’t notice me? I was standing right in front of her, though...

“Alyssa! Alyssaaa!”

“...”

*Huh? Is she shaking?* She stayed completely frozen even when I called her name.

“Alyssaaa?”

“...”

*Did she really not see me?* I waved my hand right in front of her eyes, but still nothing. Was one of us having connection problems? It really seemed like the issue was on Alyssa’s side, though.

“Huh? Is she okay?”

I looked over to Lewin and the other Cats who were standing a little farther away, but they just shrugged their shoulders, looking confused.

“Yu...to...”

“Oh, is she back?”

Maybe she was trying to ignore me to try to freak me out? Like the silent treatment they do in the Major Leagues? If so, I totally fell for it.

“Please don’t scare me like that,” I said.

“Th-That’s my line! Every time, every single time! M-My stomach, my heart! Ack, my vitals!”

*I-Is she mad?*

“Wh-What’s wrong?”

“*Wrong?! Wheeew... Ahem. Excuse me. I lost my cool for a little there.*”

“A little?”

“Just a little! I lost my cool for just a little!”

I *knew* she looked a little mad...

“Did I do something to upset you?” I asked.

“I’m sorry. I’m not mad at you, Yuto. How should I put this...? I’m mad at my own naivety for thinking I was in the clear this time just because I gathered some measly funds together.”

“Ph-Phew.”

As long as she wasn’t mad at me.

Then, for reasons unknown, Alyssa dragged me over to the Quick-Eared Cats’ stall, staring at Carro all the while.

“Um, what about Lewin and the others?”

“They’ll be fine. I told them to wait. They’ll understand. More importantly, you have some info to sell me, don’t you?”

“I do. A few things, actually.”

“‘A-A few things,’ he says...with a smile on his face!”

“Pardon?”

“Don’t worry about it. This is what my face looks like when I’m happy.”

She must have heard about Lilith’s evolution from Highwood, but that wasn’t all I had to share. Personally, I had been planning to sell her all the information at once at the end of the day, but Alyssa apparently wanted to get this out of the way first. I didn’t mind either way.

“Let’s see, could you start by selling me the info about your demon that I can confirm here?”

“Can I tell you about her evolution and Dark Sorcery?”

“Have you already tested out the sorcery?”

“Just once so far.”



I showed Alyssa Lilith's data as I explained her evolved stats as well as my impressions of using sorcery. I had a feeling that since Lilith was still the only demon around, this information wouldn't sell for much. It wasn't something many people wanted to know. Alyssa didn't seem all too surprised either.

"Gotcha, so it can only be used at night. But considering what Spell of Dusk does, it doesn't seem useful unless you use it in the daytime. Either she'll be able to use Dark Sorcery in the daytime after leveling up a little more, or that spell's meant to be used in places like caves... The magic circle didn't change or anything, like it did when you summoned Lilith, did it?"

"No. I think that was a rare phenomenon. It won't happen again easily."

"Aha ha ha. You're right."

*Am I imagining things or was that a fake laugh?*

"All right, we'll call that good on the demon info. Next I want to hear about the courtyard."

"The courtyard?"

"Yes. Yuto, you entered the courtyard of the Magical Beast's Guild in Zone Ten, didn't you?"

"Huh? You know about that?"

*"Sigh."* It caused a pretty big fuss, actually."

Now that she mentioned it, it was a very therapeutic place for command-class players. A lot of people must have witnessed me enter it. If I had seen another player playing in that courtyard, I'd probably want to find a way in too. *Yeah, I can see how that'd cause a fuss.*

"Are people saying it's unfair I went in there by myself?"

Was I getting hate? *I really hope not!* But as Alyssa explained, that wasn't the case.

"Some people are saying they're jealous of you, but it's nothing serious. In fact, people are praising you. They're expecting we'll publicize the info, so they're waiting for that. That's more or less the vibe."

“Phew. I’m glad no one’s resenting me. And I don’t plan on holding back any information.”

And with that, I told Alyssa everything. In the interest of my own safety, I dug out everything I could from the recesses of my memory and disclosed it all. Not only about the courtyard, but also about everything that came before it.

The continuation of the quest chain, which led to my meeting with Sagitta in the courtyard. The information I had received about evolution during the quest chain. The fact that I had been invited to join a school. The fact that I had been permitted to enter the Squire’s Forest to complete a school-related quest, where I then tamed Carro, a Moon Pony. And lastly, the information I learned about my crops this morning.

“That’s about the gist of it.”

*Phew.* I talked so much my throat was dry. I had recounted everything that had happened until this moment, which was no easy feat.

“Ngh...”

“Alyssa?”

Alyssa started shaking again. Then—

“Hnnngh... WAAAH! It’s only been *two daaays!*”

She screamed.

“Whoa!”

And it was really loud this time! She’d made me jump.

Alyssa flopped onto the counter and screamed with her head in her hands. You know, it seemed like a lot of effort for Alyssa to pull this same role-play act with everyone who came here to sell information. *Hang in there.*

“Th-The info about the new sorcery and the courtyard was bad enough, but the quest chain, devolution, a new school, a new area, and a monster mount that can use new magic? And that’s not all, but spirit peaches and a new fruit? Urgh, hang in there, Alyssa. You can’t let yourself fail anymore!”

Alyssa kept her head down and muttered something to herself for a while.

But once she looked back up, she was smiling cheerfully. For some reason, her usual smile seemed scary now.

“Is it okay if I calculate the information fee for Carro after we verify a few things today?” she asked.

“S-Sure. Thanks.”

“I was expecting today to just be boring boss-grinding work, but I’m super excited now!”

*So she’s not mad? Her face is scaring me, though.*

I waited until Alyssa compiled all the information, then we finally went to meet up with Lewin, Highwood, and Carlo. The information fee would be calculated at the end of the day. I might even get an extra bonus depending on how the day’s verification turned out, so hopefully things went well.

We set out a bit late since it took some time to get Carlo to calm down after he went nuts over Carro. His reaction was only reasonable for a Tamer, though.

“Carro is such a cutie. Now I want a horse too,” he said.

“The only advice I can give is to try your best with that quest chain.”

“Yeah, but I’m wondering if I could get into the Centaur School and gain access to the Squire’s Forest another way.”

“Hmm, that could be another option.”

In order to enroll in the Centaur School, you needed to progress a quest chain that required farming skills. It didn’t really make much sense. But there was actually a good chance that I had gone about it weirdly and there was a different, more normal way to do it. Based on my conversation with Sagitta, that event with him might simply trigger for someone who had a monster mount and had leveled up their long-range attack skills.

Plus, Carlo probably didn’t need to get hung up on joining the Centaur School if he just wanted to get to the Squire’s Forest. It was called the *Squire’s* Forest, after all. Didn’t it seem likely that progressing a knight quest would get you access there too? Although, considering that Siegfried, a top knight player, hadn’t known about the forest, that probably meant it would still be some time

until players could enter the Squire's Forest that way. Maybe going through the Centaur School *was* the easiest way?

"I'll do my best!" Carlo exclaimed. "First I need to get a monster I can ride, though."

He wanted to go to the Squire's Forest to get a horse mount, but to do that he needed to already have a rideable monster... Man, tough break. He had a long way to go.

"How many monster mounts do we currently know about?" I asked Alyssa.

"Not counting ones you get with initial bonus points or brought over from the beta, just a few. Off the top of my head, some were hatched from event reward eggs. I don't think there are any regular monsters you can get on the field that are rideable."

*Not a single one? Are they that rare?* After talking to Carlo a little more, I realized we had a difference in understanding. What I considered a rideable monster was any monster whose back you could ride on. After all, even Drimo in his dragon form had sufficed, even though he didn't have the Riding skill. Thinking about it that way, I figured Carlo's Brown Bear could also be used as a mount. Carlo, meanwhile, thought mounts were monsters that possessed the Riding skill.

"Huh? It's enough just to be able to ride on their backs?" he asked in surprise.

"Probably. Drimo doesn't know Riding, after all."

I wasn't certain, but it might be possible to enroll in the Centaur School without having a monster that possessed the Riding skill. When I was explaining things to Alyssa earlier, I had just given her the basic facts, since I would be selling all of Carro's information at the end of the day. As such, I hadn't yet told her that Drimo didn't have the Riding skill.

There was one other reason why Carlo and the other Cats had been under the impression that Riding was a requirement—getting on the back of a monster that didn't know Riding resulted in lowered stats. Both the player and their mount needed to have the Riding skill or else it made things difficult. If neither had it, then both their stats would be drastically reduced. If only one had it,

then both their stats were reduced by half.

Also, a monster that didn't know Riding wouldn't be able to equip a saddle or horseshoes, which would cause the rider to wobble and get thrown off, making combat impossible. Knowing that had led the Cats to believe that a monster required to enroll in the school needed to know Riding.

"So that means I've already cleared the conditions?"

Carlo could probably physically ride on Paddy, his Brown Bear, so it was possible.

As we were talking, we soon arrived at the boss area where we would face the air elemental, the Great Tempest Beast. It was similar to the Great Flame Beast in form, but thinner. It was also covered in green feathers. It was an agile beast that could double-jump in midair to move at high speeds. The boss also had a membrane that looked similar to what flying squirrels had that allowed it to glide and dive-bomb us, making it a very nasty opponent.

Our bomb saturation attack would make short work of it, though. That was exactly why I had brought Carro, who was still low-leveled.

"You're actually doing great, Carro!"

"Neigh!"

Since I could trust Carro to evade the boss's attacks, I could focus on throwing bombs. Thanks to that, I could attack at a much higher frequency. Carro's Moon Magic also really shone in critical moments. By instantly turning invisible, the pony was able to safely run away from the boss. Carro couldn't use the skill repeatedly, but it didn't get itself into desperate situations that often anyway. My mount's first foray into battle was a huge success.

I continued switching monsters in and out of my party as we grinded the boss. By the end of that morning alone, we had already fought it ten times. I was terrified to calculate just how much the Quick-Eared Cats had splurged on this endeavor. Alyssa seemed pretty pleased with herself, though.

"I can't believe we got it after only ten battles!" she cheered.

"We really lucked out."

As Alyssa was remarking about, we had obtained the super rare drop, the Great Tempest Beast's Fletching, after our tenth battle. Alyssa was all smiles while she appraised the item's data.

"We'll tackle the Great Maelstrom Beast in the south this afternoon!"

"That one, eh...?" Lewin mumbled.

"What's wrong, Lewin?"

Lewin's expression suddenly clouded over, like he was bracing himself for something unpleasant. But I was pretty sure he had no problem going up against that boss before...

"That boss stage is flooded, ain't it?! There's parts where the water goes over my head!"

"You still haven't learned to swim?" I asked.

"Course not!"

Lewin was a hopeless swimmer in real life, so he couldn't swim in the game. Apparently he still hadn't conquered that fear.

"You seemed fine earlier..."

"I know I won't drown in the game, so I can tough it out. But the fact remains that I don't like it, y'hear?!"

So he could handle it once, but he'd rather not do it multiple times. Unfortunately, we wouldn't be able to grind the boss without his exceptional throwing skills, so we needed him to grin and bear it. *Sorry, Lewin!*

"Gaaaaah!"

"Mm-mmm!"

*Hey, come on. Lewin's not playing around, so don't bother him.*

"Mm?"

"Let's go get ready over there, okay?"

"Mmm!"



Thanks to Lewin's noble sacrifice, we successfully finished grinding the boss.

It was nighttime now, and I was relaxing at home. This time I wasn't chilling out on the veranda, but in the prehistoric area where the dinosaurs roamed. *I have dinosaurs on my property! Aah, this is every boy's dream!*

I was stretched out on a deck chair I set up on the edge of the prehistoric pond, admiring the prehistoric world illuminated by the moonlight. A Meganeura—a large dragonfly—was flying around the giant ferns growing around the pond. The silhouetted fish swimming in the water were also clearly no ordinary fish. It was strange yet fascinating to see the dorsal fin of the spinosaurus as it had a pleasant swim around the pond.

With me now were my yokai and mini dinosaur mascots.

"Kapa."

"Tiep."

My mascots were sitting on my lap, smiling happily in the breeze, as I sipped my tea. I enjoyed petting my monsters, but the peculiar feel of mascots was also nice.

*"Slurp... Mm, that hits the spot."*

"Fluff."

"Okay, I hear you. Right here?"

"Boo!"

"I haven't forgotten about you, Rinne!"

My mascots scrambled against each other and fought over my hand. *I feel very loved.*

My mini dinosaurs were sprawled out around my deck chair, snot bubbles blowing out of their noses. I knew it was an effect manufactured by the game, but it was still super cute to see. I patted their heads. They each had a different sensation, from smooth to rough.

"Aah, this is so soothing."

It was important to make time for moments like this. I had been fighting all

day long, so I wanted to use the rest of my time to relax. That said, bathing in the moonlight wasn't *all* I was doing.

"How should I choose to be compensated?" I wondered aloud.

Before the Cats and I split ways, Alyssa gave me options for how she could pay me. First, she asked if I could wait until tomorrow afternoon before she paid me. She looked like she was about to kneel at my feet and she said she'd add on something else to make up for the wait, so I accepted right away.

In exchange for my information and one of my two Great Maelstrom Beast's Shield Scale, which I got that afternoon, she offered me a total of 32,000,000 G. As a large clan, they must have had a lot of expenses to pay, making money too tight to pay me right away. I suspected their money tightness was due to all the bombs they bought to grind the bosses.

One other thing she asked was if I would be willing to accept payment other than money. She told me that if there was anything among the Cats' collection of materials and items that I wanted, she could pay me with those. Honestly, I had enough money, so I was fine with taking rare items. She gave me a list of the items they had along with their effects and price, so I was thinking of choosing a few off of that.

At any rate, she sure was prepared. I wondered if she proposed the same option to other players too. If she did, then there was a chance that the items I wanted might be taken by someone else. I needed to decide quickly. It was probably a good call to send Alyssa a message before we met up to do the money transfer tomorrow so I could get the items too.

"I'm also fine with being paid only in items..."

I'd be happier with rare items over money.

"I don't need any weapons."

Over half of the list was made up of weapons and armor that I couldn't use. I was a little interested in the accessories, but I wasn't sure how much I wanted them.

"Maybe I can get accessories with a lot of slots from this list."



I checked over the list in search of those, and I found something amazing. It was a three-piece set made with rare materials created by the current top accessory maker in the game.

The set contained Black Magic Ear Cuffs, a Black Magic Ring, and a Black Magic Chain. Each one came with three empty slots, and when equipped as a full set, they had the extraordinary effect of granting 50 defense, increased automatic MP recovery rate, and increased magical power.

All three together were worth 8,000,000 G, but I decided I would take them. They were a little flashy, but if I ended up not liking them, I could always change their skin. This feature allowed players to change the appearance of their equipment, or even turn them invisible so that they didn't show up on their avatar.

Several other items and magical tools also caught my eye. There were consumables like powerful bombs, potions, and escape items, as well as handicrafts for interior decoration.

As I scrolled through the list excitedly, I found some amazing items towards the end. There were some skill scrolls—consumable items that let you learn a skill just by reading it. I knew them to be extremely valuable items, but there were quite a few on this list. I never expected anything less from the Quick-Eared Cats!

They must have acquired them for research purposes, and instead of the clan members using them, they were kept to sell to customers. That would explain why none of the skills were advanced skills. But I'd be extremely grateful if I could use money to save on bonus points. I *did* have a lot of bonus points, but I was planning to use them on stats if I ever needed to.

"There are a lot of Knowledge scrolls, huh?"

There were four: Mineral Knowledge, Animal Knowledge, Aquatic Knowledge, and Antiques Knowledge. This was my first time seeing Antiques Knowledge. Who knew there was a skill like that?

"Hmm, but I can also get Knowledge skills on my own."

I had been putting it off, but maybe it was about time for me to learn them.

Maybe I should go with the Antiques Knowledge skill scroll, since I had never seen that before. It cost 2,000,000 G, but it couldn't hurt to have.

Then, I found something even more awesome—a skill scroll for Water Magic Boost. As its name clearly implied, it was a skill that raised the power of water magic. I had been wanting to learn it, but I needed to meet certain conditions for the skill in addition to paying bonus points. If I could get it instantly from a scroll instead, that'd be ideal... It was worth 25,000,000 G, but even that seemed too cheap. That was just how good an item it was.

It would bring my total up to 35,000,000 G... Unfortunately, I'd have to give up on the Antiques Knowledge. I would still be 1,000,000 G over, but I'd just ask Alyssa if I could pay the difference.

“My attack power is about to skyrocket!”

What, you're saying that a weakling like me getting ten percent stronger meant nothing? Whatever! I just wanted to experience what it was like to get even a little bit stronger.

“All right, time to send this over to Alyssa!”

# Online Forum [Gather 'Round Tamers] LJO Tamer Megathread, Part 46

Share the deets on new tamed monsters, show off your companions, etc.—this thread is for everyone!

Bad-mouthing other Tamers is not permitted.

Screenshots gladly accepted.

Avoid double-posting.

Be mindful of what you post.

---

156: Amelia

It hasn't even been a full day since the last time I heard Alyssa scream from the Quick-Eared Cats' stall...

---

157: KingOysterMushroom

Considering what just happened, it's only reasonable people would think that Silver-Haired sold some important information, which is why they rushed over to the Cats.

---

158: Ivan

So that's why the Cats published that info online faster than ever?

---

159: Eulenspiegel

I bet they just wanted to get people to settle down.

---

160: Ursula

Yeah, but things just got crazier after they published the info.

---

161: MorningStarMeow

Well, are you surprised, meow?

This news sent shock waves through the Tamer world too, meow.

---

162: Amelia

The quest chain continuation and new monster mount really are incredible. I want a pony.

But as a Tamer, the craziest thing is—

---

163: Ursula

Devolution! Devolution, right?!

---

164: IrumaBlack

I'm more interested in the pony, personally.

---

165: UdagawaRollerCoaster

Both are groundbreaking.

I'm curious about that Cute Horse. Even Silver-Haired didn't manage to encounter it.

---

166: MorningStarMeow

Oh yeah!

---

167: KingOysterMushroom

Still, you can't deny the information about devolution is the star of the show.

Although the Cats' investigation found that there was a high likelihood that it would be unlocked around a Tamer's fourth or fifth class change.

---

168: Ivan

I've never even heard of a fourth class change in the first place.

Has anyone reached that yet?

---

169: KingOysterMushroom

No, not yet.

That's why they just said there was a "likelihood."

---

170: Eulenspiegel

Making your monsters devolve does sound interesting, though.

That opens up a lot of possibilities.

---

171: UdagawaRollerCoaster

It'll make it possible to devolve a monster you originally evolved into a regular evolution so you can re-evolve it into a special evolution.

Like a max favorability evolution, for example.

---

172: Eulenspiegel

Yeah, exactly!

Also, according to Silver-Haired's information, it sounds like you can use devolution to get a tree nymph!

Which means I have a chance!

---

173: Ursula

Figures that's what you're going for!

---

174: Eulenspiegel

What could be more important than that? Nothing, I say!

If I can't encounter one in the wild, then who's to say I

can't obtain one this way?!

I've already been leveling up my Farming skill! It won't be long before I learn Arboriculture!

---

175: IrumaBlack

Intentions aside, I really hope we can find out how to devolve monsters soon.

---

176: MorningStarMeow

Sounds like you need either the Monster Devolution skill or a devolution potion, meow.

---

177: KingOysterMushroom

Getting Monster Devolution probably depends on your class change.

---

178: Amelia

If you can use that skill on other players' monsters, that would have a big impact on its usability.

---

179: Ivan

I really doubt you'd be able to use it on other people's monsters.

If that was possible, then everyone would swarm a single player.

---

180: Ursula

It does seem unlikely that the devs would implement a feature that puts all the burden on one person.

---

181: KingOysterMushroom

And we have absolutely no leads about how to get a

devolution potion.

---

182: UdagawaRollerCoaster

I tried to ask NPC alchemists and apothecaries, but none of them knew about it.

---

183: Amelia

Maybe they tell you if you have a high favorability score with them.

---

184: Udagawa RollerCoaster

Well, I'm a member of the Alchemy and Apothecary Guilds, and I've been contributing a lot to both.

Though I guess I don't know if my favorability score is high...

---

185: Ursula

What if even though you visit the guilds all the time, the NPCs don't actually like you?

---

186: UdagawaRollerCoaster

Th-That can't be true! I'm pretty sure! I'm always having conversations with the NPC teachers!

---

187: Ivan

That doesn't necessarily mean your favorability score is high, though.

---

188: Amelia

In fact, maybe the fact that you keep talking to them without realizing they don't like you is bringing your score down?

---

189: KingOysterMushroom

This isn't a dating sim. You won't get your favorability up with NPCs just by randomly talking to them.

---

190: IrumaBlack

You're the only one who thinks you're on good terms.  
Sad.

---

191: UdagawaRollerCoaster

Stop it! That's not true!

All the old masters and teachers all hang out with me!  
We even joke around with each other!

---

192: Ursula

You're even hallucinating... Poor thing.

---

193: Eulenspiegel

You idiot! Don't keep digging yourself deeper!

---

194: MorningStarMeow

Silver-Haired's pony is cute, meow.

---

195: Amelia

You said it. It's adorable!

---

196: UdagawaRollerCoaster

I know you're trying to change the subject, but it's not gonna work! I swear we're on good terms!

---

197: MorningStarMeow

If we assume Udagawa's not speaking nonsense...

---



198: UdagawaRollerCoaster

I'm not! You gotta believe me!

---

199: MorningStarMeow

...and the NPCs don't know about the potion, then maybe it's not related to regular alchemy or apothecary, meow?

---

200: Ursula

So even though it's called a potion, maybe it's not actually an item that can be created?

---

201: Eulenspiegel

Then, maybe it's a boss drop?

---

202: KingOysterMushroom

It might also be available from the auction.

In that case, the question is where did an item like that come from in the first place?

---

203: Ivan

The auction? It'd cost a fortune...

---

204: Eulenspiegel

I need to start saving money now!

Then I'll get that devolution potion for sure!

---

205: IrumaBlack

Wouldn't it be faster to just look for a tree nymph in the wild than to wait for a devolution potion that you don't even know will actually be put up for sale?

---

206: Amelia

That way, you can keep leveling up and get closer to the fourth class change.

---

207: Ursula

Won't Silver-Haired find more information on devolution faster than we can by trying random things anyway?

---

208: MorningStarMeow

I can just imagine it! While we're losing our minds trying to figure it out, Silver-Haired will stumble upon a devolution potion like it's no big deal, meow!

---

209: Ivan

I can see myself on my knees bowing to the Cats when they put info about devolution up for sale right after I think all hope is lost!

---

210: KingOysterMushroom

I mean, it's not entirely improbable.

---

211: Eulenspiegel

In the meantime, let's pray to Silver-Haired.

Please, do whatever you can to get more information on devolution!

---

212: UdagawaRollerCoaster

The devolution potion recipe would be nice too!

---

213: Amelia

We don't have to worry at all about Silver-Haired hiding any information lololol

---

214: KingOysterMushroom

Yeah, that's not his style.

---

215: MorningStarMeow

That's our Silver-Haired!

---

216: IrumaBlack

We can count on him to make something happen.

---

## Chapter Four: Looming Shadows

“Hup!”

“Mm-mmm!”

Olto and I dove into a patch of grass at the same time.

“Nice, finally got it!”

“Arf arf!”

“Hey, don’t struggle! I’ll let you go soon!”

The fox I had just caught was wriggling around trying to escape from my grip. This was actually the way to unlock Animal Knowledge—by winning over animals that showed up in towns or in the playing field and holding them. The process required some patience, since each animal had their own unique favorite foods and behaviors. It took myself four hours until I could get close to a fox that I spotted in a field. Even after that, the fox wouldn’t voluntarily let me hold it, so I had to strong-arm it a bit.

Apparently the fox would let me hold it if I waited a few more hours, but I didn’t have time for that. Maybe I hadn’t done things the way the game intended me to, but all that mattered in the end was being able to hold it.

*“You have made contact with a wild animal. You have met the required conditions to unlock some skills.”*

Finally, I heard the announcement I had been eagerly awaiting.

“Bye now.”

“Mm-mmm.”

“Arf!”

After we watched the fox sprint away, I opened up my skills window. Animal Knowledge was now displayed under the list of skills I could acquire.

I had actually already fulfilled the conditions to learn Mineral Knowledge and

Aquatic Knowledge a while ago, but since I didn't feel like I had much need for them, I hadn't learned them. But now that I had a surplus of bonus points, I figured it might be a good idea to learn some skills I was curious about.

Incidentally, the way to unlock Mineral Knowledge was to break rocks with a pickax outside of mining spots, and the way to unlock Aquatic Knowledge was to capture a certain number of nameless fish bare-handed. In my case, I had naturally fulfilled the conditions while I was just hanging out and adventuring like normal.

"Now I've got Plant, Animal, Aquatic, and Mineral Knowledge."

"Mm!"

"But I'm not done yet!"

"Mm?"

"Heh heh heh. You see, I got all the info from the Quick-Eared Cats!"

"Mmm!"

Alyssa gave me some information when we'd met up to do the information fee transfer. She threw it in as a bonus, so I didn't even have to pay for it.

What I obtained was information about Antiques Knowledge. The fact that the Cats owned that skill scroll had to mean that they knew about the skill's existence. There was no way they would just neglect it. Thinking they had to be doing verification on it, I asked Alyssa about it, and I even found out the requirements for learning it. The Quick-Eared Cats pulled through as always.

That information normally cost 100,000, which was neither expensive nor cheap. The skill must not actually be that practical, which would explain that price. Alyssa told me I should figure out how to use the skill to increase its value, but that was easier said than done. After all, I hadn't been putting any thought into what I would actually use it for. Honestly, the only reason I wanted this skill was because I had decided to collect all the Knowledge skills.

"Ready to head to the bazaar?"

"Mm!"

In order to acquire Antiques Knowledge, I had to purchase ten antiques in the

same day without appraising them. Also, at least one of those antiques had to be worth more than double their asking price.

Although it might've sounded simple, it was surprisingly hard. First off, most players had a habit of appraising items before buying them, making the requirement of not using the Appraise skill difficult to achieve on their own. If I hadn't been warned ahead of time, I wouldn't have realized I had to do that. Second, it was rare for antiques to be worth more than twice their selling price, so it required a decent amount of luck to find one without appraising them. The Quick-Eared Cats did a great job succeeding in that. I had to applaud their tenacity.

The bazaar in Zone Five had plenty of NPC-run stalls, and there were several that sold antiques. I should have a good chance of fulfilling the requirements here.

"Let's go ahead and look around."

"Mm."

"Tra-la-la."

With my monsters at my side, I browsed the stalls, but since I couldn't use Appraise, I had no idea what anything was worth. I decided to prioritize buying as much as I could and just picked out cheap antiques at random. I mainly looked for flower vases for my home.

After buying my fifth antique, I felt something tugging at my robe. I turned around to see my monsters looking oddly antsy.

"Growl!"

"...!"

"Do you guys want to pick out antiques with me?"

"Hm!"

"Honk honk!"

"Well, all right."

It wasn't like I was particularly choosy. Why not trust in my monsters' insight

and intuition? Himka seemed like he'd have a good eye for items.

"All right, tell me if you see something you want!"

"Hm!"

"Tra-la-la!"

"Hooonk!"

My monsters responded by leaping up in celebration. They must have *really* wanted to pick out antiques. Immediately, they scattered to the surrounding stalls. Hopefully they weren't going to pick out anything crazy expensive. Though I didn't mind paying a little extra if it meant my monsters had fun.

"Mm-mm."

"You're looking at flower vases, Olto?"

"Mm."

Olto was comparing flower vases with a serious look on his face. It looked like he was miming arranging flowers, as if imagining how the vases would look with flowers inside them to see if they would go well together.

"Mmm... Mm-mm!"

It looked like he reached a decision—he held up a brown earthenware flower vase that was shaped like a big cup high above his head.

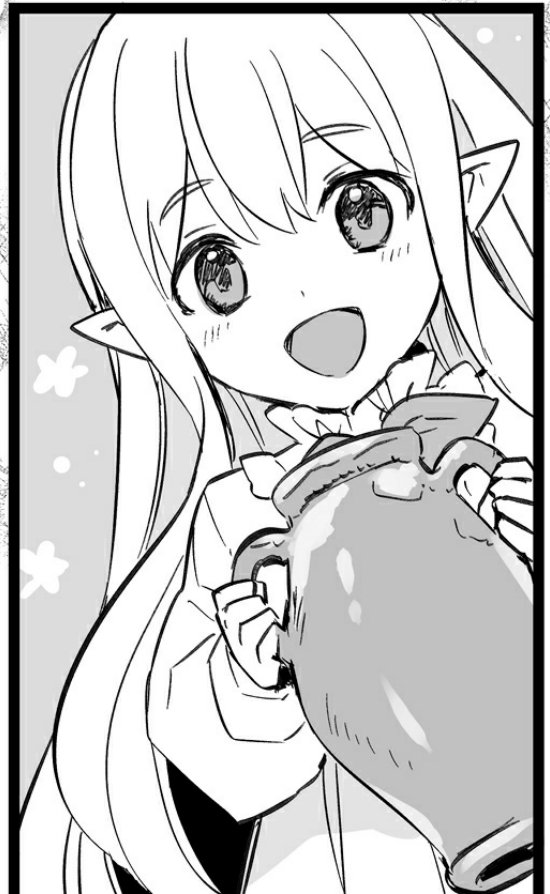
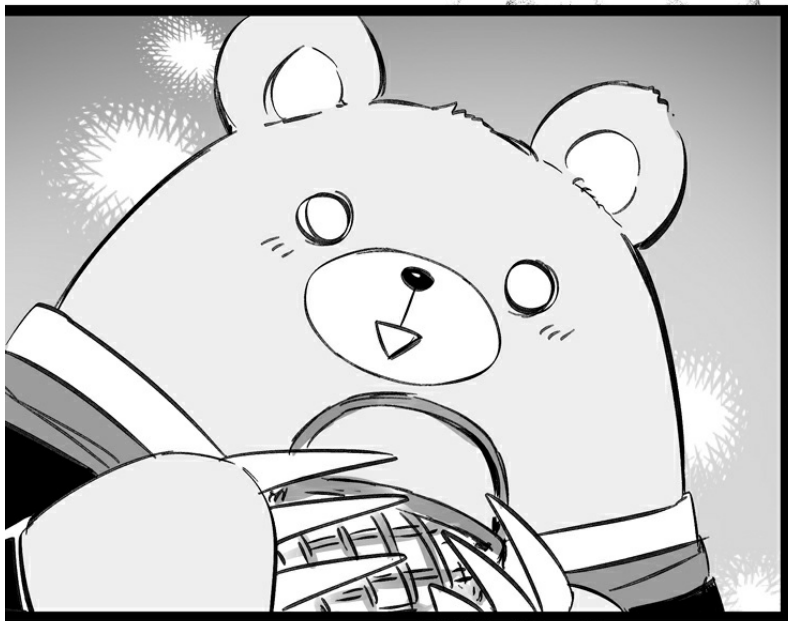
"...!"

"Did you decide on something too, Sakura?"

"...♪"

Sakura was holding a slightly worn bamboo flower holder. It looked like something that'd be hanging on the walls of a tearoom, but I wondered if it could be called an antique.

Both of their choices were the low, low price of 1,000 G. This *was* Zone Five, to be fair, so that seemed about right. Next, Himka chose a ceramic sake cup, Bear Bear chose a bamboo basket, Eine chose a green vase, and Perca chose a plate with a fish design.





“I’ve bought ten items now...”

And yet there was no announcement telling me I had unlocked Antiques Knowledge.

“Guess I have to buy some more.”

“Mm-mm!”

“Growl!”

“Okay, can everyone choose one more item?”

This was going to take a lot more time than I thought.

And so, after an hour of searching for antiques...

“Still nothing?”

“Mmm...”

Even after buying thirty items, I still hadn’t unlocked Antique Knowledge. That must have meant that I still hadn’t bought an item that was worth double its selling price.

“I also bought some items that don’t really look like antiques.”

“Mm?”

“Yeah, like those.”

The doll Olto was holding right now was exactly what I meant. It didn’t look like the type of doll that would be valuable, like a Japanese-style doll, Western-style doll, or a teddy bear. It looked more like a souvenir than anything else, like one of those decorative wooden dolls that would be sold in Bali, or like an akabeko doll with a stationary head.

Other than that, there were a few other items that I wasn’t convinced could be considered antiques, like a totem-style mask and a giant, cracked seashell. Why did I buy those items in the first place, you might ask? Well, because my monsters wanted them, of course. I also wanted to try a somewhat unique approach to try to get the skill.

“I’ve bought so much already, and still nothing. Do I need to come at this from

another angle?”

Since it was hopeless for me to know what to look for, I'd been leaving everything to chance. But maybe if I took a better look at things, I'd be able to see what looked more valuable. With that thought, I decided I'd carefully examine the antiques better before making my choice.

I returned to the shop where I'd bought the vase and checked out their other wares. But again, I was at a loss. As I took a close look at the products, each one seemed a bit dubious. For example, some painted porcelain: The ones with nicely painted pictures seemed like they could be knockoffs, and the worse-looking ones didn't seem all that valuable.

“Hmm.”

I picked up a porcelain plate, offhandedly turned it over, and noticed a strange mark painted there in blue. It looked like a kite shield with a cross drawn on it. Come to think of it, the appraisers on those antique TV show programs usually looked at the back of objects. I was pretty sure that in pottery terms, this was called a foot ring, but in any case, I hadn't been looking at them at all this entire time.

I rechecked the items I had bought, and each one had a mark or a name likely indicating what workshop it was made in. It wasn't like I knew what they meant, though. Still, thinking this might be some kind of clue, I continued to check the antiques I had bought, when I heard an announcement telling me I had leveled up a skill.

And the skill in question was Decipher. It seemed that reading the marks on the antiques had raised my skill's proficiency. I gained experience for Decipher even just by reading the signboards in towns, so it had actually been unexpectedly easy to level up. It was already level 10 now.

Then, I noticed a change in myself.

“Hey, I can kind of read this.”

What I had thought was a strange mark actually seemed to be this world's lettering. Before I knew it, the marks had subtly changed. It looked like when Decipher was at a lower level, the visibility of the letters was more obscured.

Decipher might really become important down the line, I figured. I could see it being needed to solve a riddle or something. Good thing I'd acquired it. *Thanks for recommending spellbooks to me, Sawyer!* I needed to work hard to level up Transcription so I could get the Spellbook skill. That would be the best way to repay him.

"But first, Decipher. Olto, can you bring me the antiques around here one by one?"

"Mm-mm!"

*I guess the vase is first.* As I checked the antiques' marks, several things became clear. First, there were some marks I couldn't read even with my Decipher skill. I wasn't sure if this only happened because the marks were simply designs and didn't contain any actual letters, or if my skill just wasn't a high enough level. Although, considering the products were inexpensive, the possibility of the latter being true seemed low.

The porcelain antiques were marked with the workshop's name, while the ceramics and dolls had the makers' names written on them. Now that I knew that the products from these artisans and workshops weren't worth a lot, I could pass on buying them from now on.

After organizing all the information I had, I headed out to the bazaar once again. I browsed the stalls, picking out items that only had marks or engravings that I didn't recognize. Once I bought the fifth item that I had checked the back of, finally, I heard the announcement I had been waiting for. Antiques Knowledge had been unlocked, and I learned it right away.

"Oho, interesting."

The skill added new information when I used Appraise, such as details about the item's value, the name of the maker or workshop, and how old it was. However, perhaps because the skill's level was still low, the information was vague. The value was a rough estimate, and the maker of many objects was listed as unknown. Even the age of the items was described only as being antique, vintage, or modern. But I was sure that as I leveled the skill up, it would help me obtain some unexpected treasures. I could continue raising its proficiency in bazaars and markets.

“Hmm, looks like I probably came out about even, right?”

I looked over the antiques I had bought so far and saw that I had bought some items both at a gain and a loss. Among them, there was even an item I had bought for 1,000 G but was only worth 100 G. I did gain something in the end, though, so I'd call that a success.

“Okay, seems like the most valuable item is made by this workshop. Dubhe Workshop?”

“Hmm?”

“You wanna see it too?”

“Hm!”

It was a beautifully painted porcelain plate. The picture depicted a scene of what seemed to be farmers gleaning a field for crops. Himka gave the plate a light tap and examined it. It seemed like the reason for its high value wasn't that it was a high-quality piece of work, but because it was no longer being made, making it a rare item. Apparently, that plate, which I had bought for 2,000 G, was valued at 15,000 G. This workshop's tableware was so pretty, it made me want to collect a full set.

“All right, let's check out other bazaars.”

“Hm!”

We made our way around Zone Five, peeking into bazaars as we went, and I found several more pieces from the Dubhe Workshop. Each one was a beautifully painted piece of tableware. These would look great on display as a full set. I thought collecting all of them might have some effect, but it looked like they were just home objects. *Oh well*. They were interesting, so I was happy with that.

“Next, how about we go back to the Town of Beginnings and do some browsing there?”

I was having fun finding hidden gems like these, and the Town of Beginnings probably had some antique sellers too. We could spend the day looking around at all the antique shops.

And with that, we returned to the Town of Beginnings. I switched up my monsters and strolled around the town, only to find a surprising number of antiques. Had I overlooked them before because I'd had no interest in them? Or could only I see them now thanks to Antiques Knowledge? On top of this, the ranks of the antiques for sale were surprisingly on par with those at Zone Five. I could now understand why people looked for antiques at flea markets in real life. It was a lot of fun, like hunting for treasure.

Thus, I was able to obtain several interesting items in the Town of Beginnings too. The items that particularly stood out to me were pottery made by Merak Workshop. Their products had the look of Chinese-style porcelain, such as white flower vases painted with blue designs. The porcelain made by this workshop was also worth three to four times more than its asking price. The pieces had a different appeal than the Dubhe Workshop's products, so I decided I'd collect these too.

Eventually, I ended up browsing shops in Zone Three and Seven too. I thought about going to Zone Nine too, but on my way there, I realized that I hadn't fully explored Zone Five. I had seen all the stalls, but missed a back-alley item shop. Ignoring it wasn't a big deal, but since I was in the area, I decided to stop by. That way, I'd have seen everything in Zone Five. Plus, I'd feel bad neglecting it after realizing I had missed it.

And so, I walked around town in search of the NPC item shop, when I came to a building that looked slightly out of place. It was a stand-alone inn located in a back street just off the main road. It was easy to miss, but since there were a lot of NPC shops around it, it wasn't like it was impossible to come across.

What caught my attention was the signboard depicting a horse, and the fact that the inn was a bit large.

"Does this place have a stable or something?"

"Neigh?"

"Maybe I can interact with NPC horses here, just like I interacted with monsters in the Magical Beasts Guild's courtyard."

There might be some monster mounts there that I didn't know about. I had no choice but to forge ahead. I stepped inside the inn with my monsters.

“Excuse me,” I called out.

“Neigh-neigh.”

“Welcome!”

I opened the door right to the reception desk, where a cute brunette girl with a ponytail was cheerfully smiling at me.

“What kind of room would you like?” she asked.

“Oh, um...”

This inn had two types of rooms—a simple room for logging out and a simple home that could be used temporarily. It would probably be way too rude of me to ask her to show me the stables without staying the night, so maybe I should use this place as lodging for the day. After all, my only other plans were to browse the street stalls.

If I selected one of the log-out rooms, I could log out automatically from the room. That meant they were just regular rooms, but there were several different options. I was about to choose the cheapest room when I noticed there were some options that had a horse icon displayed next to the price. Those were all on the expensive side.

The rooms with the icons next to them must have included the fee for boarding a monster mount in the stable. I could probably pass on that. After all, Carro was small enough to fit in a room, and there was no benefit to using a stable. In fact, any monsters that couldn't fit in a room were automatically sent to the Magical Beasts' Guild whenever you stayed at an inn anyway. Then what was the point of the stables?

“Only monsters who possess the Riding skill may stay in the stables. We make sure to take the utmost care of your monsters, so your monsters will certainly be happy with their stay.”

It sounded like the monsters placed in the stables would be well taken care of, which might increase their favorability score. At least I felt like that had to be fairly likely, since this was a paid service, right?

Also, now was my chance.

“Um, could I take a look at the stables?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“Thank you.”

*Nice! Maybe I can pet the monsters there!* I headed to the stables in high spirits, but I was met with a row of empty horse stalls. No horses were staying here at the moment.

“Is something the matter?” the receptionist asked.

“Oh, no, it’s nothing. This is where monster mounts stay, right?”

“Yes, it is.”

The stalls were absolutely spotless. There were cushions and futons on top of a carpeted floor. Although I called them horse stalls, they looked more like bedrooms for mounts. It could be interesting to leave Carro here if doing so increased the pony’s favorability. Ever since I got my house, I’d been sleeping in a traditional Japanese-style abode, so maybe it’d be nice to stay in a Western-style inn occasionally too.

“Okay, we’ll stay here for today. I’ll take a regular room, and I’ll leave my pony in the care of your stables. Carro, say hi.”

“Neigh-neigh!”

“Certainly, thank you very much! Please leave Carro to us. Breakfast will be prepared for you in the morning.”

*Ooh, I get breakfast too?* Come to think of it, I’d never had breakfast at an inn in the game yet. I was excited to try it.

The next morning, I woke up fully refreshed. The unfamiliar bed hadn’t made it hard for me to sleep at all. Though seeing as this was a game, lying down was all I needed to do to fall asleep and log out.

Back in the real world, I had eaten some food and did a few other tasks before I logged back on.

“An unfamiliar ceiling...” I muttered that classic line as I sat up in bed. Though considering I had seen it once right before I logged out, technically it *wasn’t*

unfamiliar!

The day before, I had changed up my party members and done a little more antique shopping before finally settling in for the night at an inn with a stable.

“Kee-hee!”

“Aye-aye!”

“All right, all right, I’m up. You don’t have to pull me.”

My monsters had slept in the room with me, and they were all now trying to pull me off of the bed. They sure were energetic in the morning.

“Let’s check out the dining room first.”

“Chirp chirp!”

I normally left immediately in the morning after staying in regular inns, but this inn offered breakfast. The inn also provided the monsters staying in the stables their own meal separately, so I would pick up Carro after breakfast.

“Good morning,” I greeted the inn’s receptionist.

“Oh! Good morning! I’ll have your breakfast out shortly! Take a seat wherever you like!”

Yet another surprisingly energetic person. Or was I just sluggish?

My monsters and I went to take our seats in the empty dining room. There were no other guests around. Was this place unpopular? We were the only ones here. There were no NPCs and no other players.

“It’s a little lonely, but at least it’s quiet.”

“Squeak,” Drimo calmly agreed. Meanwhile, my other monsters started chasing each other around.

“Aye-aye!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Tra-la-la!”

“Kee-hee-hee!”





“Hey! Don’t goof around in the dining hall! It’s bad manners!”

“Squeak squeak!”

“Chirp...”

“Aye...”

“Tra-la...”

“Kee-hee...”

I grabbed hold of Rick and Fau by their scruffs while Drimo caught hold of Eine and Lilith and held them under his arms. No one put up a fight. They must have known they’d get scolded later. Rick was looking up at me with tears in his eyes, but that trick wasn’t going to work on me!

“Be quiet and wait patiently!”

“Squeak!”

“Chirp...”

I poked Rick’s nose as I urged him to think about his actions. Drimo and I were always scolding him, so it was about time he learned. It was fine to be energetic, but there was also such a thing as too much.

“Pardon for the wait,” the receptionist said. “Here is your breakfast special.”

“Oh, this looks great!”

“Our head chef put his heart and soul into this meal!”

The inn’s breakfast was a lot more extravagant than I was expecting. It was served on a platter with soup on the side. In the middle of the plate was a generous portion of sausage and eggs Benedict, with sides of Caesar salad and fruits. It even came with two freshly baked croissants that were still steaming hot. The soup was a rich corn potage. Now *this* was what I called a breakfast. It felt very high class. I had only ever had eggs Benedict a handful of times in the real world.

“Squeak squeak...”

“Oops, I need to give you all breakfast too. Here, everyone dig in!”

I took out my monsters' favorite foods, and we all enjoyed a lively breakfast together. In the real world, I always ate frozen or instant meals in solitude. This lively breakfast was way more fun. I could no longer laugh at Kokuten for being so moved by being able to have miso soup in the game.

Once we finished our wonderful breakfast, we went to get Carro from the stables.

"Carro, how was your night?"

"Neigh-neigh!"

"Ooh, you look happy."

"Neigh!"

I'd been a little worried the pony might be lonely by itself, but it seemed I had nothing to worry about. Carro was munching on some veggies piled high in a wooden bowl, and once it noticed us, it came right over, clearly in a good mood. This place must have really given Carro the star treatment. Even its coat looked glossy, and its favorability towards me also seemed to have increased. Staying at this inn really had been a good idea.

"All right, now that Carro's back with us, let's head out!"

"Neigh!"

"Ah, please wait!"

Right after I added Carro back into my party and was about to leave the inn, the girl in charge of the stables came jogging over to me.

"Excuse me, but do you have some time to spare?" she asked, her face serious.

*Huh? What's this about?*

"I-I do."

"I have a very important matter to discuss."

"What is it?"

Was this a quest? Maybe it had been triggered because I stayed at the inn? I listened to what the girl had to say, and sure enough, it was the start of a quest.

The girl apparently had an elderly friend who was a horse lover, and that friend needed assistance with something, which was why she asked for my help.

“What kind of help does he need? To be honest, I’m not much of a fighter...”

“That’s fine. You and your monsters will be able to handle it!”

*Ah, is the game assessing my level or something?* Guessing from what the girl said, the enemies I might encounter would probably be pretty weak. I might even just have to do some labor or errands. In that case, why not help? It sounded interesting.

“Well, I can at least go talk to the old man first,” I said.

“Thank you! I’ll write you a letter of introduction, then. Could you meet the old man at his mansion?”

“Huh? His mansion?”

“Yes. He is a retired knight who lives in the mansion in the middle of town. You can’t miss it.”

I was wondering about the mansion part, not where I could find it! Was this former knight some bigwig? I doubted the game would expect me to know my etiquette, but still...

“Chirp?”

“Aye?”

“Tra-la?”

“Kee-hee?”

*W-Will we be okay?* My monsters had a bit of a mischievous streak and had a hard time behaving themselves...but I couldn’t take back what I’d said at this point. Feeling uneasy, I headed in the direction the girl had indicated.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Aye-aye!”

Once I saw Rick and Fau start playing tag, my steps grew heavier. My reluctance aside, though, we eventually reached our destination—the front of what was indeed a mansion.

The stone building wasn't what I would call luxurious so much as austere, imposing. The spacious grounds included a garden thick with trees, enclosed in tall walls and blocked off by a large gate.

"There's no gatekeeper around..."

"Neigh."

What should I do? A fantasy world like *LJO* wasn't likely to have something like an intercom, but I also didn't see a gatekeeper around that would let me through.

Unsure of how to enter, I walked closer to the gate with unsteady steps. Then, I saw there was a bell attached to a piece of string. *I guess I'll try ringing that.* But when I reached my hand out for the string, Fau leaped in front of me.

"Aye-aye!"

"Hey, don't ring it so loud!"

"Aye! Aye!"

"This isn't a game! What if we tick off the bigwig?!"

The clanging sound of the bell echoed all around. Then, I saw someone emerge from the mansion and head towards us. *A-Are they mad? They aren't mad, are they?*

"May I assist you with something?"

"Um, I came here at the request of the young lady at the inn..."

The person who'd come out of the mansion was a modest-looking granny—I mean, lady. She looked more like an old-fashioned servant than a maid.

"I see. This way, please."

"Y-Yes, ma'am."

Thankfully, she didn't seem upset about Fau's frenetic bell-ringing. But was it really okay for her to just let me in like this? She didn't need to verify my identity or anything? Didn't this mansion belong to someone very important?

The servant kept walking briskly, paying no attention to my confusion.

“Um, is it okay if my monsters come too?” I asked.

“Certainly. They are your companions.”

“O-Oh, okay.”

This mansion seemed to uphold basic human—I mean, monster rights. I was grateful for it, but I couldn’t stop worrying about whether my monsters would be able to sit still. I decided I’d give them an extra warning.

“Guys, make sure you don’t do anything embarrassing, got it?”

“Aye?”

“Chirp?”

“Did you hear what I said? This isn’t playtime.”

“Tra-la-la!”

“Kee-hee-hee!”

“Why are you cheering?! I mean it, this isn’t the time to joke around! I’m being serious!”

*Gah. I’m worried. I wanna turn back.* Unfortunately, the servant kept walking without stopping, bringing us into the mansion and all the way to a small parlor room.

“Master, we have visitors.”

“So we do. Thank you for showing them in.”

An old man was already waiting inside the parlor. Although he was elderly, he was tall, sturdy, and had a physique that clearly showed he’d spent his life doing physical work. He had such a dignified presence, anyone could see he was a man of importance. However, on his face was a warm, congenial smile. *H-He doesn’t seem so scary.*

“My name is Horton Mars. I appreciate you coming to see me. You’re here to listen to my troubles, yes?”

“Huh? Yes, I am.”

It sounded like he was already expecting me to accept. As I listened to the

former knight speak, I felt like I couldn't refuse his request. I had only intended to come here to hear what he had to say, but...he was such a distinguished gentleman, I was scared of what would happen if I declined and lowered his favorability towards me. *Well, fine.* If this was how it was going to go, I'd accept my fate and take on the quest. I squashed my inner turmoil as I listened to the old man.

To sum it all up, the man's grandson had gone into the forest and hadn't returned, so he wanted me to go check things out. And if his grandson was in trouble, he wanted me to save him. This definitely sounded like fighting would be involved. Would my party really be okay on our own? Although, since we were only in Zone Five, combat shouldn't be *that* much of an issue.

"You mentioned he went to the forest," I said. "Do you mean the forest near the town?"

"Yes, that's correct. It's ordinarily off-limits to the general public. It's meant to be a place where rookie knights go to train, but for this, I'll give you a special permit to enter."

A training ground for knights? Hey, I've heard of a place like that before.

"Is it by any chance called the Squire's Forest?"

"Oho, so you know of it? Yes, the one and the same. My grandson ventured into the forest to obtain a horse, but I fear he's gotten himself lost."

*Okay, good.* The enemies in that forest were weak, so we would be able to manage.

Still, it seemed like I was the only person who currently knew about the Squire's Forest. The fact that Siegfried hadn't even known about it made me believe so. Could it be that no one had ever stayed at that particular inn before?

I wondered if my Decipher skill had something to do with all this, but I was doubtful that an event related to knights would require a skill like that. What sort of condition could I have cleared that no one else had? As I was racking my brain, the old man held out a square metal plate. This also looked familiar to me.

"This is for you," he said.

“Actually, I already have a permit...”

“Do you, now? Show me.”

“Here you go,” I said, showing the old man the permit I’d received from Sagitta. He took it and placed his permit on top of it. My old permit got absorbed into the new one.

“I changed your temporary permit into an official permit. Now you will be able to make use of several facilities.”

“Facilities?”

“Indeed. You might not have noticed at the temporary entrance, but there are shops by the official entrance. You will now be able to access those shops.”

Apparently, the entrance I had been using wasn’t the official one. This new permit would allow me to do several more things in the forest, but one thing that didn’t change was the limit on how many monsters I could tame. If I wanted to get a new monster, I’d have to let Carro go.

“Well, I’ll head over to the Squire’s Forest, then.”

“Indeed. I’m counting on you.”

The old man and I shook hands, then I left the mansion.

“You all did a great job behaving yourselves that entire time,” I told my monsters.

“Neigh!”

“Aye!”

It was like they had all become shrinking violets in the face of that man’s commanding presence. But since they had done such a good job being quiet and polite, I had to reward them. I patted everyone’s heads and showered them in praise.

“All right, let’s go find this grandson!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Kee-hee!”



Once outside, we headed for a spot where we could teleport to the Squire's Forest. There, I noticed some things looked slightly different. I'd been able to select between two points when I teleported; every other time I'd come here, I had arrived in a small clearing with a single log house. But this time, the area I teleported into was much, much bigger. The previous clearing was called the rest area, and this area was called the entrance glade.

"Looks like there's a general store and a blacksmith."

The general store not only sold healing items but also potions to repel monsters, as well as food. I wondered if the carrots and pumpkins for sale were the favorite foods of monsters that could be caught in this forest.

The blacksmith's lineup was pretty standard, but it also sold saddles and horseshoes for mounts. Siegfried had already set me up with his, but this was a handy shop for people who had just tamed a monster mount.

"Okay, let's go! Carro, if you don't mind?"

"Neigh-neigh!"

Today, I'd be riding Carro from the outset. Riding Carro had some drawbacks—the pony's stamina was gradually exhausted, its hunger status depleted at a faster rate, and it would no longer automatically recover HP. So, instead of riding on Carro's back all the time, I had been walking while exploring and reserving being on horseback during combat.

Since Siegfried was a solo player, he rode his horse even on the regular playing field. But if I did that, I'd leave my other monsters in the dust, which made riding while exploring pointless.

Even so, in just a matter of days, I had already raised my Riding skill to level 9. I had ridden the pony around towns a bit, but what had really made an impact was riding while grinding the bosses. Though because of how much stamina it used up, Carro didn't participate in all the boss fights. I hadn't had the pony in my party while fighting the Great Maelstrom Beast, since water slowed it down, for example.

At any rate, being on horseback while fighting strong bosses had helped me level up the skill in a short amount of time. It wouldn't be much longer before I

hit my goal of level 10. So, I decided I'd try to level it up the rest of the way today by riding Carro outside of combat too.

"All right, full speed ahead!"

"Neigh-neigh!"

Carro neighed spiritedly, but the pony couldn't exactly take off sprinting. We had to walk with everyone else too.

"Neigh!"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Aye!"

Even at this slow pace, Carro seemed to be having fun walking alongside the group, a skip in its step. It neighed happily to Rick and Fau, who sat on its head.

"Hmm, I don't see the grandson anywhere."

"Kee-hee."

"Squeak."

We were all keeping an eye out for the man's grandson, but he was nowhere to be found. Had he gone deeper into the forest?

We made our way through the Squire's Forest, fighting monsters as we went. I looked over my completed map and thought about which spots might be worth checking out.

"There are some areas that look like open clearings. Let's check those out first."

With that plan in mind, we headed for the first clearing, but no one was there. There was nothing in the ten-meter, semicircular field except for short grass swaying in the wind.

"Hmm, I don't see anyone, but maybe we can find some sort of clue here. Could you all help me look?"

"Tra-la-la!"

"Chirp chiiirp!"

My monsters dispersed excitedly around the clearing. They must have felt like they were hunting for treasure. I tried looking around the clearing too, but I came up empty-handed. Everyone else came back to me looking just as dejected.

In the end, no one had found any leads for the grandson's whereabouts. I also wasn't able to find something else that I was looking for. That's right—I had another objective here besides completing the quest. And that was finding a Cute Horse, which I hadn't been able to find last time I was here. I couldn't tame it anymore now that I had Carro, but I still wanted to see it once.

Since the Moon Pony had been so hard to find, I figured I needed to clear some requirement before the Cute Horse would appear too. So, I decided I would test out a few methods I had brainstormed.

"Voilà! A carrot!"

"Tra-la?"

"I'll just wrap this around here and here and then... Eine, could you tie this to the top of that tree?"

"Tra-la!"

My first plan was to lure the Cute Horse with a carrot, which I assumed was probably one of its favorite foods. The setup was simple—I'd just hang a carrot tied to a string from a tree branch, leave it there for a bit, then come back later and see if anything had changed.

Ideally, the horse showed itself to eat the carrot, but I already knew things wouldn't be that easy. But if at the very least, I found that the carrot had been slightly nibbled on, I'd know there was a chance a Cute Horse was nearby. Just knowing that would be a helpful lead.

"Okay guys, on to the next clearing!"

"Kee-hee!"

"Squeak."

After that, we stopped by two more clearings, but we still couldn't find either the grandson or the Cute Horse. Maybe I was going about this the wrong way?

I figured I'd notice the grandson as soon as I got close enough to see his marker, but now I started to think that might not be true. Maybe he wasn't actually in plain sight. He might have hidden himself after getting attacked by a monster or something. If that was the case, then I needed to search more thoroughly.

"Guys, change of plans. We need to be more meticulous in our search. Don't overlook a single blade of grass!"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Aye-aye!"

They really were having fun with this. I didn't mind them going about this like they were doing a treasure hunt if it helped keep their focus on the search.

"Heeey, grandson! Where are youuu?" I called out.

"Kee-hee!"

"Tra-la!"

I felt like our search party was pretty top-notch thanks to the number of flying monsters I had with me. We continued to push through the Squire's Forest at an even slower pace in order to search every nook and cranny.

"Graaandson. Where are youuu?" I called out again.

"Neigh-neeeigh."

As we pushed through the foliage, I noticed something weird. A few meters ahead, there was a grove of trees that looked to be shaking. Sure, wind made trees sway, but it didn't seem like that was what was going on here. It looked unnatural, like a flickering, digital projection on a screen.

"Hmm... Carro, do you see that?"

"Neigh."

"Chirp chirp!"

"You do too, Rick?"

It seemed I wasn't the only one who noticed something strange about it. Maybe it was the work of magic or something. It looked like an illusion had

appeared in the middle of the forest. It was different from Carro's invisibility, but it did seem like something was concealing itself.

Did I finally find what I was looking for?

"What should we do?"

"Neigh?"

I looked at Carro, who looked back up at me with its round eyes. I had been able to tame Carro because I hadn't acted hostile and had given it carrots, its favorite food. By that logic, I shouldn't try to break this illusion. Otherwise, it might run away.

"First, I'll give it food to show I'm friendly."

I took out some vegetables from my inventory and gently placed them in front of the illusion. The huge feast included not only carrots and pumpkins, but plenty of leafy vegetables too.

"I won't get any closer. Now, we wait."

"Kee-hee."

"Aye!"

I had been the one to approach Carro, but I wasn't sure if I should do the same in this situation. If I tried to get too close to it, I might cause the illusion to break. It'd really suck if that ended up being taken as a hostile action. I had been pretty bold with Carro since I'd been acting blindly, but this time I wanted to go about things a little more carefully.

"Okay, let's take a break here."

"Squeak."

"Tra-la-la!"

I placed a straw mat down in the middle of the grove, and we all sat down and relaxed as we ate. I ate a cookie between sips of fresh herbal tea as my monsters sprawled themselves out and munched on snacks. Lilith looked just like a stuffed toy that had been laid face down. How was she drinking from her teacup in that position?

At some point, Fau started playing a slow ballad, and I really started getting sleepy. Since the enemies around here were so weak, it had started to feel like we were just on a hiking trip.

As I was listening to Fau strum that familiar tune, I suddenly remembered something. More and more musician players were starting to open up shops. In fact, while I was looking for antiques, I had spotted a shop that sold music boxes and sheet music. I'd already heard Fau's entire repertoire more times than I could count. I wasn't exactly tired of hearing her songs, but I wouldn't mind if she learned something new.

Buying sheet music would mean new songs. The number of songs that Fau could learn that granted special effects changed based on the level of her skill. She could also learn up to one hundred songs that granted no effects, with no restrictions on skill level. She just needed the sheet music. In order to learn more than one hundred songs, I'd have to pay money to increase the limit.

There were even some compositions made in collaboration with real-world bands now available in the game, so maybe I could buy some of that sheet music to use in place of the game's background music. Some players who were musical powerhouses were even selling their own original songs, so I was interested in buying one that I liked the sound of. Maybe I'd try finding some later while I shopped for more antiques.

While I was taking in the sound of Fau strumming her lute, I felt something tug roughly at my robe.

"Chirp!"

"Squeak squeak!"

Rick and Drimo were pulling on me from both sides.

"What— Oh, did it show itself?!" I shouted loudly as I turned around, much to the displeasure of Lilith and Eine.

"Kee-hee!"

"Tra-la!"

"S-Sorry. I got a little overexcited there."

“Aye-aye.”

I never expected to be shushed by those two... Fau stopped playing her lute and shook her head like she was saying *tsk tsk*.

*Urgh, I can't get mad since I was in the wrong.* I made sure to be quiet as I peered through the trees in the grove. I saw what I had been waiting for—a white pony munching on a carrot. That was a Cute Horse, no doubt about it. At a glance, it just looked like a white version of Carro, but on its head was a yellow circle. If the Moon Pony was meant to be the moon, then was the Cute Horse the sun? That would explain the illusion—maybe it was refracted light or a mirage.

The Cute Horse's attention was solely focused on going to town on the veggies. As an artisan, nothing felt more rewarding than having someone fully enjoy the meal I'd crafted for them. But now the question was, what should I do next? Was it okay to approach the monster? Or should I wait until it was done eating?

I was able to get a look at it, and I figured out more or less how to lure it out. It wasn't a big deal if we ended up fighting, but still... Since I had gotten this far, I really wanted to see what it felt like to pet its fur. After all, I probably wouldn't get a chance to tame it in the future, so the chances I'd have to pet a Cute Horse were few and far between.

“Okay, I'll wait a little longer. I'll try to befriend it once it's done eating. Carro, can you go tell that pony that we're not its enemies?”

“Neigh?”

*No can do, huh?* Could they not communicate with each other, even though they were both horses? Well, in any case, even if the Cute Horse did attack us, I'd try to make it understand we weren't enemies or anything to be scared of. *I call it the Nawsicaa strategy!*

Once the white pony finished eating the veggies, it started looking around. Then, it noticed we were staring at it. It fixed its gaze intently on us with the same round eyes as Carro. It had a cute, almost cartoonish appearance.

Since it was standing underneath the light that dappled down through the

forest's canopy, I had thought it was just white, but once I got closer to it, I saw its coat had a hint of gold, making it more cream than pure white. Just like I had heard.

"D-Did you like the veggies? I-I'm not your enemy, okay? I mean it."

"Neigh!"

"Neigh?"

"Neigh-neigh!"

"Neigh!"

Oh, so Carro really *could* communicate with it! The Cute Horse smiled and even started trotting over to us!

"Neigh-neigh!"

"C-Can I pet you?"

"Neigh!"

"You're so cute!"

"Neigh-neigh!"

"I know, I know. You're cute too, Carro!"

The Cute Horse came right up to me and nuzzled its head against me. I stroked its head and its amazingly soft mane. The pony didn't seem to mind being petted—its eyes were half-closed. As I kept petting it, Carro drew near on my other side, then started gnawing on my robe as if telling me it wanted to be petted too.





I stroked Carro with my free hand, which it seemed to enjoy too. It started rocking from side to side and neighing. I had a lady on each arm—I mean, a horse. I petted the white and black ponies with both hands. The similar yet subtly different texture of their coats felt really nice.

“Do you want more veggies?”

“Neigh!”

We continued to pass the time pleasantly with the Cute Horse. The pony not only let me pet its head but also its neck, back, and even its legs, while my monsters were having a fun time riding on it. We must have spent about twenty minutes playing around like that.

“Um, Cute Horse? What’s going on?”

“Neigh-neeeigh!”

The Cute Horse had abruptly stood up and started faintly glowing. It neighed loudly as it shone brighter. *What’s happening?*

“Neigh.”

“Huh? Cute Horse, you’re leaving?”

“Neigh-neigh.”

Once the light settled down, it seemed our petting time had to come to an end too. The Cute Horse gave everyone a light nudge with its nose, then walked out of the grove of trees with its tail swishing. If I didn’t have Carro already, this probably would’ve been the moment when I could have tamed it.

“Aw, it’s over already? And it just glowed, nothing else...?”

That light had been pretty flashy for something that only signaled the end of our interaction. Was that really all there was to it? Or had something changed? I checked my stats, but nothing was out of the ordinary. But when I checked my inventory, I was shocked at what I found.

“A Galloping Emblem!”

I couldn’t believe it. I had obtained an emblem, a very rare item. I’d been under the assumption that it was a super rare boss drop—who knew I could get

one this way too!

“Th-This is some insane information. I bet I can sell it for a lot!”

Emblems were still extremely rare. If there was a way that was guaranteed to get you one, everyone would want to know about it. Which meant it was worth a fortune!

“Let’s go sell this information! Oh wait, should I try to verify it a little more first?”

I wanted to try it out a few more times before this place became crowded with people. The more emblems the merrier.

With that thought, I resumed my search for another Cute Horse. My monsters and I walked all around the Squire’s Forest to find that illusion again.

“I don’t see it anywhere. You guys don’t see anything from up there?”

“Tra-la.”

“Kee-hee...”

“Aye!”

Eine, Lilith, and Fau were searching from the sky, but not even the aerial squad was able to spot the illusion. Based on the fact that we’d been walking around so much and still hadn’t found it made me wonder if it could only be encountered once per instance.

I decided to head back to the entrance and leave the forest. Once I was back in the town square, I immediately teleported back to the forest. Hopefully doing so reset the monster encounters.

I set out to explore, trying not to get my expectations up too high, and amazingly, we were able to find it almost immediately. Leaving and coming back had worked to reset things.

Things progressed in the same way from there. The Cute Horse happily ate up the vegetables I brought for it, and then it was time for a fun petting session. Eine and Lilith rode on its back while Rick and Fau clung to its tail. I myself was having a great time petting its soft coat.

Alas, the time came for our fun time together to unfortunately come to an end again. The Cute Horse glowed, then walked away. However...

“Hmm. No emblem?”

In my inventory was instead an item called Soft Pony Hair. Evidently, this interaction wouldn't yield an emblem every time. It could also be possible that you could only get an emblem the first time. I needed a little more information.

After that encounter, I left and reentered the Squire's Forest several times, repeating the Cute Horse event each time. Aside from getting the emblem that first time, I only received Cute Horse materials. It must have just been a first-time bonus, like I'd suspected.

“It sucks, but I should just be happy that I was able to get it even once.”

Plus, I'd been able to play with the Cute Horse for as long as I wanted. I was plenty satisfied.

“All right, now that we've had our fill of petting Cute Horses, let's head back!”

“Neigh!”

“Aye!”

I and my monsters—who looked just as satisfied as I did—started marching straight for the exit of the forest. All my monsters except for Drimo, that is. He stopped me with an exasperated look on his face.

“Squeak squeak!”

“What's up, Drimo? You're really tugging hard on my robe.”

“Squeak.”

“Is there something in the forest you want to— Ah!”

Oh, right. Our main objective here *wasn't* finding the Cute Horse!

“We were looking for the grandson!”

“Squeak squeak...”

*P-Please don't look at me like I'm a disappointment! I already know that I am!*

“R-Right! Let's go find that grandson!”

“Squeak...”

We continued through the forest, searching for the grandson.

“I really messed up. I didn’t even ask what this guy’s name was or anything...”

I had wanted to get out of that nerve-racking mansion as quickly as possible, so I left without asking for more details. All I knew was that the person we were looking for had blond hair, and that he had gone to the forest in search of a horse.

“Chirp chirp...”

“Aye...”

I heard Rick and Fau sigh from their perch on my shoulders—fully in sync!

“H-Hey, you two were scared of the old man too!”

“*Fwee fwee.*”

“*Tweee.*”

“You can’t whistle your way out of this!”

I couldn’t believe I had gotten so nervous in front of a member of elite society even in a game... How much of a pleb could I be?! Of course, the thing that had largely driven me to leave so fast in the first place was the pins and needles I felt worrying about whether my monsters were going to try to pull some prank!

“I should’ve asked for more information, like his name or physical features. Even just his personality...”

“Squeak.”

“Are you trying to make me feel better, Drimo?”

“Squeak squeak.”

“Ah, you’re telling me to walk faster.”

At some point while we were chatting and searching, we arrived at a familiar location.

“We made it all the way back to the clearing where we met Carro.”

“Neigh!”

It was the deepest part of the sparser section of the Squire's Forest. The middle area of the forest would be just up ahead. That was when I realized something.

"You know, the old man didn't say his grandson went to the sparse forest, did he?"

He'd said he went to go find a horse, so I assumed he meant a Cute Horse, but...maybe I was wrong? There could be other types of horses in the middle and dense areas of the forest. If that were the case, then it was pointless to search around the sparse forest.

"There's only one way to find out. We have to go deeper. I'm a little scared, but I'll fail the quest if we don't find the grandson."

"Squeak squeak."

"Y-Yeah, you're right. There's nothing to be scared about with you around, Drimo. Right?"

"Squeak."

*I can always count on you, Drimo!* He always gave me the physical and mental push I needed in times of uncertainty.

"Aye-aye!"

"Kee-hee!"

And with that, we stepped foot into the middle area of the forest, which looked a lot different from the sparse area. There was very little light, making it hard to see in front of me. But it made for a good habitat for a Moon Pony. Could Carro actually be a monster from the middle area?

"Okay, we don't know what sorts of enemies will pop out, so let's move slowly. Drimo, you take the lead."

"Squeak!"

I dismounted Carro and cautiously walked through the forest, hiding behind Drimo. It wasn't long before we ran into an enemy.

"Ka-kaaaw!"

“Dash Birds? Wait, no, they’re a different color!”

We had run into two monsters that resembled ostriches. At a glance, they looked like Dash Birds, but the color of their plumage was entirely different. One of the birds was pure white and the other was gray with black spots. Were they evolved forms of Dash Birds? We hadn’t even gone that far into the middle area yet. Wasn’t it too soon for this much of a jump in difficulty?

Scared as I was, I appraised the birds, only to be surprised by what I found out.

“Huh? They *are* Dash Birds.”

These monsters were the same Dash Birds that inhabited the sparse forest. So they were just different colors?

However, as we fought them, I realized these Dash Birds were in fact slightly stronger. Seeing how Drimo wasn’t able to take them down in one hit, they were probably higher-leveled than the other Dash Birds.

“They drop the same items... They’re high-quality, but I don’t know if I’d say fighting them is worth the effort.”

After fighting the birds, we continued wandering around the middle area looking for the grandson. We ended up running into the same monsters that appeared in the sparse forest, but they were higher-leveled and stronger.

Also, the rideable monsters like Dash Birds and Branch Deer came in several varieties and colors. I suppose if you wanted your mount to have a little more individuality, you’d have to catch them in the middle area.

“These monsters feel on the same level as Zone Eight monsters.”

They weren’t so strong that it made it impossible to explore the place, but it wasn’t a walk in the park either. I had to stay completely focused and couldn’t put much effort into mapping the area.

Even so, we managed to get halfway through the middle area. That was when...

“AROOOOO!”

“Whoa! Wh-What was that?”

“Neigh?”

Suddenly, I heard a tremendous howl come from deep in the forest. It sounded far away, but could that have been directed at us? As I was debating if we should run for it, I heard more howls.

“Awooo!”

“Awo-wooo!”

These howls sounded a little less intimidating than the first one, but they sounded closer. And there were several of them. I had a feeling they came from wolf monsters, but I had yet to encounter any wolves in this forest. It was pretty terrifying not knowing how many or what kind of monsters we were up against.

*Wh-What should we do?* Could we beat them in a fight? Or should we put our safety first and run away? Actually, if this was related to the quest, then we probably had to defeat them to find the grandson.

“Okay, fine! Let’s retreat back to an open field where we can take on these monsters!”

“Kee-hee!”

“Squeak squeak!”

“Fau, Eine, you keep an eye on the monsters to see if they’re getting closer!”

“Aye-aye!”

“Tra-la!”

I wasn’t sure if they were part of the quest or a boss battle, but hopefully they weren’t that strong.

“Hmm, where’s a good spot?”

“Tra-la-la.”

We ran away from the mysterious source of those howls, searching for a place where it seemed feasible to engage the monsters in battle. As we ran, we didn’t run into any Dash Birds or other small fry monsters that we encountered before. At first I thought it was just good luck, but it was clearly intentional. This had to be the start of some sort of event.



Despite the lack of other monsters, these event monsters were definitely closing in on us.

“Graaawr!”

“Grrr!”

I heard the sound of violently rustling thickets along with ferocious growls right at our backs. It would be hard to keep outrunning them. I decided to stop in a smallish clearing just up ahead to face off against our opponents.

“All right! We’ll fight here! Drimo, take the vanguard!”

“Squeak squeak!”

We got into formation in the clearing, which was right by the entrance of the middle area. I had actually wanted to go to a larger clearing a little farther ahead, but we had good footing here, so we would have no problem fighting. Well, the same went for our opponents too, but it was better than getting ambushed on a narrow path.

“Fau, first cast buffs on us, then debuffs on the enemies! Rick and Lilith, you two keep an eye on our left and right. Eine, you keep a watch out behind us! Carro, focus on evading more than attacking!”

“Neigh-neigh!”

If I left the evading to Carro, I could devote my attention to attacking. I started chanting a water magic spell incantation while we waited for the enemies to appear. Tense with nerves, I kept my staff at the ready for several seconds, until—

“They’re here!”

“Graaawr!”

I knew it—they were wolves. Three large, muscular wolves jumped out of the thicket, glowering and snarling at us. They had light-green fur, and they were called Forest Wolves.

“Let’s do this!”

“Squeak squeak!”

“Kee-hee!”

*Time to hit them with a preemptive strike before they get a chance to attack!*

“Aqua Shock!”

“Gyawr!”

“Grrr!”

*Damn it!* I aimed my AoE spell at two of them, but one evaded it! The wolf must have sensed me cast my spell and leaped back to avoid it. But the one wolf I did hit was killed instantly. If one hit from my lower-powered Aqua Shock could defeat one, these wolves must have low HP or defense. They probably had high evasion instead.

“Squeak squeak!”

“Gyawr!”

Drimo was not to be messed with, as usual. He predicted the second wolf’s action and took it down with one clean hit.

That left one wolf, which my monsters defeated before I could even give the order to do so. Rick distracted the wolf while Lilith stabbed it from the side. One thrust from her trident depleted the Forest Wolf’s HP. She didn’t have as much attack power as Drimo, but she was still able to kill it in one hit? These Forest Wolves were a lot weaker than I thought they’d be.

If this was all the fight they had to put up, we could have just fought them where we originally were—

“Graaaaawr!”

“Grrrrr!”

“Gah! There’s more!”

Apparently there were more than just those three wolves. More Forest Wolves burst through the thicket and came rushing at us.

“Grawr!”

“Oh crap!”

They must have circled around us at some point—they came at us from behind. Someone as hopeless as me in close-quarters combat had no chance of evading attacks from this agile pack. I twisted my body around, hoping I was lucky enough to block their attack with my staff and avoid instant death. *Please miss, please miss!*

“Tra-la!”

“Y-You saved me, Eine!”

“Tra-la-la!”

Thankfully, Eine intervened before the wolf’s fangs reached me. She knocked back the wolf with her oversized needle. I took that opportunity to launch a spell at it, eliminating it. But we weren’t in the clear yet.

While we were defeating the second set of three wolves that had appeared, five more wolves came leaping into the clearing. Were they spawning indefinitely? If so, defeating them one by one with spells was too inefficient. I decided to use tree magic to stop the wolves in their tracks.

“Hallucinate Mushrooms!” I cried, casting my spell, which made mushrooms pop up all around us. They were purple and had white spots—very toxic-looking. It would have been weird if they *weren’t* poisonous.

Then, all the mushrooms spewed green spores at once. No matter how fast the wolves might be, they couldn’t avoid the clouds of spores covering the entire area!

“Graaagh!”

“Grawwwr?”

My spell worked just as planned. The wolves yelped as the spores spread over them. But the spell didn’t actually deal any damage to them. Instead, it had a chance of inflicting its targets with Confusion.

“It worked on two of them? Not bad.”

They must have had a low resistance to status ailments. I’d been thinking I’d be happy with even just one of the wolves getting confused.

While I was admiring the effect of the spell, the confused wolves started

attacking their allies. Conveniently, both went after the other wolves that weren't confused.

Now that I had successfully obstructed the wolves, the only thing left I had to do was attack the confused wolves and finish them off. It felt a little cruel, but it was necessary for our survival.

Once we defeated all the wolves, it didn't seem like any more were going to show up.

"Did we win?"

As soon as I thought we'd stopped the pack of wolves, the big baddy finally showed up. *Did I jinx us?*

"Garooooo!"

"I-It's huge!"

This must have been the first wolf I'd heard howl. It was a giant, green wolf as tall as a tree. Unlike the smaller wolves that had been the color of pretty, young leaves, this giant wolf was a dark-green color that made me think of a deep forest.

This one was called the Forest Wolf Chief. It was obviously powerful. There was no chance in hell it wasn't. It stared right at us through golden eyes and a shiver ran down my spine—I could sense this was the beginning of a fierce battle.

"Grr... Graaaaaghhh!"

"Here it comes!"

# Online Forum [Assemble, Fans of Silver-Haired] All Things Silver-Haired-Related, Part 18

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.

---

706: Yang Yang

Once again, another bomb drop by Silver-Haired is wreaking havoc.

---

707: visitorfromanotherplanet

The second I look away, the Quick-Eared Cats' submaster starts screaming.

---

708: Yodel-Ay-Hee

There've been some weird quests that people have been talking about a lot recently.

I bet Silver-Haired can get info about those.

---

709: visitorfromanotherplanet

Silver-Haired will probably get dragged into one without even trying to get info.

---

710: Yodel-Ay-Hee

True LOL

---

711: Yang Yang

What weird quests?

---

712: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Apparently there are quests where you run into a weird shadow creature as an enemy.

---

713: visitorfromanotherplanet

Oh, I've heard of those.

I heard someone went on what they thought was a fetch quest to find a girl's treasure. They said it freaked them out. It was like a horror movie.

---

714: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Yeah, exactly.

The story I heard was of someone getting attacked by a shadow creature while on a quest to find a sword left behind by a famous blacksmith.

---

715: Yang Yang

What in the world could that shadow creature be?

---

716: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Dunno.

But the fact that all these quests that the shadows show up in have nothing in common has got people talking.

---

717: visitorfromanotherplanet

Technically, one thing they have in common is that they're all quests that came directly from NPCs.

---

718: Yang Yang

That's it, huh? That's everything outside of the quests from the Adventurers' Guild.

There's no way to even try to avoid them.

---

719: Willow

You know, I heard it has to do with the demon.

---

720: Yang Yang

Huh? For real?

---

721: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Oh, now that you say it, that would make sense!

---

722: visitorfromanotherplanet

A dark shadow *does* sound demonic!

Wow! So it's connected to that cutscene!

---

723: Yang Yang

So instead of having the demon appear out of nowhere, first they're building it up with a bunch of quests that are related to it?

---

724: Willow

There's no proof of it yet, but it seems highly likely.

---

725: Yang Yang

So those mysterious quests will eventually connect to the demon?

Maybe the demon will show up after a certain number of those shadow creatures are defeated?

---

726: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Or maybe the demon will weaken depending on how many of those quests are successfully completed?

---

727: Willow

I could see that.

---

728: visitorfromanotherplanet

I wonder if we'll encounter a shadow creature too, then?

If so, then I want to know more about them.

---

729: Yodel-Ay-Hee

I'm sure the verification clan will investigate before long!

---

730: Yang Yang

If not, Silver-Haired will definitely obtain some incredible information!

---

731: visitorfromanotherplanet

Your dependency on him is almost refreshing XD

---

732: Willow

I get it, though.

---

733: Yodel-Ay-Hee

If anyone can, Silver-Haired can!

---

734: Yang Yang

I just know it! Silver-Haired's probably in a mysterious playing field no one's ever heard of right now, doing some quest no one knows about!



This is Silver-Haired we're talking about!

---

735: Yodel-Ay-Hee

And we can count on him to bring that information to us!

---

736: visitorfromanotherplanet

If the key is getting a quest directly from an NPC, then it seems really likely that Silver-Haired would end up getting one.

Because, well, he gets along really well with NPCs.

---

737: Willow

More than that, he becomes friends with NPCs who we don't even know about.

---

738: visitorfromanotherplanet

If that NPC is some amazing person, they might know some amazing information.

---

739: Yang Yang

Yeah, seems possible.

In fact, I can't see it *not* happening.

---

740: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Silver-Haired!

Please, bestow us with the information about these mysterious quests!

---

741: Willow

Wait, but if Silver-Haired has to fight that strange shadow creature...

Can he win?

---

742: visitorfromanotherplanet

Ah...

---

743: Yang Yang

H-He'll find a way!

If anyone can, he can!

---

744: visitorfromanotherplanet

I'm sure Silver-Haired will trigger some amazing event and record an amazing battle of himself defeating a demon completely solo!

---

745: Yodel-Ay-Hee

Stop saying "amazing" so much!

But yeah, I get what you mean!

---

746: Willow

Silver-Haired! Come back safe, please!

And bring us informatiooon!

---

747: Yang Yang

Come back alive!

---

"How are we supposed to beat that thing?!"

Ten minutes after we encountered the Forest Wolf boss, my monsters and I were trudging dejectedly through the sparse area of the forest.

Seriously, it was rough. A single blow nearly wiped out my monsters, and the boss was unfazed by any of our attacks. The Forest Wolf Chief was so strong we were forced to flee. Thankfully, we *were* able to escape, as we weren't fighting on an actual boss field. We ran as far as we could without looking back, somehow managing to escape with no casualties.

“Whew... I can’t believe how strong that boss was... Did we reach a dead end with this quest?”

There was no way we could beat it, right? I dropped my head in my hands, and Rick ran up onto my shoulder. I thought he was here to console me, but apparently not.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Huh? Is that a person?”

To my surprise, someone was collapsed in the clearing up ahead. *Is that who I think it is?* We rushed over to the figure.

Yep—it was the grandson. Which meant those wolves had nothing to do with this quest at all. We should have looked everywhere in the sparse forest before going to the middle area!

*Sorry for leaving you here for so long, grandson.* I mean, obviously it wasn’t like he was actually lying there the entire time, since this was just a game, but I still felt guilty for some reason. To make up for neglecting him, I approached the grandson as kindly as I could. My demeanor must have helped me establish a friendly rapport with him, so everything turned out all right in the end. Oh, and the grandson was a full-grown man. I had been under the assumption that he was a kid, but he was a twenty-year-old apprentice knight. A child couldn’t have entered this forest in the first place, anyway.

“Ha ha ha! You and your monsters are quite strong!” he said.

“Not really. I mean, I guess we do know how to handle ourselves around here,” I said with a forced laugh. I didn’t want to tell him he was just weak. Could he really handle being a knight if he had trouble with *this* forest?

However, there was a reason why he had collapsed, which he explained.

“So, you want our help to find a Cute Horse?”

“That’s right. Do you mind?”

The grandson had apparently come here to find a Cute Horse, but he’d forgotten to bring food and collapsed from hunger. That also seemed like questionable judgment on his part, but I guess it had nothing to do with his

ability as a knight.

In between bites of salted onigiri that he held in both hands, the grandson told me about why he came to the forest. As someone aiming to become a knight, he wanted to get a horse at all costs. But Cute Horses were rather small for knights to ride on—was he okay with that? They weren't majestic at all.

But the man didn't seem to mind that.

"The founder of my family achieved heroic feats in battle while riding a tiny horse, you see."

"On a Cute Horse?"

"A horse similar to the Cute Horse! The founder massacred monsters with this treasured sword while riding a small horse!"

*Massacred?* Was that the best way to put it? That made it sound like his family was bloodthirsty or something. Also, he was doing all that while riding a pony that looked like a *Cute Horse*?

The grandson held his blade up high. The way it shone pale blue made me think it was a magical sword. It must be very powerful, but since I couldn't use it, I didn't feel any envy for it. I imagined a rugged knight in full body armor holding that magical sword in one hand and galloping onto a battlefield on a pony. *That doesn't look cool at all!*

However, the grandson seemed to want to be just like the founder.

"I want to make a Cute Horse my companion, to emulate the founder! I will make it happen! But...I can't seem to find one."

Eventually, he had become too hungry to keep moving. Even after eating, the man was worried he'd collapse again, so he asked me for help to tame a Cute Horse.

"All you need to do is find it. I'll fight it by myself."

Well, if I didn't bring this guy back home, I'd fail the quest. My only choice was to help him.

"Okay, I'll give you a hand," I said.

“Oh, thank you!”

The grandson—whose name was Cheval—seemed like he could fight just fine, but the main problem was whether we could find a Cute Horse. I had already found and played with one. Could I find another one without leaving the forest and resetting the monster encounters? But if I left the forest, there was a chance I might fail the quest.

We walked through the forest as I worried about that, while Cheval taught me the way to find a Cute Horse. He explained how they only appeared in the daytime, hiding behind a strange, flickering illusion. They weren't strong in battle, so they didn't pose much of a challenge once you found one. It was all mostly information I already knew, though I hadn't known the fact that Cute Horses only came out during the day.

This was just a guess, but this was probably the intended way to find a Cute Horse. That was, to stay at the inn in Zone Five, accept the retired knight's request, and search for a Cute Horse with Cheval. It felt like a tutorial.

After Cheval finished his explanation, we quickly found the horse.

“Kee-hee!”

“Oh, did you find something, Lilith?”

“Kee-hee-hee!”

Lilith spotted the now-familiar illusion in the clearing we had arrived in. There was a spot between some trees that was shimmering like a haze of heat. There was no mistaking that this was the illusion the Cute Horse was hiding behind—I had seen it many times already. Cheval seemed to recognize it too.

“Oho! Over there, that's undoubtedly the illusion of the Cute Horse! You have my gratitude for finding it!”

“Huh? Wait! You're just gonna rush right at it?”

After giving a celebratory shout, Cheval unsheathed his blade and charged at the illusion. I thought we'd have to fight it together, but I was blocked by an invisible wall and couldn't get any closer. Clearly, all I could do was sit back and watch the fight.

“Hraaah!”

“Neeeeigh!”

Cheval pierced the illusion with his sword, and his battle against the Cute Horse began. Both sides struggled to keep the upper hand, but watching from the sidelines, it just looked like a man with a sword was bullying a little pony.

As my monsters and I watched, both Cheval’s and the pony’s HP started to drop. Then, the moment both their HP bars fell into the red zone, Cheval raised a shout like he was using his special attack.

“Taaame!”

“Neeeeigh!”

*He got it!* Cheval had brilliantly tamed the Cute Horse. Since this was part of the quest, I knew he wasn’t going to fail, but it was still exciting to watch.

“I did it!” Cheval, covered in scrapes and bruises, cried triumphantly as he punched both fists in the air. It was very heartwarming, for some reason. Maybe this was how players who were strong fighters felt when they watched me in battle. In any case, had I completed the quest now?

However, as soon as I had that thought, the sky suddenly darkened. Was it getting cloudy too? That was unusual for the game— “Huh?”

*Wait, what?* The sun wasn’t being blocked by clouds! Some sort of dark film was covering our surroundings!

“Hey, what’s going on? Cheval?”

“I’m not sure either! But I sense something wicked!”

*S-Something wicked...?* This quest wasn’t just about getting a horse—we were about to get thrown into a boss battle!

“Guys! Gather around!”

“Squeak squeak!”

“Tra-la!”

We all huddled together and braced ourselves for whatever was to come. Cheval and I stood back-to-back, waiting vigilantly for several seconds.

“Mwa ha ha ha ha! I’ve found you!” someone bellowed out.

I whipped around in the direction of the voice.

“Gah!”

*What the heck is that? It’s creepy as hell!* In a spot a little farther away stood a dark, bizarre humanoid figure. It was about two meters tall, and it looked like a swarm of shadows taking the shape of a human. It didn’t look entirely flat, but it was incredibly dark and didn’t seem to have a solid form.

Standing out against its pitch-black head was a large, crescent-shaped mouth filled with abnormally white teeth, and two bulging, bloodshot eyes. It was horrifying, to put it mildly. This thing would make elementary schoolers cry! Even I was about to cry! Wasn’t this game a fantasy RPG? Don’t throw in horror elements out of nowhere!

“That is the treasured sword of the Solline family, is it not?” the shadow man asked.

Cheval hesitated before responding, “And what concern is that of yours?”

The shadow man was apparently after Cheval’s magical sword.

“Mwa ha ha ha! Give me that sword! Do so, and I will ensure your journey to the afterlife is quick and painless!”

“Never! You’re the one who will be running away with your tail between your legs, villain! This sword destroys evil! I will cut you down with a single strike!”

I knew this was a quest, but man, Cheval was really provoking the shadow. There was no avoiding a battle at this point. Though it was obvious from the start that the shadow man was going to attack us anyway.

“So be it! Then I will kill you and take the sword from you myself! It’s too late for regrets now!”

The clearing was enclosed in a boss wall. I knew this was an event boss!

“Drimo, take the vanguard! You’re the only one in our party who can do that right now! Please!”

“Squeak squeak!”

Drimo gave me a thumbs-up as he ran to the front. *He's always so cool!*

"Eine, Fau, stay in the rear guard! Focus on healing and casting buffs!"

"Tra-la!"

"Aye!"

Eine and Fau responded to my order with a salute. Without Reflet here, we were lacking healers, but buffs should make up for that. If they could stack buffs that boosted our party's automatic recovery, that should really help us out.

"Chirp chirp!"

"Kee-hee-hee!"

"Yeah, I know! You don't have to hound me! I have orders for you too!"

"Chirp."

"Kee-hee."

These two were joking around even right before a fight! But I couldn't get mad at their cute faces!

"You two are our support attackers! Attack the enemy when the time is right! But wait and see how things play out first."

"Chirp chiiirp!"

"Kee-hee!"

Rick and Lilith saluted me too and then left to take their positions.

"Neigh?"

"Carro, let me ride your back, and evade the boss's attacks."

"Neigh-neeeigh!"

Carro was still low-leveled, but hopefully it'd be fine in a boss fight.

But the problem was, just how strong was this shadow man? Was this an enemy we could even beat in the first place? If he was as strong as the Forest Wolf Chief, we were doomed for sure...

"Wicked creature! Your blood will stain this blade!" Cheval exclaimed,



signaling the start of the battle. “Go! Soleil!”

“Neigh-neeeeigh!”

Cheval hopped right up onto his Cute Horse, but...seeing a knight riding a small pony really *did* look odd. It was like seeing an adult riding a miniature motorbike. And yeah, I knew that I must have looked just as odd riding Carro. But Cheval was larger than me, and he was wearing metal armor, which made him look even more bizarre.

Would this sight become more common once Cute Horses became more popular with other players? A squad of knights riding Cute Horses charging into battle against a raid boss... Yeah, I kind of wanted to witness that.

“Sir Yuto! Please support me!”

*Oops. This isn't the time to just sit back and watch!*

The enemy seemed to be focused entirely on Cheval, so we needed to make sure to protect him! I'd likely fail the quest if Cheval fell in battle, after all. So, maybe it would make sense to add more tanks to my party? On the other hand, Cheval was moving around a bunch, so would we even be able to keep up with him?

I decided instead to just use my current lineup to give him extra help.

“Fau! Eine! Support Cheval as much as you can!”

“La-di-daaa. ♪”

“Tra-la-laaa!”

“I feel power coursing through me! Hraaaaaah!”

With the power of Fau's and Eine's buffs, Cheval charged for the Shadow Man. Yes, that was actually the boss's name.

“Urgh! Curse that troublesome sword!”

“Gaaah!”

Cheval's attack had a good amount of power behind it, but the boss was also strong. Just a graze from the Shadow Man's hand was damaging enough to take out more than ten percent of Cheval's HP!

Should we be leaving all the attacking to Cheval?

“Squeak squeeek!”

“Graaah! How dare you, arrogant mole!”

No wait, Drimo’s attack was really effective too! The boss must have had low defense in exchange for his high attack power. Then, should we attack aggressively, or take our time and act cautiously...?

“Graaah! You vexing pests!”

“Urgh!”

“Neigh-neigh!”

*Damn it!* The Shadow Man used an AoE attack! And it was super powerful! It took out more than half of Carro’s HP! I knew the pony was low-leveled, but still!

The boss barely telegraphed his attacks, which meant it was going to be pretty difficult to predict and avoid them.

I made my decision as I healed Carro. “Let’s attack him as hard as we can and end this quick! Carro, turn invisible! Then get closer to the boss!”

“Neigh!” Carro cried, then turned invisible, which meant I should be invisible too—though I couldn’t tell for sure.

Carro slowed down to a trot. In its invisible state, it couldn’t run very fast, so our only choice was to approach the boss slowly. Well, it wasn’t like we had to get right up close to him, so this was fine. Once I knew I was in range of the boss, I cast the spell I had chanted.

“Hydro Pressure!”

It was an advanced water magic spell that wasn’t just damaging, but had a chance of throwing an enemy off-balance with a blast of strong water pressure.

I hit the Shadow Man from behind with that spell.

“Aaarghhh!”

“Nice! He lost balance! Drimo, use Dragon Blood Awakening! Get ‘im!”

“Squeak squeeeeak!” Drimo roared, as if he was waiting for this moment.

Then, he charged straight for the teetering Shadow Man, his body glowing as he ran. A second later, the burst of light subsided to reveal a brown-scaled earth dragon.

“Squeak squeak squeeeeak!”

“What is this power?!” the Shadow Man roared.

*Nice!* He knocked him down again!

“Fau! Your turn!”

“Aye!”

*Now for our second ace in the hole to finish the job—Fau’s Earth Spirit Awakening!*

After transforming into the size of an adult, Fau stuck out her hands, and two magic circles emerged in front of her. The magic circles shone brightly, then produced a special effect that clearly indicated they were about to unleash a ferocious attack. Then, the magic circles each fired off a boulder. And unlike the time she used that attack against the Large Rock Ant, this time our enemy was collapsed on the ground.

“Gyaaaaah!”

Each boulder made a direct hit, taking out a large chunk of the Shadow Man’s HP. Drimo and Fau alone had depleted his health by more than thirty percent. Even counting the fact that the boss had low defense, that was still an impressive feat against a boss enemy. Their Awakening skills were as incredible as ever!

“All right! Let’s keep it up! Rick, go crazy throwing nuts at him! Everyone else, hit him with everything you’ve got!”

“Chirp chiiirp!”

My monsters and I followed up with an endless stream of attacks. Rick was over there even throwing valuable nuts! But that was fine, it was better than getting killed!



Cheval was also riding around on Soleil, attacking the Shadow Man with his treasured sword. The boss's HP continued to drop, reaching fifty percent in no time.

Then, it happened. The Shadow Man unleashed a thundering roar and emitted a red aura.

"Raaaaaargh!"

"Figures he wasn't going to let us win so easily!"

"You won't get away with this! I'll make you paaay!" he cried as the red aura enveloped his entire body. "Graaaaah!"

"He's fast!"

"Kee-hee!"

"Lilith!"

The Shadow Man rushed forwards at twice his usual speed and hit Lilith with a punch so forceful it sent her flying back to the edge of the field, taking forty percent of her HP out with it.

That red aura, that crazed roar—the boss was clearly in a rabid state. Normally, bosses reached that state once they dropped to twenty or ten percent HP, but this boss became rabid at only fifty percent. *Why in the world?!*

However, being in a rabid state came with its downsides. In most cases, while it boosted the boss's attack power and speed, it also lowered their defense. That probably applied to the Shadow Man too.

"But it's not like we can take advantage of that weak point right now...!"

The Shadow Man was too fast, making it impossible for us to attack him continuously.

"Aye-aye!"

"Fau!"

*Oh no! Fau's about to die!* One hit from the rabid boss was too much for her!

"Damn it! Fau, return! Olto, come out!"

“Mm?!”

“Olto! Sorry for summoning you in the middle of a boss fight! But please, block that thing’s attacks!”

“Mm-mm!”

Even though I’d suddenly thrown him into a boss fight, Olto was ready to go!  
*You never let me down, Olto!*

“Graaaaagh!”

“Mm-mmm!”

I heard a loud sound of impact as the Shadow Man’s fist collided with Olto’s hoe. But Olto wasn’t sent reeling backwards—he managed to stay firmly rooted in place. *Our tank is on another level! No one’s as steady as him!*

“Everyone, keep attacking!”

“Squeak squeak!”

“Kee-hee-hee!”

I knew it—the Shadow Man had even lower defense now! We were clearly dealing more damage to him. Especially Cheval and his sword! Amazingly, a single slash of his sword took out almost ten percent of the boss’s HP. If Cheval just attacked four more times, we could win this...

Yeah, right! In the brief second it took me to even have that thought, the tides of battle changed—I should’ve known a quest battle wouldn’t be that easy!

“Graaaaaghhh!”

“Aaagh!”

“Neigh-neeeigh!”

“Cheval!”

Cheval and Soleil were sent flying back by the waves of magic energy. They were already at half HP, and after slamming to the ground, they didn’t get up again. I quickly used a potion on them, but it had no effect. In fact, they seemed to be covered in a thin layer of something that blocked the potion from even reaching them. They must have fainted and been withdrawn from the battle.

I get it, now we had to fight without our support characters! Huh? Wait, then wouldn't it have been better if I'd let Cheval handle the first half of the fight and waited to use my monsters' Awakening skills until the second half...? Ahhh! I totally strategized this whole thing wrong!

But if I stopped fighting here, we'd lose the battle and fail the quest.

"Guys! The boss's HP is already less than half! We can do this!"

"Mm!"

"Squeak!"

Our two tanks hadn't lost heart yet. That was very reassuring.

The battle clearly started to stabilize especially once Olto started using his Guardian skill. Having a tank on the field really was necessary. While Olto was keeping the Shadow Man occupied, the rest of us continued to attack.

"Kee-hee!"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Graaah!"

We gradually started getting a grasp of the pattern. Although the boss was admittedly strong, his actual movements were pretty simple. As we deftly maneuvered around the Shadow Man's attacks, we eventually became able to counter them. The Shadow Man's HP started to plummet. *This is working! We can do this!*

Yeah, I needed to learn to stop letting small victories get to my head. Nothing good ever happened when I did...

"Grah! So be it! You've forced me to unleash my secret weapon!"

The moment the Shadow Man's HP reached twenty percent, his form underwent another change. He inflated to a staggering size, and then a black beam of light shot suddenly out of his mouth. Unable to dodge the surprise ray beam attack in time, Drimo took a direct hit.

"Squeak..."

And what a hit it was...

“N-No way!”

*It one-shotted Drimo?! Oh come on, just how strong is this thing?!*

“Diiie!”

While I was in shock, the Shadow Man—now almost five meters tall—started to move. His arm stretched out like a whip, arcing as if pulled by some centrifugal force before striking the ground with a thunderous crack.

“Mm-mmm!”

“Oh crap!”

*He couldn't stop it?!*

Olto tumbled to the ground. Now wasn't the time to stand around dumbstruck!

“Reflet, Sakura! Come out!”

“Humm!”

“...!”

“Reflet, help Olto! Sakura, attack!”

To replace our two party members that had fallen, I summoned Reflet, our healer, and Sakura, our all-rounder. I had Reflet concentrate on healing Olto. If he fell, we'd really be done for. Sakura would take over Drimo's place as our attacker, since she was able to attack from afar with her tree magic.

However, the Shadow Man received a huge boost to his defense when he turned gigantic, which meant regular attacks wouldn't deal much damage to him anymore. And that wasn't all—his attack power had also greatly increased.

Of course, I came to realize that the boss's beam attack didn't actually have as much power behind it as I'd thought. I ended up getting hit with it once, and it only took out thirty percent of my HP. I mean, it was still strong, but not strong enough to kill me in one hit. The true terror of that ray beam was the fact that it had a slight chance to instantly kill its target. After Drimo, I watched it happen with Eine—she almost had full health, but she died after one direct hit from the ray beam.



Drimo had really been unlucky. He'd gotten hit with its insta-kill ability on the first hit. I really needed to be careful. If I was insta-killed, then our whole party would be defeated.

With Reflet now on the field, Olto was back on his feet and able to keep fighting.

"Aaaugh!"

"Mmm!"

*Olto, that was awesome!*

The Shadow Man stomped forwards with a dull thud and swung his black fist down from over his head. There was no denying it was a tremendously powerful, heavyweight attack. But Olto didn't run away—he faced the attack head-on and blocked it. He stopped that fist, which was as big as he was, with his hoe, and pushed it back.

"Gaaah?"

And then the Shadow Man lost balance!

While the boss tried to keep his feet planted on the ground to stop from falling over, we all pelted him with attacks. The Shadow Man's HP started to drop little by little. After he grew, I'd been worried how our party was going to fare, but we were actually able to hold our own.

"If we can keep this up, can we win...?"

Unfortunately, my hopes were quickly shattered. The Shadow Man transformed once again, likely triggered by his HP crossing the ten percent threshold.

"You've done it now! I will bring you down with me! Aaahhh!"

"Now he's turning into a wolf?"

*And we can't attack while he's transforming! Typical!*

The Shadow Man had transformed into a jet-black wolf with thick smoke rising from its four limbs. It retained the same mass as its gigantified form, but despite the lupine appearance, its teeth still resembled a human's, which made

for an unsettling visual.

“I will *devour* you!”

“This fog...!”

The black fog started billowing out from the Shadow Man’s body with a fierce intensity until it surrounded us. It didn’t plunge us *completely* into darkness, but my visibility was reduced by more than half. Moreover, now that the boss was hidden in the fog—

“...!”

“Sakura! Damn it!”

We couldn’t even sense him coming!

The giant wolf bit Sakura, killing her. Apparently his teeth *also* had the ability to kill instantly. I’d hoped Sakura would be able to use her Divine Blessing skill, but now that was impossible!

“I summon Himka! Everyone! Huddle together and stay vigilant!”

“Hm!”

Newly summoned to the field, Himka held his mallet at the ready and gave a reassuring nod. Himka’s Counterattacker skill, which allowed him to auto-counter enemies with the flames that enveloped him, was just what we needed in a situation like this.

“We only need to take out ten percent of his HP! Himka! We’re counting on you!”

“Hm!”

We all kept a vigilant eye on our surroundings, no one daring to take a breath.

*It’s no use! We can’t see anything in this dark fog!* The smoke coming out from the boss’s limbs must have been making the fog around us even thicker. I tried to discern where he was by the sound of his footsteps or breathing, but I heard nothing. As a shadow, he probably didn’t make any noise.

A boss that could surprise attack as much as it wanted... *That’s cheating!*

“Chirp chiiirp!”

“Rick!”

Rick got bit! He wasn’t killed instantly, but he took a lot of damage!

I used a healing spell immediately, but it healed very little of his health—less than half of what it should have.

“Wh-What’s the deal?!”

I healed him again, to the same results. In the meantime, Lilith got bitten. She wasn’t instantly killed either, but she took a huge amount of damage.

“Humm!”

Reflet tried to heal her, but again, she was only able to heal Lilith for very little. Was this fog inhibiting our healing? I decided I’d try to help Reflet, but shockingly, I didn’t have enough MP.

“Huh...?”

*Hold on, what?* I knew I wasn’t a complete expert on managing my MP, but I knew generally how many times I could use my healing spells before I ran out! I should have had enough to use Aqua Heal one more time even without downing an MP potion! Was I not only healing for less but also consuming more MP than usual?

I was about to take out an MP potion when I was suddenly enveloped in a silver light, and then my MP was restored.

“Neigh!”

“Carro! Nice!”

Carro had used Moon Magic, and it had restored a *lot* of my MP. Now I would be able to use Aqua Heal at least two more times, with more than enough to spare.

Still, I was surprised how effective Carro’s Moon Magic was... I mean, it was certainly effective at night, but it wasn’t even dusk yet.

Then, one possibility suddenly crossed my mind—was this black fog turning the area around us into nighttime? But that reason alone wouldn’t explain why we weren’t healing as much...

“Whatever, I’ll try anything right now! Lilith!”

“Kee-hee?”

“Can you use Spell of Dawn here?”

“Kee-hee!”

*Great! She can use it in battle too!*

“Guys! Protect Lilith at all costs!”

“Mm-mmm!”

“Hmmm!”

Good thing I’d made sure to gather enough dark-attribute materials I needed to activate the spell!

I focused on the magical circle Lilith produced, selecting the materials to offer from the window that popped up.

“Graaawr!”

“Mm-mmm!”

“Whoa!”

There was a super loud noise right next to me as the Shadow Man tried to attack. Thankfully, Olto blocked it, but I still felt some of the pressure from it.

“Thanks, Olto!”

“Mm!”

I saw Olto give me a thumbs-up from the corner of my eye as I selected the final item.

“Spell of Dawn, activate!” I cried.

“Kee-heeeee!”

The magic circle glowed dark red, illuminating the area. Then, something astounding happened. The pervasive black fog vanished instantly.

“G-Grawr?”

The Shadow Man looked around in bewilderment.

“Now’s our chance! Let’s attack all together!”

*It’s time to form an offensive lineup!* I sent Carro away and summoned in Olea. Then, we all started attacking the Shadow Man. While the giant wolf was certainly swift, Olto and Himka had no problem blocking him now that he was visible. Meanwhile, Rick and the others chipped away at the boss’s HP.

One unfortunate thing did happen, though—Lilith got hit with a counterattack and died!

“Grawr!”

“Kee-hee...”

“Ahhh! That’s why I told you not to go too far forwards!”

She hadn’t been insta-killed, at least. Her sorcery accumulated a good amount of aggro, which made the boss target her. I’d known that would happen, which was why I’d told her to stay back... But she must have seen the Shadow Man flinch from Himka’s Counterattacker skill and saw that as her chance to attack, and moved too far forwards. Worse, as a healer, Reflet also accumulated aggro and was next to be targeted. The giant wolf shot his black ray beam from his mouth, killing her too.

“Bear Bear, Perca, come out! Help us!”

“Growl growl!”

“Honk honk!”

Bear Bear and Perca arrived on the scene fully ready to go. They went straight for the Shadow Man.

I could no longer summon any more monsters. We had to use our current fighting power to take the Shadow Man down!

“Hydro Pressure!”

“Chirp chiiirp!”

“Trii-triii!”

My water spell, Rick’s glowing walnut, and Olea’s scythe all made a direct hit on the boss nearly simultaneously. The water pressure, the intense flash of

light, or the scythe with the ability to knock back its target—it was unclear which one of those made it happen, but the Shadow Man stopped moving completely.

Not letting this chance go to waste, Bear Bear dealt the boss a crushing blow. They struck him with a powerful attack, their claws glowing red from their Charge Ramp-Up skill.

“Grooowl grooowl!”

“Graaagh!”

“Honk hoonk!”

“Chirp chiiirp!” Rick cried from on top of my shoulder, his tail sticking straight up.

The blue acorn in his hand glowed brightly, then he used his Deep Green Heart skill to transform it into a Deep Green Fruit.

“Chirp chiiirp!”

He threw the fruit, which landed spectacularly inside the Shadow Man’s mouth. The fruit exploded, and the Shadow Man’s HP dropped drastically. But the boss still hadn’t fallen. He must have had some skill that let him cling to life before dying for good. There was still a sliver left in his HP bar.

But our wave of attacks wasn’t finished yet! A lone, heroic penguin swooped down on the collapsed and groaning Shadow Man. It was Perca, cannonballing into the boss using Penguin Highway.

“Honk honk hoonk!”

“Graaaaagh!”

*We got him this time!*

“Grrr...”

After a final, dying whimper, the Shadow Man broke apart into polygons and disappeared.

“Woo-hoo! We won!” I cheered.

“Honk honk!”

“Nice job, Perca!”

“Hooonk!”

I caught Perca as he leaped towards me and I tousled his head, much to his delight.

I had set a new record for summoned monster deaths this battle... I knew they'd all be alive and well back at the farm, but still, that boss fight hadn't been good for my heart.

“Growl growl!”

“Trrrr!”

“Ack! Y-You guys did great too!”

Bear Bear and Olea threw themselves at me, so I caught Bear Bear and Olea and gave them pats too. And wouldn't you know, once the others saw that, they came bounding over to me too.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Mm-mmm!”

“Hmm!”

“Mmph!”

Rick pounced on my face while Olto and Himka rammed into either side of me. *I'm completely surrounded!*

“Ahhhhhh!”

They were crushing me for a bit, but at some point they must have realized they'd gone a little overboard and stepped away from me.

“Phew... Anyway, we beat the boss! What sort of materials did we— Huh?”

There were no material drops. Instead, I had obtained potions and money.

“Hrm, honestly, I would have preferred materials...”

Oh, well. It was better than nothing.

“Sir Yuto!” Cheval called out to me. “Thank you!”

“Neigh!”

*Whoops, I forgot about that guy again!*

“I-I’m glad you’re okay,” I said.

“Yes, more or less.”

“Neigh.”

Cheval and Soleil had regained consciousness and walked over to me. Since they didn’t look injured, did that mean I had successfully cleared the quest?

“Anyway, what was that creature? It seemed to be after my sword,” Cheval said perplexedly as he took out his sword and looked at it.

It was a valuable magical weapon. Many people were sure to want it. But the boss seemed more like a demon than a magical beast. Maybe it wasn’t after the sword just because it was valuable, but because it held some sort of secret?

I examined the sword, but I couldn’t glean anything from it. Normally when it came to these things, there would be some sort of secret message hidden in the hilt or guard of the sword... Unfortunately, that wasn’t the case with this sword. The Shadow Man must have been after this sword for its abilities or something like that.

Ultimately unable to figure out anything else here, we decided to head back to the mansion. We didn’t run into any more surprise attacks or new events along the way, and within thirty minutes, we had arrived at the mansion.

“Thank you for your help,” the old man said.

“Neigh-neigh!”

“Please, take this as a thank-you for saving my grandson.”

The old man gave me 5,000 G and one bonus point as a reward. It wasn’t much, but I supposed that was about right for a Zone Five quest. Besides, the biggest benefit to this quest was getting access to the Squire’s Forest, so the reward was probably just a bonus. Combined with what I got from beating the Shadow Man, I received over 100,000 G.

“Please visit us again sometime.”



“We shall welcome you with open arms.”

The old man and Cheval saw me off as I left the mansion. Outside, night was already starting to fall.

“Alyssa’s not online?”

I guess I’d have to sell information to her tomorrow.

## Chapter Five: A Boss Battle with the Gang

After finishing the quest to find Cheval, I decided to head back to the Town of Beginnings. I remembered that I still hadn't finished looking for antiques there.

First, I went back to the farm to switch out my party members, then I wandered around the town. I didn't find anything noteworthy, though. The valuable pieces were those made by the Dubhe Workshop; the rest was cheap goods. But my monsters did enjoy being able to pick out their favorite antiques, so I was happy about that.

I was wandering around browsing the item shops in a back alley, when I happened across a strange sight. There was a large crowd of players gathered in one of the Town of Beginnings' many small town squares. The place was filled with stalls, and there wasn't an NPC in sight. Both sellers and customers were all players.

At a glance, it looked like a bazaar, but the atmosphere felt completely different. All kinds of music was playing in the square, and many buyers and sellers alike had musical instruments in their hands. They must have all been musicians.

Job classes like Bard existed in this game, and it was possible to only acquire musical instrument skills. In fact, musical instrument skills were the most popular of the hobby skills, since they allowed you to easily play instruments, which was much harder to do in real life. I myself wasn't entirely uninterested. After all, people who could play musical instruments were pretty cool, right?

"Should we look around?"

"Aye-aye!"

Fau seemed interested too.

I stepped into the square, which was buzzing with energy. I already could tell from a distance that it was a bustling spot, but there were even more people here than I thought there were. The atmosphere reminded me of conventions

like Comiket.

“Oh, is that you, Silver-Haired?”

“Hmm?”

While I was looking out at the square from the entrance, someone suddenly called out to me. I turned to see a familiar face. It was a man with black eyes and hair and delicate features. Based on his appearance, he looked to be around twenty years old.

“Sekisho?”

“It’s good to see you again.”

Standing there was Sekisho, one of Kokuten’s party members. He was a high-leveled mage that loved fighting monsters. I’d seen him several times during events and such, but this was my first time talking to him one-on-one.

“Are you here alone?” I asked him.

“Yeah. I’m indulging in my hobby today.”

“Your hobby? Here?”

“Huh? Do you not know what this is? It’s a convention for musicians to sell their music boxes and sheet music.”

It really was a convention! I knew there were players who were making music in the game, and apparently they were selling their original compositions in this very square. They also sold music boxes that played their own original music.

“There are many different bands and artists here,” Sekisho explained. “Why don’t you take a look around? I’m sure you’ll find a song or two you’ll like.”

“Hmm... That sounds fun. Are you looking for anything in particular, Sekisho?”

“Yes! Nyamun-chan!”

“N-Nyamun-chan?”

*H-He sounds really excited all of a sudden.*

“Yes! She’s a cat in real life, but due to some mix-up, she accidentally logged into LJO with a cat girl avatar, and now she’s a super cat idol! Nyamun-chan’s

her name!”

“I-I see...”

I wasn’t one to judge other people’s preferences, but I’d have to pass on that. Still, it was interesting there was an underground idol with such an incredible backstory here. Or should I say a game idol? She’s a cat in the real world...

“Do you want to come with me, Silver-Haired?”

“O-Oh, well, I have my monsters with me. They’ll cause some trouble, so I’ll just take my time and browse around.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. You go have fun.”

After I sent Sekisho off to Nyamun-chan’s booth, I leisurely walked around the square. I would feel a little awkward about hanging out with Sekisho the entire time.

The first stall I checked out was a trio of girls selling music boxes.

“We’re selling our EP!”

“The song that we’re playing now is included in it too!”

“Please consider buying one!”

They looked exactly like musicians selling music on the street as they performed while calling out to people walking by. One was playing a classical guitar, another a mini keyboard slung over her shoulder, and the third a small drum.

Their composition of instruments was more like that of a small orchestra than a band, but their frilly outfits and the style of their songs had the vibe of real-world idols. Their appearances were also visually well-balanced. One had red pigtails, one had long black hair, and one had a blue ponytail. It was like they knew exactly what they were going for.

Their band name was “Sunbeats.” The song they were performing had a melody that anyone of all ages would enjoy. It was a standard idol tune with a pleasant, almost retro feel to it. All of the music I heard in this game was

classical music, so this song felt very fresh.

“Aye!”

“Oh, are you a fan, Fau?”

“Aye!”

Fau seemed to be enjoying the girls’ song. She was on top of my head, blissfully swaying her body from side to side. The band moved on to play their next song, which was another pure and innocent idol song.

They called it an “EP,” but the music box could only record up to three songs. I checked out the song titles—there was “Cat in the Shade,” “Sunflower,” and “Onward to Tomorrow.” All the song titles sounded like typical idol songs.

Surprisingly, the songs didn’t seem to resonate with my other monsters. They didn’t have the same spark in their eye as when they were picking out their favorite antiques. They didn’t dislike the performance, but they didn’t like it either. That was the vibe I was getting, at least. Still, they were acting way too obvious about it. At least sway a little or something and pretend that you like it!

Meanwhile, as Fau and I were both rocking side to side as we listened to the girls’ songs, they noticed Fau.

“Sh-She’s so cute!”

“This is my first time seeing a fairy up close!”

“Wait a second, isn’t that Silver-Haired?!”

The girls knew their fairy information. Unsurprising, since they were musicians. That must have been how they knew who I was, since I was the one who had first discovered fairies.

In any case, they became strangely flustered. They stopped their performance and started acting jittery and panicked. Other customers started looking our way too. *Um, I didn’t complain or anything, okay? They just started freaking out on their own! I don’t know why! Don’t get the wrong idea!*

“U-Um, uhh... Here! For you!”

“Huh? For me...? N-No wait, I’ll pay for it.”

“N-No, you can’t!”

“I can’t just take it!”

*Now it looks like I complained and now they’re giving me a music box as an apology!* What if people started spreading weird rumors about me?!

“It’s fine!” one of the girls insisted.

“Wh-What do you mean? I feel bad taking it for free, and there’s no reason you need to give me one!”

“No, no, you’re Silver-Haired! If you give us money after we forced a music box on you, we’ll be in danger!”

“That’s right!”

“Won’t you please just take it?”

“D-Danger?” I repeated. “From what? Then, can’t you just not force me to take it...?”

“It’s too late to take it back now!”

“Come on, what?!”

The girls were shaking their heads and waving their hands in refusal, so I couldn’t keep insisting that I pay them money. In the end, I bought some of their sheet music, then left. The other customers—or fans, rather—weren’t mad at me, right? They were just sort of glancing my way and awkwardly smiling, so they didn’t *seem* mad...

“Well, I guess this is fine. Fau likes their music, and I was planning on buying sheet music anyway.”

“La-di-daaa. ♪”

“Oh, you’re playing the song already?”

“La-laaa. ♪”

I had bought sheet music before at the auction. It looked like a skill scroll. However, the sheet music wasn’t something that needed to be read. Instead, it was a consumable item that disappeared after using it. And once you used it, you immediately learned and were able to play the song.

Fau was already happily singing and strumming her lute to the tune of the Sunbeats' song. It didn't sound exactly the same because of the different instrumentation, but I might actually have preferred the lute version. It had a mysterious, fantastical feel to it, which I attributed to the timbre of the lute. The song didn't give any special effects or anything, but I felt I'd made a pretty good purchase.

"How about we buy sheet music for a few more songs?"

"La-la-laaa. ♪"

"All right, what type of song should we pick next?"

I was feeling even more hyped about exploring this music convention now. My monsters and I headed for the next booth. All the stalls were spaced out a bit, probably to prevent all the different music that was playing from clashing together.

While the Sunbeats' stall had been painted white, pink, and aqua, the next booth I stopped at was all black. *Talk about dark.* It couldn't see any other color in the stall besides black. Even the music boxes on sale were black, so they were very hard to see.

The music that was being played was also dramatically different from the other booth. I'd call it...progressive death metal? It really packed a punch. They had a male singer delivering throaty, screamed vocals, and the bass and drums were heavy and intense. It was the type of music that some people might consider straight-up noise. The performers wore studded leather jackets and white face paint. Some of them even wore hockey masks. They looked like a quintessential death metal band. Some of my monsters got right up close to the performers to listen to them play—and I was surprised by who.

"Lilith, I understand, but Eine and Fau, you like this kind of music too?"

"Kee-hee!"

"Tra-la-la!"

"Aye-aye!"

Lilith was shaking her head up and down like she was headbanging. Next to

her, Eine and Fau started doing the same, their hair swishing around and getting all disheveled. Lilith was a demon, so it made sense that she would like heavy-metal music. In fact, I'd be surprised if she liked anything else. And seeing how Fau liked more intense songs like this one, I guess that meant she didn't discriminate when it came to music. With the idol music, she'd swayed and clapped her hands, but now she was headbanging so hard I thought her head might come off. She was so small and dolllike that I couldn't help but be worried about her neck.

Those two were both within my expectations, but I never would have thought that Eine, the one with the most childlike appearance of all my monsters, would like this kind of music. Seriously, this band's name was "Death Game," for crying out loud. The songs recorded on their music box were called "Catharsis," "Sock 'Em," and "They're All Corrupt Anyway." I guess the idea was that beating up corrupt politicians made them feel better or something? I actually didn't dislike their music, but it was like the exact opposite of Eine's cute image.

I thought we'd just pass it by, but my monsters were getting so into the music that they ended up attracting a lot of attention. We couldn't just pass by without stopping at this point. I decided to buy a music box from the male vendor who was in clown makeup that belonged in a horror movie. He seemed to have noticed my monsters, but he didn't say anything about them.

Instead, he just let out an indescribable, loud cackle. His laugh sounded more like a performance than something like Rikyu's laugh. Maybe not chatting with customers was part of the band's concept.

I asked if they had any sheet music, and he showed me what they had for sale, cackling all the while. Also, it seemed like a drawn-out cackle meant yes, and short cackle meant no? This guy in the white face paint really was able to communicate a lot just by cackling. *How admirable! Keep it up, you youngsters!*

Once we were done, we waved goodbye to the guy in the white face paint, who waved back at us, and we walked away from the booth. Eine looked reluctant to leave. She must have really liked their music.

Things were much calmer at the next booth.

"This booth is instrumental music..."



“Aye-aye!”

“Growl!”

A three-piece band was performing music that had unusual melodies, reminiscent of South American folk music. It was the type of music that made me imagine a condor flying towards the Andes.

Every single one of my monsters seemed to like this music, especially Bear Bear. They were clapping their stuffed animal hands together, their eyes lighting up as they listened to the music.

Two members of the trio were playing instruments I recognized—a guitar and a wooden recorder—but one was playing a strange instrument I’d never seen before. It looked like an oddly shaped flute with a row of wooden pipes, each of which was slightly longer than the one before it. When I appraised it, I found out it was called a siku.

I wondered if the musicians made their instruments themselves. They definitely didn’t look like instruments found in the early game. The guitar the other musician was playing was called a mandolin, and the recorder-like instrument was called a quena.

Their band name was “musica,” all in lowercase. Was that pronounced “mew-sica”? Or “moo-sica”? I was pretty sure it meant “music,” but that wasn’t English, right? The songs on their music boxes were called “mi viaje,” “epopeya,” and “cielo.” Unfortunately, I didn’t know what any of those words meant.

I was sure they would tell me if I asked, but the poncho-wearing trio of guys were performing so enthusiastically that for some reason, I felt too intimidated to go up and talk to them. I’m sure the song titles meant something cool.

But since my monsters seemed to like this music, I wanted to buy a music box and sheet music. As I was wondering how to go about that, I saw that their stand was set up like one of those countryside vegetable stands. Did the band already know that people were shy about approaching them? That thought made me feel a little sad. I ended up not being able to bring myself to talk to them, but I internally wished them the best of luck.

“All right, next is a comedy band?”

The band members were performing punk music while wearing animal ears and flashy cosplay outfits. The vocalist had bunny ears, the guitar player had fox ears, the drummer had bear ears, the bass player had cat ears, and the triangle player had dog ears. Among them, the triangle player stood out the most. She was the smallest one, and she looked so silly striking that triangle like her life depended on it that it was kind of adorable.

Their band name was “Furry-Eared Girl Group.” It was definitely a joke. And their band name wasn’t the only humorous thing about them.

Their song names were also all wacky. There was “What the Heck Is That Girl with the Pigtails Complaining About?” “Fantastical, Chaotic Girly Feelings,” and “There’s Nothing in Saitama.”

At least, I thought they were a comedy band whose draw was their onstage performance, but...

“Are they actually being genuine?”

“Aye.”

Their performance sounded very authentic, in a way that you wouldn’t think from a band with a triangle player. Actually, even the triangle wasn’t just randomly added in—it blended perfectly with the other instruments. Also, was it me, or were the songs actually not bad? The song they were singing about Saitama right now actually had a message to it. They were singing about how precious it was to have an ordinary daily life where nothing good or bad happened. The first half of the lyrics were pretty deep, even if the second half expressed how a place with nothing like Saitama was actually god-tier.

Huh? It *was* deep, right? Or was I going crazy? Did it just sound deep because of the gap between their ridiculous outfits and their songs?

It wasn’t just me—my monsters seemed to like this band’s music too.

“You’re all really getting into it, huh?”

“Mm-mm!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Aye-aye!”

Not only Fau, who liked any type of music, but even Olto was standing in the front row watching their performance with Rick sitting on top of his head. He was jumping up and down, surrendering himself to the punk rock beat. Rick was using that momentum to bounce up high on Olto’s head. They were making such a scene that they attracted even more attention than ever.

“Huh? S-Silver-Haired?”

“No way. Really?”

“It’s really him! Awesome!”

“Ah! His fairy is here too!”

“Wow, you’re right!”

Of course all their jumping around would make us stand out. And apparently the members of this girl band also knew who I was.

Fau’s popularity among musician players was really something else. Even some of the girl band’s fans were looking at us.

“Um, could I get a music box and some sheet music?” I asked.

After we left that booth, I toured the other booths and bought more sheet music and music boxes. I got several pieces of sheet music for classical and Celtic folk songs, which Fau was happy about. Now she had an even wider repertoire of songs to play. I was looking forward to hearing her perform during mealtimes. None of the songs granted any effects, though, which meant they’d have no impact on our fighting power!

Once I was satisfied with my purchases, I met back up with Sekisho and we walked through the Town of Beginnings, both of us looking pleased with ourselves.

“Silver-Haired! What’d you think?”

“I got to hear a bunch of different music, so it was very worthwhile.”

“Not that—I’m talking about Nyamun-chan!”

*Ah, right. That’s what he means...* I had tried to be evasive since I wasn’t sure

how to answer him.

Right before I had left the convention, Sekisho had invited me to watch Nyamun-chan perform onstage, but... I could only suppose that she was doing it to maintain the story that she was a cat in real life, but the song lyrics had consisted entirely of the word “meow.” Yes, I had watched a cute, gray-haired cat girl stand up onstage, punching her cat paws in the air and singing “meow meow meoooow meow meoooow meow” with her all heart and soul—it went past endearing and bordered on surreal.

“Um, well, sh-she was really great?”

“Wasn’t she? Nyamun-chan’s always doing her best, even in the real world!”

“What? But, she’s a cat...right?”

There were quite a few people who gained idol-like popularity in VR games and then went on to become idols in real life. But wouldn’t that be hard to do as a cat? I mean, she was a *cat*. She wouldn’t be able to make appearances.

When I expressed that doubt aloud, Sekisho happily explained things to me. Within less than five minutes, I became an expert on all things Nyamun-chan.

Nyamun-chan was active on social media in the real world and also entertained her fans by uploading videos online. Even though she couldn’t be an idol like she was in the game, she was popular as a heartwarming animal blogger. People could support her as an idol in the game, and admire her as an adorable gray tabby cat in the real world. *Doesn’t that get confusing...?*

I was wondering how the cat setup worked in real life, but apparently the story was that her owner was writing as her representative. I had a feeling if I mentioned the words “story” or “setup” to Sekisho, he’d get upset, so I made sure to be careful about my wording.

Anyway, Nyamun-chan and her owner were probably one and the same. The owner was pretending to be Nyamun-chan— Never mind, I shouldn’t think something so tactless. Sekisho looked content, and that was all that mattered.

“I’m a little tired, but that was fun. You all had fun too, right?” I asked my monsters.

“Aye-aye!”

Everyone responded with a nod. Fau looked the most pleased, but my other monsters were all in high spirits too. Their excitement from listening to all the music still hadn’t subsided.

“Kee-hee-hee!”

“Tra-la-la!”

“Wow, look at you go.”

Lilith and Eine were whirling like spinning tops and headbanging. There was no music playing, so it just looked like they were flailing around for no reason.



“Mm-mmm!”

“Grooowl!”

“Chirp chirp!”

I could only guess that Olto, Bear Bear, and Rick were recreating their favorite band’s melody with their bodies. They had their hands curled up like a cat’s and —

“Oh, you’re pretending to be Nyamun-chan!”

They actually *liked* her? *I mean, she’s cute and all, but...* I watched them incredulously as they struck kitty cat poses with an incredulous look on my face, while Sekisho exclaimed, “I expected nothing less from Silver-Haired’s monsters! They know quality when they see it!”

“Ha ha ha... A-Anyway, are you sure it’s okay for me to come over to your house?” I said, forcibly changing the subject. I could see this conversation taking forever if Sekisho’s excitement ramped up even more. “I know it’s sort of last minute.”

“Yes, it’s fine,” he assured me. “Everyone’s happy to have you over, so don’t worry about it.”

Sekisho and I were currently en route to the house Kokuten’s party used as a home base, which had been purchased at an auction. Curious what the house was like, I asked Sekisho, and in response he invited me over.

The house was located in the middle of the town hub of the Town of Beginnings. It was in a special area, like my Japanese-style house was. My house was built on a hill surrounded by a cluster of trees resembling the sort that grew on mountains in Japan. Meanwhile, Kokuten’s Western-style house was constructed in an area that resembled the hilly moors of England. There was about an even split of grassland and trees.

There must not be many players who owned a Western-style house yet, judging by how solitary the hilltop house was. I felt a little jealous. They had all these rolling hills all to themselves.

“I’d seen this place before at the auction, but it really is something else in

person.”

“Isn’t it? It was so worth it to pool our money together for it.”

Kokuten’s party members had all consolidated their funds to be able to purchase the house, and it wasn’t hard to see why. There were hedges tangled with ivy and beautiful roses, which stood before an elegant white gate leading into a vivacious English garden. The garden eschewed a manicured look, instead filled with flowering plants that almost seemed to grow wild.

The foliage probably changed with the seasons, but right now, the beds were filled with white and yellow blossoms, their petals scattering with every breeze. Thanks to this being a game, no matter how many petals went flying, the flowers remained intact.

We walked down the cobblestone road that cut through the garden, passing under a stunning rose arch before finally reaching the front door. There was a beautiful fountain in front of the entrance, which I assumed was the source of the waterway that flowed through the garden.

“Well, come on in.”

“Thanks for having me.”

I stepped inside the house. The interior was also very pretty. It had refined, English-style decor with classic wooden floors. Although it wasn’t quite big enough to be called a mansion, the place was pretty luxurious compared to an ordinary home.

“Welcome, Silver-Haired.”

“You’re here too, Kokuten?”

I was greeted by Kokuten, who was wearing a white T-shirt and red tracksuit, apparently in full-lounge mode. I had only ever seen him wearing his sturdy armor, so he looked sort of wrong to me. Moreover, he looked out of place in this fancy house—though it was *his* house, of course, so he could dress however he liked.

“Thanks for coming out to greet me,” I said.

“I was training at home today, so it’s no trouble.”



Just as Sekisho had gone to Nyamun-chan's event, the other party members were also enjoying a day off in their own way.

Kokuten had constructed a training room in the house where he was doing mock battles against NPC wooden dummies. Since it fell outside of my realm of interest, I hadn't been aware of this fact, but apparently you could install training rooms that simulated dungeons and combat situations in your home.

"Wooden dummies, huh?"

While I wasn't interested in the mock battles, I *was* interested in those wooden dummies.

"Would you like me to show you?" Sekisho offered.

"You don't mind? I feel a little bad."

"Don't, I'm free right now, anyway."

Sekisho not only showed me the wooden dummies but also gave me a tour of the rest of the house. Unlike my own home, there were separate rooms for each party member, so there were surprisingly few communal spaces.

In addition to the training room Kokuten had been using, there was also a room for analyzing recorded videos of battles frame-by-frame, a room for practicing lockpicking and disarming traps, and a room for repairing the durability of equipment by a small amount. Leave it to a top party of fighters to have a home filled with rooms dedicated to nothing but combat.

Also, there was no sight of the spaces that were indispensable in my own home, like a kitchen, a room for playing with monsters, a crop field, or a crafting room. Our homes weren't simply different because one was a Western-style home and one a Japanese-style home; even by the makeup of their layouts they were polar opposites.

"This was a lot of fun. It's not often that I get to see inside other players' houses."

"I'm glad to hear it. The outside of the house looks nice, but we haven't spruced up the interior much. It's not really a home fit for receiving guests."

Now that he mentioned it, I'd noticed that there weren't a lot of furnishings

or home objects. Everyone kept their personal items in their own rooms, so the living room and communal spaces were rather sparse. The shelves looked a little sad and empty.

“I see... Oh! In that case, I’ll give these to you, as a housewarming gift!”

I had just the thing. It’d look perfect in the living room.

“Is this a plate?” Sekisho asked.

“Yeah, it’s an antique. Suits the house, don’t you think?”

I had handed Sekisho a decorative plate made by the Dubhe Workshop. It clearly had a Western style, so it went perfectly with this house’s style. I had several of them, so I didn’t mind giving them even two or three plates.

“We can’t just take such a nice-looking plate...” Sekisho protested.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not as expensive as it looks. Please, take it.”

While the plate looked valuable at first glance, the original price was only between two and three thousand G.

“Really? Well, if you insist.”

“Nice, we can finally decorate the shelves in our living room,” Kokuten said, looking pleased. Sekisho took the decorative plate and excitedly walked over to one of the shelves that had been installed in the living room.

Like the two of them said, the shelving here was pretty bare. Oddly enough, just displaying a plate on a shelf felt like it brightened up the room.

“Wow, that single plate really made a difference,” Kokuten said in awe.

“Maybe we should try putting a little more effort into our home decor.”

“Then how about a Nyamun-chan poster?!”

“Nah,” Kokuten said bluntly.

“Yeah, okay...” Sekisho responded, his shoulders slumping.

*Sorry, man.* I felt a little bad for him, but I couldn’t help but feel glad that Sekisho’s tastes wouldn’t get the chance to taint this nice living room.

“Silver-Haired, where did you buy this plate?” Kokuten asked. “I’m interested

in seeing more like it.”

“Oh, you have good taste!”

It wasn't like I had made the plate, but it did make me happy when someone complimented something I also thought was nice. But while this product was from the Dubhe Workshop, not all my antiques were.

“There's a bunch I'd love to tell you about, but I didn't get them all from the same shop.”

I told Kokuten and Sekisho about how I used Antiques Knowledge to buy items from many different stalls.

“Ah, I see.”

“Hmm, that's out of the question for us, then.”

Kokuten's party used all their bonus points to boost their stats and fighting skills. Asking them to spare even two points for a non-combat-related skill would be a lot.

“Okay then, how about something like these?” I said.

“Oho? These are nice plates too. These might actually go with our house better than the other one,” Kokuten commented.

“Yeah, you're right,” Sekisho agreed. “I definitely want some like this!”

“Himka made them! Pick whichever ones you like. Consider these housewarming gifts too.”

They were some of the especially nicely made porcelainware items that Himka made, which I had decided to hold on to. I didn't really have a specific purpose in mind for them, though. I had just stored them away, thinking I might put them up on display at some point. In addition to the plates, I also took out some vases and tea sets that I figured would look nice in this Western-style living room.

“No, no, no, no! We can't accept these!” Kokuten said vehemently.

“Don't you know how much these went for at the auction?!” Sekisho cried.

“These aren't as nice as the silverware sets I put up. Himka just made them

for practice. Honestly, I don't think they're worth that much."

The materials didn't cost much either, and if I hadn't held on to them, I probably would have just put them up for sale at my farm stand. People still hadn't lost interest in the products I sold there, so I knew they'd sell easily. I figured people would want to put more effort into making meals and snacks once they got more accustomed to the game, so they'd probably keep selling for a while longer.

"We'll pay you for them," Kokuten stated.

"No, it's fine. Really."

"But—"

"Please, I insist—"

Oh, great. Now we were stuck in a loop of bowing to each other. Kokuten insisted on paying and refused to accept them for free. So, I decided to ask for a favor instead.

"Okay, hear me out. There's a boss I wasn't able to beat earlier. How about you help me defeat it, as payment?"

"Oh? Hey, that doesn't sound too bad, does it?" Sekisho said.

"You're right," Kokuten agreed. "That's our field of expertise, after all."

It sounded like Kokuten and Sekisho were on board with the idea.

"Oh, but I'm not sure if I can bring you guys there yet."

"Where's this boss located?" Kokuten asked.

"It's an area called the Squire's Forest. Have you heard of it?"

A look of surprise crossed Kokuten's face when he heard the name of the area.

"I-Is that the forest the Quick-Eared Cats are selling information about?"

"Oh, so you do know it?"

"Of course! It's a new area!"

"Huh? Really? *There?!'*" Sekisho exclaimed.

It seemed like the Quick-Eared Cats' strategy was to gather more detailed information about the forest by making its existence known. And that plan was working just as intended—the Squire's Forest had become a hot topic all over the game. Players who wanted a mount were especially losing their minds looking for it.

“Th-This is pretty big, isn't it?”

“Definitely. Man, I've got goose bumps.”

I wasn't expecting this big of a reaction. Apparently a new area where you could obtain a rideable monster was enough to blow the minds of even top players like them.

“So that information *did* come from Silver-Haired...”

“People were saying it probably was him, and they were actually right.”

For some reason, Kokuten and Sekisho were glaring at me. It wasn't like I was keeping the information a secret from them, okay? I just hadn't had the chance to bring it up since coming here until now.

“Anyway, let's see if we can teleport to the forest together.”

“Yeah!”

“Please and thank you!”

They sure were enthusiastic. At their urging, we formed a team and then headed to the teleportation circle. However, we weren't able to teleport together. I went back to my farm to drop a few monsters off, formed a party with Kokuten and Sekisho, then tried teleporting that way, but with the same result. It seemed they couldn't enter the Squire's Forest without clearing the proper requirements first. As I expected, they likely needed a permit.

“That's a shame. I thought I was about to get to fight a new boss...” Kokuten said dejectedly.

Both he and Sekisho looked disappointed, but I hadn't given up yet. If it was a permit they needed, then we'd get them one. The old knight had told me to visit him again at his mansion sometime, after all. Not that he was probably expecting me back *this* soon!

When I explained as much to Kokuten and Sekisho, they looked surprised.

“What?! Are you saying you found a way to get into the Squire’s Forest that’s *not* through the quest chain?” Kokuten asked.

“Th-That’s amazing! Silver-Haired never misses!”

Well, even *I* knew this was some pretty amazing information. I could already picture Alyssa’s scream when I got the chance to tell her about this. *Heh heh heh*. I had to say, I was enjoying the shocked look on Kokuten’s and Sekisho’s faces.

The three of us headed to the mansion. I gave my name at the entrance, and we were shown inside without a problem. Cheval and the old man were in the parlor. They greeted us warmly, probably because I had successfully saved Cheval. Seeing how happy both he and the old man were to see me, I should have no problem asking them for a favor, right?

I decided I’d try asking the old man if he could give my friends a permit for entering the Squire’s Forest. If he said no, then I could at least ask him how they *could* get a permit.

“Certainly, that is no problem,” the old man said.

“Huh? Really?”

Securing their permits ended up being no problem.

“You saved my grandson. I know I can trust any friends of yours. I am unable to issue you permits for all your friends, but about five should be fine.”

“Th-Thank you very much!”

*Man, am I glad I cleared that quest!* He could provide me with permits for five other people, or in other words, enough for everyone in a single party. It was the same limit as the key for entering the Lakeside Sequoia Dryad’s Altar. This went without saying, but Kokuten and Sekisho wouldn’t be able to receive extra permits for anyone they might bring here.

“Um, are you sure you’re okay with giving us something as valuable as these permits?” Kokuten asked me.

“Well, of course. I need your help to fight the boss.”

“No way! We’re getting way too much out of this!” Sekisho asserted.

“I don’t really think you are...”

“It’s true! You even gave us those plates!”

I was asking them to beat a boss for me that I couldn’t. It was only natural that I would take care of getting them there.

After some discussion, it was decided that the two of them would help me out several more times when I wanted to challenge a boss in the future. Man, I really had some real fighting power on reserve now.

Be that as it may, it was going to be hard to challenge the boss in my current state—my monsters who’d died during the boss fight were still under a death penalty. It had reduced somewhat after we spent some time at the convention, but there was still some duration remaining. We couldn’t go up against the Forest Wolf Chief in such a weakened state.

Kokuten and Sekisho seemed to want to challenge the boss today if possible, though. They said they had a pretty packed schedule starting tomorrow. I didn’t mind delaying this fight for a bit, but as for them...

“Out of the question! This is an unknown boss! I’m too curious!”

“Please let us challenge it!”

“Oh, but...”

“It’s fine! I have just what you need!”

Kokuten took out an item that mitigated death penalties. If I remembered right, it sped up the death penalty effects by six hours. He handed me a bunch of them. *Don’t these cost 500 yen a piece? Is he really okay with giving me this many?* I tried to refuse them, but Kokuten insisted I use them for his and Sekisho’s sake.

I supposed that these items *would* cancel my monsters’ death penalties, which I was happy for. That was a working adult for you; he sure knew how to spend his money.

“Next, we need to gather some party members,” Kokuten said.

“If the boss made your monsters faint in one hit, it must be really strong,” Sekisho followed up.

“I don’t think our party members will be able to participate, so hopefully we can find other people.”

“If you don’t mind who joins, Silver-Haired, then we can ask some people we know.”

“Hmm, yeah.”

As we were walking and discussing what to do, a voice called out to us from beside us.

“Ah, is that you over there, Yuto?”

“Hey, Murakage!”

“It has been quite a while! And I see you’re with the chief!”

“Hello, Murakage,” Kokuten greeted him.

The voice belonged to a suspicious character dressed head to toe in black, but he actually wasn’t shady at all, but an acquaintance. Okay, maybe he was a little bit shady.

He was here in Zone Five gathering materials. Apparently, in true ninja fashion, he concocted his own poisons.

“No Ayakage today?” I asked him.

“She is currently leveling up with the other women of the clan. She said it was a girls’ day.”

I was happy to hear that things with his marriage and clan were going well. More importantly, did we just find one more person to join our team?

I furtively glanced over at Kokuten, who was nodding and grinning. I took that to mean I should invite Murakage.

“Murakage, are you free later today?”

“Hmm? I suppose I am free... Do you require my assistance?”

“Well...”



I explained to Murakage how I was looking for people to join me to fight against a boss I couldn't beat, keeping the details vague. I also told him if he decided to fight with us, I'd bring him to a new area.

"You want me to come with you?"

"Yeah, we need a scout, and you should be more than high-leveled enough for the fight. Plus, I trust you on a personal level."

"Hearing you say such words of praise, I cannot refuse to lend my hand! This is my opportunity to repay your kindness! I will live up to your trust in me!"

And with that, we gained a member. *Kokuten, Sekisho, and Murakage, huh...?* They were all dependable allies, if a little intense.

And so, we added Murakage, the ninja, to our provisional party. Then, he raised a question.

"Hmm, if we are fighting a boss, should I bring my monster mount?"

"Huh? Oh right, you have a horse, don't you?"

"Yes, I do."

Apparently, if you joined the Knights' Guild and Merchants' Guild and did some quests for them, you could buy a horse. However, if you went through a guild that wasn't the Knights' Guild, you'd get a random monster, so there was a chance you wouldn't get a horse. So, if you wanted a horse, the Knights' Guild was your only choice.

Plus, the only horse that was purchasable was a Packhorse, which wasn't very strong. In Siegfried's case, he'd thrown a bunch of his initial bonus points into skills that enhanced both him and his horse while he was on horseback. That was why even though his horse might have seemed strong, the Packhorse itself didn't have high stats and its abilities didn't get that much stronger even after evolving. Because of that, people were theorizing that players could change horses somehow, or there was some sort of quest that would strengthen their horse.

"We are headed for the rumored Squire's Forest, are we not? Might there not be a chance we will run into some horseback-riding event?"

“Yeah, that’s a possibility. Also, our enemy is an agile wolf, so it might not be a bad idea to be on horseback.” I turned to Kokuten and Sekisho and asked, “What do you guys think?”

“I don’t have a problem with that,” Kokuten responded. “I’d also like for some people to be on horseback to verify a few things.”

And so, we decided Murakage would participate with his horse, Dust Storm. Then, we searched for more party members.

We decided we might as well try to invite one more player who could ride on horseback, so we reached out to a certain man. And that man on horseback would be none other than Siegfried.

“Hello there, Yuto. Thank you for the kind invitation.”

The purple-haired Siegfried looked as princely as ever as he came riding in on his ugly horse.

“I will work my very hardest, to show my appreciation for you choosing me to join your team.”

“I as well,” said Murakage.

“There’s nothing like going to fight a mystery boss to get your heart pumping,” Kokuten said.

“I need to earn good money so I can support Nyamun-chan,” Sekisho stated.

It was quite the eccentric team we had assembled here. A self-proclaimed knight, a ninja wannabe, a battle junkie, and an idol otaku. They were all top-level players, so why did I feel uneasy about this? Well, in terms of fighting ability, we were set, so if we still lost with this lineup, that would just mean the Forest Wolf Chief was too strong.

We temporarily disbanded so we could go to our homes and make preparations, and then we reconvened in front of the teleportation circle.

“All right, I’m counting on you guys.”

“Yeah!” they all responded enthusiastically.

But then everyone said they wanted to verify something before the boss fight.

When they heard about how I obtained an emblem from the Cute Horse, they couldn't just ignore it. In fact, they were super into the idea, surprisingly so.

But this was an emblem we were talking about, after all. Since I still hadn't used mine, it hadn't really sunk in for me yet, but they were transcendently rare items that were desired by all. Apparently what I told them about the Cute Horse's emblem had been such important information that even Siegfried, who was usually so well-mannered, suddenly turned serious and hounded me with questions.

Plus, this was a good team to verify the Cute Horse encounter with. Kokuten and Sekisho didn't have monster mounts, while Murakage and Siegfried had their horses. Could Murakage and Siegfried tame a Cute Horse? And if they could, could they obtain an emblem on their next encounter with the horse? And what would happen if we were in a party versus a team?

Since there was so much we wanted to know, we decided to try out several things. First, I brought Murakage and Siegfried to visit the old retired knight. The man's attitude was clearly different towards the two.

It seemed having a tamed horse made him act favorably towards you. I was curious how his attitude would change if he was visited by someone with a tamed mount that wasn't a horse, but I'd have to leave figuring that out to the Verification Clan.

The old man told Siegfried to come visit him anytime if he had interest in being a knight. The fact that he didn't say the same to Murakage must have meant it was related to Siegfried's job class, or maybe a skill that he possessed.

After that, we headed for the Squire's Forest while we calmed down Siegfried, who was beside himself with joy. The outer parts of the forest were at such a low difficulty level that we didn't even have to get into any particular formation. We just strolled leisurely through the forest, crushing the occasional monster that crossed our path. After only fifteen minutes, we found a Cute Horse. At this point, finding a Cute Horse had become routine for my monsters.

"Aha, so it creates an illusion," Murakage remarked.

"Don't attack it. Put your weapons away and sit down here," I said.

“I feel like I’m at a picnic. Doing this sort of thing isn’t so bad once in a while,” Siegfried said airily. The others smiled uneasily, but it was better to relax in this scenario. We weren’t going to *fight* the Cute Horse, after all.

We all sat down on a straw mat while I laid out the Cute Horse’s favorite foods, like I had done previously. Then, once the horse revealed itself to eat the food, we gathered around to play with it.

“It feels nice to the touch,” Siegfried commented.

“Indeed it does!” Murakage agreed.

Siegfried and Murakage were horse fans, all right. They were super excited—though Kokuten and Sekisho displayed only a normal amount of enthusiasm. Even though they were interested in it being a monster mount, they weren’t *that* fascinated by the horse’s cuteness.

Once the Cute Horse was satisfied with our interaction, it started to glow. This was normally the part where we’d get an item...

“Well?” I asked everyone.

“I tamed it!” Murakage exclaimed.

“It seems I struck out,” Siegfried said.

“Same with me and Sekisho,” Kokuten said.

It seemed like the Cute Horse was tamed by the player who had raised its favorability score the most. And when that happened, the other players didn’t obtain an item. I guess there was only one chance per party to get something.

After that encounter, we tried several more times. We tested out a few different scenarios, like removing people from the party, and entering the forest individually. From our experiments, we discovered that the Cute Horse couldn’t be automatically tamed without certain conditions: it was necessary to have either Taming or Riding skills.

Also, we all received different items for interacting with the Cute Horse. Siegfried was the only one who had obtained an emblem, and it was still unclear what the requirements were to receive one. However, it was possible that favorability influenced the outcome, like it did when taming it.

Siegfried possessed a skill that helped him raise the favorability of monster mounts, but Murakage didn't have any skills of that type.

"Unfortunately, we are reaching the end of our time limit," Murakage pointed out.

"Oh, already?"

We had decided at the start that we would spend only two hours on verification, but the time had flown by in the blink of an eye. Kokuten and Sekisho seemed like they were ready to fight the boss, though, so maybe it was a good time to start moving in that direction. Besides, it was already dusk, and I wanted to defeat the boss before night fell, since wandering bosses sometimes became stronger at night.

"Man, a wolf-type boss monster? I can't wait!" Kokuten said excitedly.

"You said it!"

*Of course the battle junkies are stoked to fight it.* Both Kokuten and Sekisho were immediately pumped. I was glad they were here.

Thirty minutes later, we were locked in a fierce battle against the Forest Wolf Chief.

"Graaawr!"

"Mm-mmm!"

"Taaake *this*!"

"Grrragh!"

*Th-That was awesome, Kokuten!* He'd just blocked the Forest Wolf's Chief giant body head-on! *Now that's what a fighter's capable of!*

This was now my second time challenging the Forest Wolf Chief, and this time I was fighting alongside four other guys, but the giant beast honestly still scared me. The wolf was big enough to eat me like a snack. Plus, it had nearly killed me last time. Unsurprisingly, that experience had left a strong impression on me. I had been so scared just luring it into a clearing that I yelped in fear several times.

However, the players I had gathered were even stronger than I'd been anticipating. While my monsters and I had been unable to do anything against the giant wolf, the four of them were fighting it face-to-face on more than equal footing. There was Kokuten, who'd taken on the role of tank; Sekisho, a top-level mage; and Siegfried and Murakage, who were steadily chipping away at the Forest Wolf Chief's HP while attacking on horseback.

*Do they even need us?* I wondered as I watched them fight from the back, but *I was* the one who had assembled us together. My monsters and I supported them with buffs and debuffs, attacking just enough to not accumulate any aggro.

My current party formation was as such: Carro and I were on offense, Olto was on defense, Reflet was in charge of healing, Fau was our buffer, and Olea and Lilith were casting debuffs.

Since we could leave the vanguard to the rest of the guys, I felt like we were being decently useful this way. Especially brutal was the combination of Lilith's Imp's Gaze, which could lower the enemy's Sanity stat, and Olea's tree magic and scythe. A lowered Sanity meant the tree magic attacks Olea and I used against the boss occasionally inflicted Confusion on it. It automatically recovered from the ailment after a few seconds, but being able to stop it even for a moment was huge.

Olea's scythe didn't deal a lot of damage with direct hits, but it did have a high critical hit rate, which was affected by Dexterity and Sanity. Against an enemy with lowered Sanity, Olea's scythe boasted an extremely high critical hit rate. The Tree Nymph's Scythe they had equipped must have already had a high crit rate to start with.

"Tiii-triii!"

"Grawr!"

"Tiii!"

Olea also had Blow Away resistance from Endure, a skill they'd had as an Olive Treant. They blocked the wolf's attacks with their scythe and then counterattacked. Once every ten counterattacks, they landed a critical hit. With how small Olea was, they looked incredibly cool swinging their huge scythe

around against a giant wolf.

Olea's attacks didn't deal *that* much damage, but their ability to make the boss flinch and knock it back was a big help. When the wolf was momentarily stopped by being inflicted with Confusion or being dealt a critical hit, Siegfried mercilessly drove into it with his Lance Charge.

We continued fighting against the Forest Wolf Chief while taking care of the weaker Forest Wolves that occasionally appeared. Then, the giant wolf changed form.

"Its HP bar turned red! Guys, we've almost got it!"

"A red aura..." murmured Murakage. "It's undoubtedly in its rabid state. Kokuten, do you require protection?"

"Ha ha ha! I'll be fine! Just keep an eye on its aggro, please!"

Enshrouded in a red aura, the Forest Wolf Chief's muscles swelled, making it look a size larger. Its teeth were bared, which made its face look even more fiendish, and the saliva trickling down from its mouth struck me with terror.

Jeez, this thing really was terrifying beyond belief. I'd be on the verge of tears if I was here alone. But thankfully, I had some incredibly reliable top players on my side. Without even a flinch, they charged the rabid wolf chief head-on. Kokuten was even *grinning*. I guess he couldn't help it—he was having too much fun fighting against the vicious boss. When we were chatting before the boss fight, he'd mentioned that he enjoyed imagining what attack an enemy might throw at him. For someone like him, nothing could be better than surprise moves from an unfamiliar boss.

"Now I'm fired up!" Kokuten shouted gleefully as he returned his sword to his side and took out something else. I thought it was a potion, but I was wrong. It wasn't in a bottle, but a smooth, gourd-shaped object. Was it a buff item?

Before I could appraise it, Kokuten gulped down the contents of the gourd, which seemed to be a liquid of some kind. Then, I saw Kokuten's HP recover by a small amount. Did he use a healing drink after seeing the boss get a boost in power?

However, I was wrong about that too. To my surprise, Kokuten became

Intoxicated.

*Huh? Is he okay? Wait, did he actually drink alcohol just now?*

Paying no mind to my confusion and apprehension, Kokuten advanced towards the wolf chief—with staggering steps, of course.

“Groooough!”

“Oh, no you don’t!”

“Graaa?”

The wolf chief sprung forwards in an attempt to attack Sekisho in the rear guard, but Kokuten reacted instantly and struck it down.

What was that just now? He delivered a kick to the wolf while it was in midair, but it wasn’t a somersault or an overhead kick. It was a complicated scorpion kick. His movements were so unusual that they were completely unpredictable.

Once the wolf chief fell to the ground, Kokuten started pummeling it with the heels of his palms, swaying unsteadily on his feet as he did.

*Drunken Boxing!* His fluid movements bore a close resemblance to those of a certain celebrity martial artist. This was my first time seeing Drunken Boxing in action!

“Sekisho! You’re up!”

“Got it! Air Shock!”

“Gragh!”

Next came Sekisho’s explosive AoE attack. A burst of wind erupted underneath the boss, making it lose its balance. The wolf chief’s upper body teetered dramatically, then it collapsed onto its belly.

“Everyone, attack!” Kokuten cried out.

“On it!” we all responded, using everything we had to attack the beast.

As I switched out my monsters, we all dealt successive attacks against the boss. But the one who brought it all home was, unsurprisingly, Kokuten.

“Aaahhh! Kao Liang Chiew!!!”



“Whoaaa! Kokuten, that was awesome!”

“Aaah! Hiya! Hrah! Graaah!”

It looked like Kokuten had used one of Drunken Boxing’s special techniques. As I recalled, Kaoliang was a type of Chinese liquor. It came as no surprise that Drunken Boxing would have an art with a unique name like that.

Kokuten was enveloped in a bright red aura and his movements had sped up. He approached the boss with alternating slow and fast movements, then he pummeled the enemy with his fists in a strange shape, with his thumbs and forefingers forming a circle.

Normally, players were left immobile after using a technique, but martial arts techniques had a one-of-a-kind feature. If the arts were skillfully linked together, then they could be used in quick succession. I had heard that the timing was so strict that it was incredibly difficult to link more than four techniques in a combo.

After Kokuten pummeled the boss with his fists, he lightly jumped up and then brought his left elbow down, used his right palm to deal an uppercut, bent his body back as he kicked the boss with his toes, then used the momentum of bending his body back forwards to deliver a headbutt.

That was five arts so far. Kokuten had already pulled off a super difficult chain of techniques, but he still wasn’t finished.

“Aaaaahhhhh!”

For his final move, Kokuten used all the strength in his body to strike the wolf chief’s head with his palms. Afterwards, Kokuten was momentarily frozen with his right foot firmly stepped forwards and both his palms thrust outward, leaving him completely open. If he hadn’t taken down the boss here, he would have been hit with a counterattack.

“Grrr...”

But there was no need to worry about that. The strength left the wolf chief’s body, and it shattered into polygons.

“That was my first time seeing Drunken Boxing,” I said. “It was so cool!”

“Ha ha, it’s thanks to you that I got the skill in the first place. I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

Apparently, Kokuten had showed off a bit for my benefit. *What a nice guy!*  
*That’s Kokuten for you!*

# Online Forum [Musical Performance] Music Lovers Hangout, Part 9

A place to talk about your favorite music.

All genres of music are allowed. No belittling anyone's tastes.

Recruiting band members is allowed.

Posting about instruments you made yourself or original songs is highly encouraged.

---

766: Natsuki

Am I dreaming?

Our album sold out!

Now I can upgrade my equipment!

---

767: Nuzareba

You're not dreaming! We sold out too!

This has never happened before!

Man, I don't think I've ever laughed for that long before!

I'd have lost my voice if this were real life.

---

768: Negima

We sold out too.

I hope everyone listens to my triangle playing!

---

769: Nogia

We also got a bunch of inquiries even after we sold out.

Leave it to Silver-Haired.

Is it even legal to make this much money?

---

770: Natsuki

I kind of wish we could have made this many sales from our own popularity...

---

771: Negima

Silver-Haired's influence is too powerful.

I don't know how the information spread, but people flooded the square only ten minutes after he left.

The Defenders are everywhere...

---

772: Nuzareba

It got as crowded as a real-world large convention.

Seeing so many customers was almost miraculous.

And no one even ran away!

---

773: Nogia

Oh, yeah. Death Game's booth *was* a little scary.

---

774: Nuzareba

Yeah, I know.

For the record, I was told I could only laugh so I didn't break the immersion, but even our supposed target audience ran away in fear.

---

775: Nogia

Yeah, something similar happened to us too.

All three of us are shy, so we can't really deal with customers.

When we just keep playing, people sort of run away.

---

776: Nuzareba

Yeah, that can be intimidating in its own way.

It can be hard to talk to people playing traditional folk instruments.

---

777: Nyamun

Nya ha ha ha! You both are scary, meow!

Meanwhile, I'm just too cute to handle, meow!

---

778: Negima

I'm more scared of Nyamun-chan.

Don't get me wrong, you're cute, but...

---

779: Natsuki

Y-Yeah. You're cute.

But...

---

780: Negima

Look, you're cute, okay?

But maybe going "meow meow!" with a straight face is a little much?

Technically, my role is to be the quirky airhead, but I can't compete with Nyamun-chan!

---

781: Nuzareba

You're not a true airhead with that attitude.

Also, if you're trying to be quirky, then you need to show a little more effort. Like, you're just talking normally.

Not that I'm one to talk, when my role is to only laugh...

---

782: Nyamun

Even if I'm excessive or surreal, I'm still cute, meow!

Cuteness prevails! Which means *I* prevail, meow!

---

783: Negima

And for some reason, *that's* popular.

---

784: Nyamun

How dare you?!

---

785: Nogia

Yeah! Don't you understand Nyamun-chan's cuteness?!

Your triangle is basic anyway! You need to be even quirkier to be a match for Nyamun-chan!

---

786: Negima

Grrr.

---

787: Nyamun

Nya ha ha ha! Thanks to the Silver-Haired phenomenon, I'll be known nationwide, meow!

Everyone will fall head over heels for my charm, meow!

---

788: Natsuki

But they're also calling you weird.

---

789: Nuzareba

Well, this will just be a short-lived buzz caused by Silver-Haired. It'll die down soon. But I hope we gain some

fans out of it.

---

790: Natsuki

Yeah, true.

We can't let this chance pass by.

---

791: Nogia

This is the first time musician players have been in the spotlight. We need to keep up this momentum.

---

792: Nyamun

You can leave it all to me, meow! I sold stacks and stacks of sheet music!

I'm sure everyone who purchased some will become my fans, meow!

From now on my albums will fly off the shelves, meow!

---

793: Negima

Tee hee, I really hope it works out for you.

---

794: Nyamun

Do I sense pity, meow?! Why, meow?!

Even Silver-Haired bought my music box and sheet music, meow!

His heart is mine, meow!

---

795: Negima

He bought our stuff too, you know?

---

796: Nuzareba

Ours too. His fairy really seemed to like us.

Wait, will she be okay?

Will people get upset if she starts playing heavy metal?

---

797: Nogia

He bought our music too. He probably bought stuff at most booths.

---

798: Nyamun

H-His monsters were dancing like crazy at my booth!

I know I'll become their favorite, meow!

---

799: Natsuki

It really would be nice if that happened, though. There's no doubt that we'd get more attention with the Silver-Haired effect.

---

800: Nogia

I don't mind if he doesn't end up liking our band.

I'm sure this will have a significant economic impact on everyone else, after all. Musician players don't really make much money...

At the very least, I hope we can sell a little more!

---

801: Nuzareba

You only need one musician in a party, and we don't have very high combat ability.

It's a tough world for musicians who can't sell anything not just IRL, but in the game too.

---

802: Nogia

Urgh. It'll be considered an essential job someday! Just wait!



---

803: Natsuki

Still, no matter how weak of a job class it is, it's nice being able to practice my instrument in-game too.

I feel like I'm even improving in real life.

---

804: Negima

Oh, I think that's definitely possible.

Our leader said that she played as a bard in some VR game, and through that, she was able to play an instrument IRL too.

---

805: Nogia

The same happened for me. I'm not that good, but I can play a little.

But since I'm playing an MMO, I want to get some attention!

---

806: Nuzareba

Mm, yeah. Not as much as Silver-Haired gets, though!

But I'd at least like for people to talk about me every now and then on the forums!

---

807: Nyamun

You can leave that to me too, meow!

Don't underestimate the power of a cat, meow!

---

808: Nuzareba

Oh yeah, you're a cat.

---

809: Negima

I forgot.

You really are impressive, Nyamun-chan.

You put so much effort into keeping up that front of being a cat...

---

810: Natsuki

I saw you in action during the event.

They say you could be one of the top scouts in the game by now if you went that route.

I respect how you can play the role of a scout even though you're a bard.

Oh, but even besides that, you're putting in a lot of effort.

---

811: Nyamun

I-I'm not putting in effort, meow!

It's all natural! I *am* a cat!

This conversation is over!

---

812: Nuzareba

Well, that sort of thing might backfire on us anyway.

---

813: Negima

Oof. Right.

---

814: Natsuki

I have to admit that's true...

---

815: Negima!

Ah!

---

816: Nuzareba

I-I'm sorry for bringing it up! Everyone's taking damage!

---

817: Nogia

A-Anyway! I have something to say!

---

818: Natsuki

Wh-What is it? I'm so curious!

---

819: Nogia

Silver-Haired! Thank you!

---

820: Natsuki

Right! Thank you!

---

821: Nuzareba

I can buy that robe I wanted thanks to you!

---

822: Negima

Same here! Thank you!

---

823: Nyamun

Thank you, meow!

Now I can fill my belly with fish, meow!

---

824: Negima

We get it, you're a cat!

---

825: Nuzareba

Wait, don't cats IRL prefer meat?

Cats don't like water, so they can't catch fish in the natural world.

---

826: Nyamun

Who asked you, meow?!

Please stop, meow!

---

“Oh man, that was such a fun fight.”

“It’s been a while since we fought against a speedy boss! Fast enemies are always fun.”

While I was feeling like I had my fill of boss fights for a while, Kokuten and Sekisho were grinning happily. They were even talking about finding a way to bring the other members of their party here to farm the boss. This wasn’t that surprising—they were members of a top party, who were vocal about the fact that they played this game for the combat. Their battle mania was fully raging.

“What sort of drops did you obtain?” Murakage asked. “In addition to materials, I also received stirrups.”

“I got a brush,” Siegfried said.

“I got a bridle,” I said.

Unsurprisingly for a boss in the Squire’s Forest, its drops included horse gear. I wondered if the items you obtained changed depending on what your monster mount was, whether a horse or otherwise. Kokuten and Sekisho hadn’t received any monster mount gear, so it seemed like the drops were also contingent on whether you even had a mount or not. This area really was set up for players with the Riding skill after all.

“I also got a random item box,” I added.

“We got those too,” Kokuten said.

Each of us had also received a random item box. I touched it, selected the option to open it, and then an item was added to my inventory.

The item I obtained was called “Forest Wolf Chief’s Fang Sword.”

Name: Forest Wolf Chief’s Fang Sword

Rarity: 6 *Quality*: 10 ★ Durability: 620

Effect: Attack +208, Magic + 45, moderate boost to damage dealt against beasts, deals minor tree attribute damage.

Requirements: Agility 40

Weight: 13

Since it dealt attribute damage, it would also deal damage to ghosts. The damage boost against beast-type monsters also made this a powerful weapon. There were generally a lot of beast-type monsters around, after all.

However, no one in my party could use this weapon. None of us used swords, but even if they did, none of us could even equip it. It required a whopping 40 agility. Plus it was really heavy.

“I got a mace,” said Siegfried. “But I don’t use maces.”

“I got an assortment of potions. Not bad, I guess...” Kokuten trailed off disappointedly.

“I got an ax!” exclaimed Sekisho. “Oh, but no one in our party uses axes.”

I obtained a sword I couldn’t even equip, Siegfried got a mace, which was hard to use on horseback, Kokuten got some potions, and Sekisho got an ax, which no one in his party had a need for. How did we all strike out so badly?

Meanwhile, Murakage had obtained a winner.

“I received a cloak. It eliminates my scent, and it has a camouflage effect in forests!”

It was an incredibly useful item for a ninja. Judging by Murakage’s happy dance, it must have had high defense too.

“This will make a wonderful present for my wife.”

“Huh? You’re giving it to Ayakage?”

“Yes, our wedding anniversary is coming up.”

Would an in-game rare item really be a good anniversary present? I supposed a hardcore gamer would be happy with it, but...wouldn’t something like that normally make your partner mad? And in the worst case, lead to divorce? The

rest of us were also somewhat involved in this, so I really hoped things didn't end badly.

The others seemed to be thinking the same. They started giving Murakage advice.

Kokuten went first. "Murakage, I don't know if it's the right move to just get Ayakage a present in the game for a wedding anniversary gift."

"Murakage," Siegfried followed up, "make sure you give her a present in real life too, okay?"

"Of course I am getting her a present in real life. What sort of man do you think I am? But it is thanks to my wife that I am able to be here playing this game, so I wanted to express my appreciation."

Apparently, Ayakage had been a beta tester, and she had received a copy of the game for Murakage as a reward. I'd thought that they had just lucked out with both of them getting a copy of the game, but in fact that wasn't the case. Not only that, it was *Ayakage*, not Murakage, who had been the beta tester.

I had been under the impression that Ayakage was keeping her ninja geek gamer husband company, but apparently I was wrong. In actuality, they were a gamer wife and her ninja geek husband.

"Actually, I think I do remember that Seki said he started playing the game with the copy Shuella received as a bonus for being a beta tester too," Siegfried said.

"Oh, really?"

It sounded like a lot of people who were playing the game with family, friends, or acquaintances were doing so thanks to a beta tester's reward. Maybe Tsuyoshi and Takayuki, who were friends in real life too, were among those.

While we were discussing that, Silver seemed to sense something.

"Neigh?"

"What is it?" Siegfried asked.

"Neigh-neigh!"

“Chirp chirp!”

Rick was also reacting to something. He climbed on top of Silver’s head, his nose twitching. *I’ve seen this reaction before!*

I peered carefully in the direction Rick was focusing on and noticed something subtly off. Although it was blending in with the scenery, something was definitely moving over there. It was invisible, but I could still see the grass moving.

Then, whatever was there stopped in a patch of tall grass. It must have sat down. There was no denying what that was.

“Guys! Don’t move from where you are!” I called out.

“Huh? What’s the matter, Yuto?” Siegfried asked.

“There’s a Moon Pony in this clearing.”

“Th-There is?” Murakage stammered.

“Yeah. Look over there.”

I pointed in the direction where the Moon Pony was, but the others had trouble seeing it. I could just barely see it since I had experienced this before, but to the others, it just looked like an ordinary patch of grass. Well, it was only understandable. The sun was already setting, so the light was dim.

I urged everyone to sit down where we were and then I took out a bunch of carrots from my inventory. Taking care not to spook it, I piled the carrots up in a spot just slightly in front of the pony.

Then, as we observed in silence, I heard a crunching sound and saw a bite get taken out of the carrot at the top of the pile.

“Nice, it’s eating!”

The Moon Pony finished its meal as we watched over it. Now that it had come this close, Kokuten and the others also noticed that something was there.

“Listen, approach it veery calmly, and then pet it gently. Don’t attack it under any circumstances, okay?”

“Understood,” said Siegfried.

“What a thrill!” Murakage exclaimed.

“An invisible monster, huh?” Kokuten said.

“Sounds like it’d be tricky to fight against,” Sekisho remarked.

I reminded the ever-battle-hungry Kokuten and Sekisho once again not to attack the Moon Pony as we moved closer to it.

We played with the Moon Pony, and once we were done, it left in the same way the Cute Horse did—it glowed faintly, then departed the clearing.

It also left us with some items. I received Soft Moon Pony Hair. No emblem, though. Was that because the Moon Pony didn’t drop one in the first place, or was there some condition that needed to be fulfilled? We wouldn’t know after a few more tries.

“I guess we couldn’t tame it, huh?” Siegfried said.

“Hmm, seems not,” said Murakage.

“That must be because we already tamed a Cute Horse.”

“You can tame a Moon Pony if you release your Cute Horses,” I explained.  
“You wanna?”

“No, that’s all right. I already have Silver, anyway.”

“And I already have Dust Storm. I don’t plan on riding another horse.”

After our unexpected encounter with the Moon Pony, Kokuten asked, “What should we do now?”

“What do you mean?”

“If everyone still has time, should we keep exploring? We have a strong group, after all.”

“That sounds good to me,” Siegfried said. “It’ll be helpful to have a completed map for when I come back here alone.”

“I agree,” Murakage said.

*Oh...* Everyone sure was motivated. They were all ready to continue exploring even after everything we had already been through. Since it was already



nighttime, I personally sort of wanted to go home... But it would be difficult for my own party to explore this area by ourselves. I needed to take advantage of this opportunity.

“Okay. I’ll join too,” I said. “But I switched out my party members during the boss fight, so they might not be that suited for exploring.”

Currently, I had with me Drimo, Bear Bear, Rick, Perca, Himka, and Eine. We had no healers, and our magic attack power was also a little lacking. Though we would probably be fine with Kokuten, Sekisho, Murakage, and Siegfried with us.

“But there’s something I want to test out,” Siegfried said. “Kokuten, do you mind if we take a break first? Only for five minutes or so.”

“Of course, that’s fine.”

“I have no objection either,” Murakage said.

And so, we decided to take a short break in the clearing where we’d fought the boss. Since there wasn’t much else to do, I passed around herbal tea and some snacks that boosted recovery speed. Everyone seemed to enjoy them, so I was glad that I’d shared.

“Delicious as always,” Kokuten praised me.

“These snacks are so good,” Sekisho said.

“This tisane is also sumptuous.”

Tisane? Oh, Murakage was talking about the herbal tea. He was doing his usual ninja role-playing. Though I was pretty sure I heard him use the word “drops” earlier.

“By the way, what was it you wanted to try out, Siegfried?” I asked.

“Actually, I wanted to try using this.”

“Wait a second, isn’t that your emblem?”

Siegfried had taken out the ultrarare item he’d only just obtained—the Galloping Emblem. It was a palm-sized, hexagonal plate that was reddish gold in color. In the center there was an engraving of a galloping horse.

“So this is one of those rumored emblems?” Murakage asked.

“It’s pretty,” said Kokuten.

“I hear it’s got a lot of different uses, but what exactly?” Sekisho wondered.

Emblems could be used for almost all crafting actions, and they could even be used to learn skills if used on yourself or your monsters. There was a Heraldry skill, but that was its own separate thing. Each emblem let you learn a different skill.

“You’re planning on using *that*?” I asked Siegfried.

“Yes, that’s my plan. I don’t do much crafting, so it doesn’t make much sense for me to hold on to it.”

“I admire your bravery!”

“It’s embarrassing hearing you say that, Yuto. You’re clearly a much braver man than I.”

“You think so?”

“I do. Well, this time, I’ll be the one taking the lead,” Siegfried said with a laugh. Then, as he petted Silver, he pressed a selection on his window without a moment’s hesitation.

Instantly, the emblem shone. I knew an ultrarare item would have such a flashy effect. Actually, perhaps it was no more flashy than using any other item, but it had been a while since I’d witnessed this blinding effect.

“Grooowl!”

“Chirp chiiirp!”

My two adorable dummies were covering their eyes. Drimo, who handled brightness the worst, wasn’t blinded at all. His tiny sunglasses sufficiently blocked the light.

“Squeak.”

“Chirp...”

“Growl...”

After expressing his exasperation, Drimo calmed down Bear Bear and Rick—who were rolling around on the ground—and helped them back up.

“S-Sorry about that,” Siegfried apologized.

“Don’t worry about it. They were just being careless.”

Their curiosity had made them get too close to the emblem. The rest of us were fine just squinting our eyes a little.

“Hmm. Did anything change?”

“Neigh?”

I carefully examined Silver, but I couldn’t tell what was different. His face was as ug—er, as cute as ever.

“It doesn’t seem anything has changed on his appearance, but he has a new skill,” Siegfried stated.

“Whoa, really? What skill?”

“It’s called ‘Galloping,’ same as the emblem.”

I had never heard of that skill. According to Siegfried, it boosted Silver’s running speed and jumping ability, as well as increased the power of his attacks.

“Also, he can evolve now.”

“Huh? He can? Just by using an item?”

“Yeah. It looks like he can evolve now, regardless of his level.”

Now that was something that couldn’t be ignored. Could all emblems do that? No, none of the information I got from the Quick-Eared Cats about emblems had mentioned evolution at all. Did it only work on Packhorses? Or was it an effect of the Galloping Emblem specifically? Or, was it the result of several conditions?

But a horse evolving from an emblem obtained in the Squire’s Forest? This could *not* be a coincidence.

“Wh-What can he evolve into?”

“There’s only one option. It looks like he can evolve from a Knight Horse to a Noble Horse.”

A knight to a noble horse? That sounded like a downgrade...

But Siegfried evolved Silver without hesitation. After my adorable dunces got blinded once again—much to the bemusement of everyone else—an astonishing-looking horse appeared before us.

“Oho, now that’s a fine steed. Silver, you’ve gotten quite handsome.”

“Neeigh!”

*Handsome...?* His face shape hadn’t changed, but I guess it was a little smaller now? Meanwhile, his body had gotten a little bigger. He couldn’t quite be called a thoroughbred, but he was lean with slender, fast-looking legs. His face did not match his body at all. If I crossed paths with him in the middle of the road without knowing him, I’d definitely do a double take. But, oh well. As long as Siegfried, his owner, was happy, that was all that mattered.

Silver’s abilities also got a pretty big boost. The word was that horses evolved from Packhorses weren’t very strong, but Silver was now strong enough to hold his own against an enemy. He had transformed from a pet used for travel to a tamed monster capable of combat. And of course, he could still be ridden.

*Murakage, stop looking so wistful! You can come to the forest on your own now, so you can do this too! I believe in you!*

“I can’t wait to see how strong you’ve become, Silver! I’m looking forward to our next fight!”

“Neigh-neigh!”

Siegfried was already strong, but he was even stronger now that Silver had evolved. Several of his skills had also undergone changes, so his attack power had also increased by quite a lot.

“Now then, are we about ready to set out?” Kokuten asked. “I’m interested in seeing your new moves, Siegfried.”

“I am quite envious,” Murakage muttered.

“Squeak.”

“M-Mr. Mole, are you consoling me?”

“Squeak squeak.”

“Mr. Mole!”

“Yeah, yeah. Come on, let’s go.”

Once we were ready, we set off to explore more of the Squire’s Forest.

Because it was nighttime, the enemies were stronger and more numerous, but for the others, that just meant they had more prey. Even monsters that my party alone probably would have lost against, they handled easily. It was so easy for them that we even had the composure to make small talk as we went, just like we had in the sparser forest. We also obtained a bunch of materials, so our exploration proved really worthwhile.

Plus, now I had completely mapped out the middle area, save what clearly looked like a boss arena. That was the one place we didn’t step into. Kokuten and Sekisho wanted to challenge it, but I managed to convince them not to attack it right away by telling them it was a toss-up if we’d be able to beat it with someone like me holding them back. If it was any stronger than the Forest Wolf Chief, then we wouldn’t stand a chance.

However, the only people who could currently enter this forest were here right now, so I’d probably have no choice but to help out sooner or later...

In the meantime, since it was getting late, we decided to return to the old knight’s mansion first so we could ask about the requirements for entering the Squire’s Forest. With any luck, other players besides me would gain access to the forest, and then *they* could help the others take on the boss!

I figured other people would be able to access the forest by going through the inn, then getting invited to the mansion, and then being tasked with searching for the old man’s grandson, but there was probably an easier way to do it.

If this plan to gather information fell flat, then I had no other choice. I could still invite one more person to the forest with my permit, so I could bring in someone else to challenge the boss with a full team.

We went to visit the old man again and asked if there was any way I could bring Kokuten’s party members to the Squire’s Forest, but his response was less than favorable.

“I have nothing I wish to ask of them. Although, I do have several requests for

*you two.”*

“Do you mean us?” Siegfried asked, indicating himself and Murakage.

“If so, then this must be because we have the Riding skill.”

What the man wanted them to do was harvest and gather materials from the Squire’s Forest. Murakage was probably right about Riding being a requirement.

But if the old man granted Murakage and Siegfried access into the forest like he had for me, and they were able to invite others to the forest, then maybe they could invite Kokuten’s party members? No, Murakage was a clan master, so he’d probably prioritize his clan members. Siegfried, on the other hand, was a solo player, so maybe he’d be agreeable to some trading something for doing so.

We were about to head out, but the old man wasn’t finished speaking with us yet.

“You two. I see you already have horses, but you have befriended steeds from the Squire’s Forest as well.”

“What? Are you speaking to me?” Murakage asked.

“And me?”

I hadn’t had this conversation with the old man after I tamed Carro. Considering what the old man said, maybe this only happened if you had two tamed horses?

“Isn’t two a lot to handle? Why don’t you leave your newly captured monsters in my care?”

We asked the old man for more details. He used the words “leave in my care,” but in effect, he would be buying their horses. In exchange for relinquishing their ownership rights, they would receive a special item, which was a tool that could be used to strengthen horses evolved from Packhorses. In other words, it was an item that would raise the abilities of their beloved Packhorses to the same level of a Cute Horse. This was an event to strengthen a Packhorse, just as had been theorized.

Oh, and incidentally, if they left their horses with the old man, then they

wouldn't be able to tame another horse in the Squire's Forest. That was probably so players didn't repeat this same event to make a superstrong Packhorse.

Both Murakage and Siegfried made up their minds right away to trade their Cute Horses for the item. Unsurprisingly, they were attached to the horses they had spent time raising.

"Wow! It's a power-up item!" Siegfried cheered.

"I see, so it's called a Magic Horse Badge."

At first glance, the items they were given looked like metal plates. I thought it might be a piece of equipment, but it was apparently a consumable magic item. It was probably something like a lesser version of an emblem. I wondered if Siegfried would still be able to use it on Silver now that he'd already evolved, but it didn't seem to be a problem. The item wouldn't change the horses' forms, but it would upgrade their stats, growth rate, and skills.

"Now even Dust Storm has become a fighter!"

"Neeigh!"

"Silver has gotten even stronger. I've never been happier."

"Neigh!"

Siegfried and Murakage had moved to the mansion's stables and immediately used their Magic Horse Badges.

The horses' appearances didn't change. But a look at their stats showed that they had grown clearly stronger. Their levels were unchanged, but they had boosted stats and several new skills. There was also the possibility that they had an improved growth rate. It was no exaggeration to say that they had gotten a super power-up at the drop of a hat.

Siegfried's and Murakage's horses getting an upgrade had an impact on me too. Both players' names vanished from my permit. Then, the old man handed them both their own permits.

"And these are for you two."

"Oh! Much obliged!" Murakage exclaimed. "Does this mean I can bring my

companions to the forest, just as Yuto can?”

“You can indeed.”

“In that case, we can bring even more people to the forest now. Should we start with Kokuten’s party members?” Siegfried suggested.

“Are you sure about that, Siegfried? I would very much appreciate it,” Kokuten said.

“Of course. I gave you my word, after all.”

“Thank you!”

Just as we all left the mansion in a celebratory mood, I noticed a message from Alyssa. It looked like she just logged on a moment ago. I decided to give her a call.

“Hiya,” she answered.

“Hey, I got your message.”

“Oh! So, what do you think? Did I pique your interest?”

“Yeah, you did. So what’s this so-called juicy info?”

Alyssa’s message had stated that she had some juicy information I wouldn’t want to pass up.

“Heh heh. Yuto, you got the Foam Emblem, right? Do you still have it?”

“Yeah, it’s still in my inventory.”

“Good. I have some interesting information about its use. Wanna buy it? I guarantee you won’t regret it.”

“Wow, if you say so, then it must be good. I’m definitely interested in buying. Can I come by now?”

“Of course!”

A way to use my emblem... *Could it be what I think it is?*

“I have some information I want to sell you too, so this is perfect timing,” I told her. “It’s also related to emblems.”

“...”



“Alyssa?”

“I-I’m okay. I see, so you, too, have information about emblems...”

“That’s right. You won’t be disappointed. Well, I’ll head over now. Are you good to meet in the Town of Beginnings?”

“I-I’ll be waiting. But, um, we can also meet tomorrow if you want?”

“I’d like to hear the information you have as soon as possible. I’ll be there before you know it.”

“O-Okay. I-I need to make some preparations, so I’m hanging up now. See you soon!”

Before going to the Cats, I consulted with the others about how to handle the information. About half of the new information I knew was obtained through our joint efforts, after all. If they wanted to keep things under wraps for a bit, then I would only sell information about how to obtain the emblem in the forest.

However, no one had felt particularly strongly about hiding the information. In fact, they encouraged me to sell it, saying that if more people knew, then there would be more monster mounts around, which would be helpful for game progression. They weren’t a top frontline party for nothing; they prioritized the collective benefit over their own.

In the end, we decided that Siegfried would come with me to sell information, and then we would split the payment among our four parties. It’d be an inconvenience for Alyssa to calculate our compensation individually, but hopefully she wouldn’t mind doing so.

“All right, shall we go?”

“Yes, let’s.”

Together with Siegfried, I headed to the Quick-Eared Cats.

“Have you made use of the Quick-Eared Cats before, Siegfried?”

“Yes, a fair amount. I buy and sell information there.”

Siegfried explained that he often bought and sold information related to

horses and the Riding skill. Also, he apparently knew a lot of details regarding fetch quests since he was quite friendly with NPCs, which he also sold fairly often.

“But we’re selling some incredible information this time. Will Alyssa be surprised?” Siegfried wondered.

“Maybe. We have information about how to enter a special area where you can get a monster mount, information about a boss, the map of the area, how to find a special mount, and how to obtain an emblem. Plus, information on using the emblem to evolve a horse.”

“I’m excited to see Alyssa’s reaction.”

We chatted for a bit until we reached the Quick-Eared Cats. We stepped inside, and across the counter was Alyssa, standing imposingly.

She had her legs shoulder-width apart, her arms crossed, and her chest was slightly puffed out. Her pose reminded me of something you’d see in a mech anime before an attack. I was half expecting some majestic-sounding music to start playing in the background.

“You’re here! I’ve been waiting for you!”

*Wow, someone’s pumped.* It almost felt like she was trying to intimidate me, but that was probably just my imagination, right?

“I won’t run away, no matter what information you throw my way! I’m ready for the challenge!”

Ah, she was role-playing some sort of hot-blooded warrior today. I was a fan of her commander role-play from the other day, but this wasn’t bad either. In that case, I’d rise to the challenge too!

“Heh heh heh. I have some pretty amazing information for you today. Try not to let it bowl you over.”

*How’s that?! That’s exactly what the leader of some nasty, evil organization would say!*

“Whuh?! I-If you’re talking it up that much, then...j-just how amazing is your information?!”

*Huh? She was back to normal all of a sudden. Was she not role-playing at all? She actually was pumped? Wait, I take it back, Alyssa! I'm not that stupid! Crap, I'm too embarrassed to think of something to say!*

“...”

“...”

There was a weird tension in the air as Alyssa and I stared at each other. What was the me from a few seconds ago even thinking?!

“Ha ha ha. I think that's enough fooling around, you two.”

“Ah! R-Right.”

“Y-Yeah.”

*Saved by Siegfried!*

“A-Anyway, since the two of you came here to sell information together, I can only imagine that it's some absurd bombshell. I'm already scared.”

“You can keep those expectations high.”

“RReally?”

Alyssa raised an eyebrow. Maybe we had hyped the information up too much and now she was doubting if we were being serious or not. But that was just fine. I was more than confident in our information!

“Okay, first, I'll start with the information about the inn.”

“‘First,’ he says calmly... L-Let me hear it, then.”

“I found an interesting inn located in a back alley in Zone Five.”

“An inn? Where is it?”

“Let's see, it's around here,” I said, pointing out the area on my map. Alyssa pulled up her own map to check.

“Hmm, I've never heard of it. This is complete news to me. Maybe you need to unlock some special condition?”

“I think the trigger is probably possessing the Riding skill.”

It was an inn with horse stalls, so what else could it be? But Alyssa had

another possibility in mind.

“It might also have something to do with having a monster mount physically with you. There are players out there with the Riding skill, after all. The favorability of your monsters might also play a role. Otherwise, I have no idea why it wouldn’t have been discovered until now.”

There were very few players who walked around in town with a monster mount like I did. The only other person I’ve seen always accompanied by their mount was Siegfried. And if high favorability was required, that would explain why it had remained undiscovered for so long.

Another explanation could be that even if someone had found it, they decided not to use some inn located in a back alley. And maybe there were a lot of people who just overlooked it.

“Still, an inn that can possibly raise your monster mount’s favorability... That alone is pretty big info.”

“Then, that’s where the quest was triggered.”

“Did you say ‘quest’?”

“Yes.”

I told Alyssa about the girl at the inn who had written me a letter of introduction to go to the mansion, where the old man gave me a permit to enter the Squire’s Forest with the request of finding his grandson.

“Huh? A permit? F-For real?”

“Yep. I think it’s a different way to enter the forest, besides doing a School Quest.”

“That *is* amazing! Y-You did it again, Yuto! I can sell this info for a super high price!”

“I’m glad you’re so pleased.”

“So, what do you have for me, Sieg—”

“Oh, I’m not done yet,” I interrupted her.

“Huh...? Oh, really?”

“Yeah. I still have to tell you the best part.”

“Th-The best part?!” Alyssa squeaked.

*Heh heh heh. Yes, that’s the surprise I wanted to see!* Wait, or was she just pretending to be surprised? Thinking about it, that squeak sounded a little deliberate. I had to hand it to Alyssa. She always knew how to reel me in.

“Heh heh heh. That’s right. The best part.”

“The best part...!”

“You two seem to be having fun,” Siegfried commented.

“J-Just tell me already! Tell me what the best part or whatever is!”

“Very well!” I cried.

“I’m happy to see such a big reaction from you, Alyssa.”

For some reason, Siegfried was smirking. I glanced over at him before turning back to Alyssa and telling her about what we found out in the forest. I explained everything about the Cute Horse, the boss, and the event with the old man as I showed her screenshots.

“Take a look at this screenshot.”

“A Cute Horse...! There’ll definitely be people who want a monster as adorable as this!”

“I think so too. Now, this is—”

“A Galloping Emblem! I-I can’t believe—”

“And right here is—”

“The grandson’s—”

“The Shadow Man—”

I spent five minutes telling her everything, and once I was done, Alyssa suddenly dropped to the floor.

“Urgh...”

“A-Alyssa?”

“Haah... Haah...”

Alyssa was plopped on the ground and leaning against the counter. Her shoulders were moving up and down as she breathed heavily. She looked like she’d just run a marathon.

“A-Are you okay?”

Alyssa took several ragged breaths before responding. “I-I did it... I didn’t scream this time...!”

Alyssa’s cat ears quivered as she let out a hoarse groan.

“Congratulations?”

“Heh heh heh, you were close, but I won this time!”

I thought it was pretty great information, but I got no “WAAAAAH!” today. Too bad.

After getting her breathing under control, Alyssa spoke. “An item that strengthens a Packhorse, huh...? Some players would sacrifice everything to get to the Squire’s Forest.”

Horse enthusiasts like Siegfried and Murakage would probably want to go to the Squire’s Forest.

“And that emblem... I did hear some reports that you were going back and forth through a teleportation circle. I guess that was when you were testing things out with the Cute Horse?”

“Huh? Reports?”

“Yeah. You kept going into and coming back out of a teleportation circle several times, right? Lots of people noticed.”

*R-Right, that makes sense.* My monsters were kind of famous, so they were recognizable by some people. Of course their owner acting bizarrely at a teleportation circle would stand out. *Damn it, I didn’t think about that at all!*

“S-So, do people think I’m some sort of weirdo?”

“No, other people do the same thing when they’re verifying things. You just attracted some attention.”

“W-Well, that’s fine, I guess...”

As long as no one was saying “What’s that weirdo doing? Figures that guy with the weird title was a freak! Ha ha ha ha!” then I wasn’t worried about it.

“Now then, should I tell you my information?” Siegfried asked.

“R-Right, you still have information to tell me too. But I’ve gotten through the worst of it...! Bring it on!”

“O-Okay. Alyssa, you seem different from usual.”

Despite his bewilderment, Siegfried told Alyssa about how he used the Galloping Emblem to evolve Silver. He showed her the abilities of the Galloping skill and Silver’s stats as he spoke.

Once she got a look at that, Alyssa started to tremble.

“A-Alyssa? Is something the matter?” Siegfried asked.

“W—”

“Alyssa?”

“WAAAAAH! No faaair! You tag-teamed meee!”

# Epilogue

## Cutscene

In the same basement as before, two men were facing each other. Most players would recognize them as the same conspirators from the previous cutscene.

The man's shadow cast by the candlelight was, once again, clearly nonhuman. This time, however, even the subordinate man's shadow was distinctly different. Long, unhuman horns grew from his silhouette.

"Gathering hope does not seem to be going as well as planned, does it?"

"Please forgive me, my lord. We were thwarted by the otherworldly travelers..."

The man sitting on the throne looked indifferent to the subordinate apologizing on his knees. He had one arm propped on an armrest and had his cheek resting on his hand. His eyes were closed as if he was contemplating something.

Then, after several seconds, he slowly opened his eyes.

"Very well. I will lend you more minions. Ones of even higher rank."

"D-Do you really mean so, my lord?"

"Yes."

As soon as the man affirmed his promise, magic circles emerged all around the cellar room, out of which inky-black shadows started swarming. The shadows wriggling around the throne gradually began to take on a human shape, until the room was filled with countless shadow people.

Each of the shadows had horns protruding from their heads and wings sprouting from their backs. They were unequivocally demons.

"These demons are superior to the Shadow Men. Well, they are still lower-



ranking demons, but they should suffice. But considering how much support I am giving, be warned—I will not tolerate failure.”

“O-Of course, my lord!”

“Also, we have only been targeting vessels, but...”

The man sneered, his pupils turning into vertical slits like a reptile and his canine teeth growing long and sharp.

“Now go after people as well. Go after those who have earned people’s love, those who have gained people’s trust, those who carry the burden of the people’s hopes! Kill them and steal their souls!”

“Y-Yes, my lord! At your command!”

“Hope! Steal and accumulate more and more hope! That will quicken my resurrection! Then, I will bring the end to that vexing Sequoia Dryad who sealed me away!”

## Afterword

Thank you for purchasing the latest volume of *Late-Start Tamer*!

Once again, there's an afterword!

This always goes wrong! Editor! You told me I wouldn't have to write any more afterwords! You must enjoy seeing me like this, don't you?!

But it's fine! Just like last time, I'll bring in a guest!

"...?"

It's Yuto's tamed monster, Sakura!

Once again, welcome to the cramped, dark, and kind of sad Afterword Room hell that I live in!

"...?"

Yes, I know it's a strange place. I'm sorry.

You see, I can't leave this work-jail until I finish writing this afterword! So please, do whatever you can to help me! I'm begging you!

"...!"

Wow! You thumped your chest! Are you saying to leave it to you? I knew I could count on your help! You're so dependable! I know you're a character I created, but who would've thought you'd be so cute and reliable!

Now then, let's get this interview started—

"...♪"

Huh? Sakura? Why did you take out your whip? That daring look on your face is cute too, but...

Did I say something to offend you?

"...!"

Yikes! You just grazed me with that thing! I heard it whizz by my ear!

Olto tried to destroy the wall last time, and now you're doing the same? I thought Yuto's monsters were supposed to be more mild-mannered than that? Or do you hate the thought of being in this room with me so badly that you have to resort to brute force? Don't forget, I created you! Be nicer!

"...♪"

Wait, you destroyed the wall! Wooooo! I can escaaape!

And there you have it, another comedic afterword.

Hee hee hee. I realized something! I can repeat this same thing with all the monsters! Include all the other characters too, and I have even more options to choose from!

I'm not scared of afterwords anymore!

...But, I'd still prefer not to write them, so if possible, I'd like to forgo them in the future.

Now for a word of thanks.

To my editors, W-san and I-san, thank you for your endless patience.

Nardack-sama, Carro looks amazing! You outdid yourself!

To my friends and family, to everyone else who was involved with the publication of this volume, and to all the readers who support my work—it is thanks to you that I can continue to write. I am truly grateful.



A  
LATE-  
START

# TAMER'S LAID-BACK LIFE

12



A Late-Start Tamer's  
Laid-Back Life









★ Fau ★



★ Olea ★



★ Carro ★













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A Late-Start Tamer's Laid-Back Life: Volume 12

by Yuu Tanaka

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