

A LATE-START TAMER'S LAID-BACK LIFE

Yuu Tanaka

Illustrator:
Nardack

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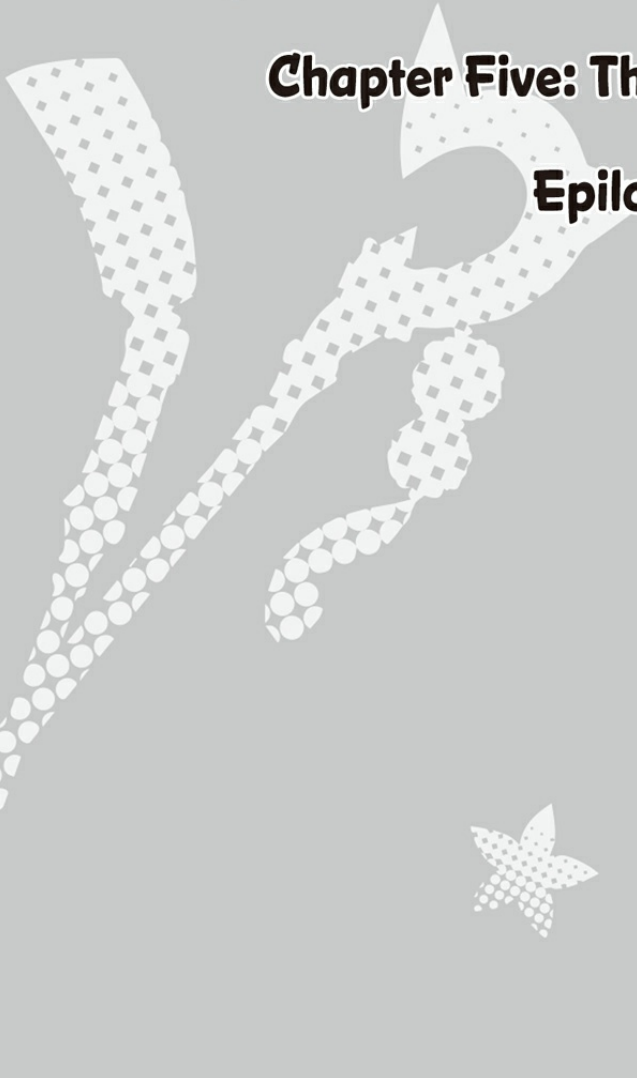
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A Late-Start Tamer's
Laid-Back Life

Chapter One: Record-Breaking Discovery

After clearing the Subterranean Lake in Zone Five, we stepped foot onto the grassy field that stretched beyond it.

We had received a notification of the event that would be held, but we had already decided to make it to the safety zone first before reading over the details. The problem was that we couldn't find anything that looked like a safety zone.

"Where's this safety zone at, anyway?"

"Usually it's right by the entrance to an area..."

"Heh heh... Hard to make out much."

The three girls I had come here with—Kurumi, Filma, and Rikyu—and I alike were looking all around, tilting our heads in confusion.

"There's nothing that stands out, at least as far as I can see."

In addition to the thick, tall grass growing everywhere, it was nighttime, so seeing anything was almost impossible. I tried equipping my Night Vision Necklace, but I still didn't find anything.

Normally, there should have been some clear sign like a big tree, a giant rock, or an unnatural-looking patch of flowers that was visible from the entrance. I couldn't spot anything that would have signaled a safety zone around us. It must have been hidden beneath the tall grass.

Pushing our way through the field of grass seemed like a lot of hard work. Plus, the grass would conceal any monsters, so it would be hard to detect them by sight. Meaning we'd have to watch out for surprise attacks.

"Maybe there isn't a safety zone here?" I wondered aloud.

"That wouldn't make any sense," responded Filma.

"Heh heh... They even have safety zones in Zone Six, after all."

I see. In that case, it wouldn't have made sense for this to be the only place to not have one.

"So I guess it's just hidden in the grass and we can't see it?"

"You're probably right!"

This is gonna be a pain to find. But we couldn't turn back now that we'd gotten this far. We had to make one final push.

I could have easily had Eine fly around and do some recon from the sky, but I was kind of scared to do that in an unknown area, given the possibility she'd get ambushed by a strong enemy and killed in one hit.

Hmm, should I just have her observe from up above for a little while? Wait, no. Eine doesn't have Night Vision, so she probably can't see in the dark.

We would do a bit more searching. If we still couldn't find the safety zone after that, *then* I would send her on recon.

"We have no info on what kinds of monsters appear here, so let's move forward carefully," cautioned Filma.

"Roger that!" said Kurumi.

"Heh heh... I wonder what sorts of items we can get here?"

"Let's take our time too, okay?" I said. "Olto, Sakura. If it comes to battle, you'll be our tanks."

"Mm!"

"...!"

"Drimo, you take care of the back."

"Squeak!"

I felt like I was using my cute monsters as a shield, but I just could *not* let myself be killed here. There was no telling what sorts of fiendish monsters we might encounter. Levelwise, this place was probably also a little out of our league, so we had to put survival first as we proceeded. And so, Kurumi took point and pushed through the grass to start moving forward. The grass looked to be as tall as her.

“Grrr, I can’t see *anything* in front of me!”

When pushing the grass aside by hand seemed insufficient, she began pushing through it with all her body weight. In an instant, she disappeared, swallowed up by the grass.

We rushed in after her. This tall grass was a lot more trouble than I’d been expecting it to be. Plus, it wasn’t the only thing hindering our path.

“Yuck! The bottoms of my feet are all soaked!”

Kurumi’s shrill voice reverberated throughout the nighttime meadow.

“Ah, looks like this is a wetland.”

“It doesn’t gross you out, Filma?”

“Oh, I’ve got waterproof boots on, see?”

“That makes sense. How about you, Rikyu?”

“Heh... Heh heh...”

Rikyu was clearly miserable. She was wearing tabi and geta, after all. Those were probably getting drenched.

“Water’s getting into my boots too,” I said.

“Mm.”

“...”

“Squeak.”

Olto and the others’ moods had also worsened. Drimo especially seemed to be having a hard time walking. After each step he took, he shook the mud off his feet. Reflet, however, seemed the same as ever. Actually, she looked to be enjoying herself. I guess that was because she was near water.

Eine and Rick also looked fine. Eine was floating, so she of course wasn’t bothered by the marsh, while Rick had shrewdly taken a spot on my shoulder. That was fine, though, since he could throw from there during a battle.

“We’re gonna have a terrible time unless we figure out how to deal with this.”

“And we really can’t move forward like this...”

Our feet weren't entirely stuck, but it was extremely difficult to walk when the soles of our feet were sinking into the mud. Plus, all this grass was obscuring our vision. I didn't even want to think about being in the front in this situation.

"How 'bout this?" Kurumi offered as she readied her main weapon, her giant hammer. "Filma, stand back."

"What're you going to do, Kurumi?"

"I'm gonna clear out all this grass! Take *thiiiiis*!"

Then, she started spinning her hammer around, mowing down the grass. It didn't go so great, though. The grass bent back a little, but that was about it. It was almost as though it had evaded the impact.

"Raaaargh!"

"H-Hold on, Kurumi! Don't swing so—"

"Ribbit!"

Right after Filma called out to Kurumi, trying to stop her from wasting her energy, we heard the loud croak of a frog, and the sound of something huge getting sent flying. We whipped our heads over to see something brown lying on top of fallen grass.

"R-Ribbit..."

"Eeugh! It's a frog!" Kurumi cried.

"It's a mud frog! How cute!"

"No way, how's it cute?! Are you okay, Filma?"

"What do you mean? Big frogs are cute!"

"Heh heh... Frog... Toad's oil... I wonder if it's flammable?"

Kurumi had accidentally attacked a frog-type monster that had apparently been hiding in the grass. She must have hated frogs, since she was cringing miserably.

Meanwhile, it seemed like Filma might've liked frogs? Her eyes were sparkling, unlike Kurumi's. I bet she liked aquatic animals. I was scared to see how Filma would react if something like a penguin or a sea otter appeared if

this was how she reacted to frogs. She might well convert to being a Tamer or a Summoner on the spot.

Meanwhile, Rikyu's eyes were completely different from either Kurumi's or Filma's. She had the look of someone eyeing a prize.

"Ribbit."

I didn't really like this thing either. It'd be a different story if it were a cute tree frog, but giant toads like this were just gross. I didn't hate it as much as Kurumi did, though.

"I'm pretty sure I got a direct hit on it, so why hasn't its HP gone down at all?"

"Heh heh... It's probably got some resistance to bludgeoning attacks since it's squishy."

"Squishy... Ewww..."

"Which means it's up to me and Rikyu," declared Filma.

Filma and Rikyu commenced attacking it in tandem, easily defeating the frog. Evidently, as a trade-off for its high defense against blunt attacks, it was weak against piercing damage—meaning Filma's harpoon was highly effective.

"Hey, isn't that the safety zone over there?"

"Oh, you're right!"

The grass around us had been knocked down in the commotion, making the way ahead clear to see. It must have been because the mud frog had been hopping about all over the place. Actually, maybe the strategy for getting through this place *was* to fight the monsters and mow down the grass as you moved forward.

We could see a clearly dry patch of land through the grass. Staying vigilant of our surroundings, we made our way towards that spot. Then, an area very different from the thick grassy field came into view. There, a field of light-purple flowers was in full bloom, clearly meant to be a place to rest. Its border with the grass was radiating a dim light.

No doubt about it, this was the safety zone.

“We did it!”

“Heh heh... We’re safe.”

“Yeah, we are.”

Once we stepped into the field of flowers, we immediately heard an announcement telling us a teleportation destination had been registered. This way, even in the worst-case scenario where we died, we should be able to make it back here quickly.

Finally, we could catch our breath.

“It’s so pretty here, isn’t it?” said Filma.

“Heh heh... It is,” responded Rikyu.

“Yeah, I really like this place too,” Kurumi chimed in.

Just as the girls said, it was a beautiful location.

Since it was already the middle of the night, our surroundings were dark, but the purple flowers that were growing here were faintly luminescent, illuminating the safety zone.

This scenery was simply magical. The glowing flowers reminded me of purple Japanese gentians. Both the Subterranean Lake and this field of flowers were views I would never have been able to see in real life. Being able to come to a place like this was one of the true charms of a fantasy game. Unfortunately, since they were simply background objects, I wasn’t able to pick any of the flowers. If I could have brought them back, they would have made some pretty decorations for my garden.

“Mm-mmm...”

“Squeak...”

While I was transfixed by the pale glow of the flowers, Olto and Drimo, who were sitting next to me, were making some strangely melancholic noises.

“What’s wrong?”

“Mm...”

“Squeak...”

They were both rubbing their bellies in the same way. Oh wait, had they not eaten since I summoned them?

“It might be a weird time for a meal, but we have a great view. Should we eat here?” I suggested.

“Mm-mm!”

“Squeak!”

I could just take out what I’d already prepared for Olto and some of the others, but I’d make my and Reflet’s meals here.

“After all, I’ve got these!”

“Hum!”

It was time for the long-awaited crab dishes. Once they saw me take out the crab, Kurumi, Rikyu, and Filma began clamoring with excitement.

“Ahhh! You’re having crab?”

“Heh heh... You promised you’d cook for us.”

“Please, make some for us too!”

I had no issue with that, seeing as I had promised them that from the start.

“I got it, I got it. You good with leaving the cooking up to me?”

“Yeah!”

“Heh heh... I’m looking forward to it.”

“All we can think of to make is stuff like boiled crab and crab fried rice,” said Filma.

On top of not having the Cooking skill, the three of them apparently didn’t cook in real life either. All the work was being left to me. Filma also sent me a transfer request.

“Could you use this?” she asked.

“Subterranean Lake Water? Never seen this before.”

I had worked pretty hard to gather items, but I didn’t remember obtaining anything like Subterranean Lake Water.

“I got it from a gathering node at the bottom of the lake.”

“Ah, so that’s why we didn’t get any.”

Reflet didn’t have the right skills, so even if she had reached the spot where the water flowed from, she wouldn’t have been able to collect it. If we ever wanted to get some Subterranean Lake Water, either Olto, Sakura, Rick, or I would have to go down and get it.

“Are you sure I can use this? It seems valuable...”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. I go to the Subterranean Lake like once a day anyway.”

So the Subterranean Lake was her replacement for a pool. Not surprising, considering her character’s focus on water.

“I have a lot of Subterranean Lake Water stocked up. I collect some each time I go since I have a tendency to be a hoarder about things... So please, feel free to use it!”

According to Filma, it was the kind of item that didn’t have much worth if you had too much of it. I thought it’d be a good idea to sell it, but apparently you could get them at the NPC shops at South Gate for a relatively reasonable price. Aquatic items were used in most crafting, so they must have been made to be pretty easy to get a hold of in the game for that reason.

“All right then, I’ll gladly use it.”

“Great!”

It was water with a rarity of 4. *Wow, this is awesome!* I was happy to be able to try it out.

“What should I start with?”

Just obtaining the crab had unlocked several basic recipes, so I’d try those out first. Besides those, there were a bunch of other recipes that seemed feasible to make. In addition to the crabs I’d caught, the girls had also craftily gotten their own too, giving me a total of fifteen crabs to work with. With this many, I could probably make all the recipes.

“I’ll make this one first. It’s just basic boiled crab.”

It was an easy recipe. I just had to place the crab in a pot along with the Subterranean Lake Water and salt, and then light a fire under it. Twenty seconds later, it came out with just what I was expecting: a bright-red boiled crab. It looked just like the Shanghai crab I'd once eaten in Chinatown.

"It looks delicious..." I muttered.

No, I need to be strong. If I tried sneaking a few bites, I'd get booed out of there. People could be scary when it came to their food.

After that, I made lots of different dishes: grilled crab, crab omelet, crab miso soup, crab hot pot, crab stew, crab salad, clear soup with crab, crab cream croquettes, crab bread, crab pizza, and crab steamed dumplings.

If rice had been discovered, I could have made an impressive spread of crab fried rice, crab pilaf, crab rice soup, and a seasoned rice dish with crab. There wasn't much I could do about that, though, since rice hadn't yet been found in the game. Plus, the variety of dishes I had already made should be tasty enough.

"I've really outdone myself, if I do say so myself!"

Hearing the call, Filma and the others started gathering around. Their eyes gleamed when they caught sight of all my crab cuisine.

"I call dibs on the crab omelet!"

"Hey, no fair, Kurumi!"

"Heh heh... That crab bread is mine."

"Hum!"

It looked like a fight would break out if I let this go on. Maybe we needed to settle things fairly with rock-paper-scissors. I'd made enough crab hot pot and stew for five people, so we could all eat those at least.

In the end, I won the hot pot, stew, miso soup, and clear soup. Yeah, I was *not* expecting to lose *every* round of rock-paper-scissors. All I got was the soup-based dishes. Now that I thought about it, since I had made hot pot and stew, the miso and clear soups were really unnecessary.

The game gods must have been moved by Kurumi and the others' desire for

crab.

“I guess this is fine. I can just make more when I want to, after all.”

My frustration was diminished by watching the girls devour the crab dishes. It felt really nice to hear them compliment my food. And seeing even Filma, who was always so prim and proper, tear through the food like her life depended on it reaffirmed the magic of crab for me.

I took a slurp of one of my dishes and said, “Mm, yeah, this is good. Reflet, what do you think? How is it?”

“Hum!”

Reflet flashed me a wide grin, holding a grilled crab leg high up above her. *I guess that's a yes. I'm glad I cooked them... But you've got food stuck around your mouth, you know that?* I thought about wiping it off for her, but it would just get dirty again immediately. *Okay, just enjoy your meal.*

While we were having our fill of the crab dishes, Olto and the others who had already finished their meals were playing around in the safety zone. Wait, they *should* have been. But for some reason, they were nowhere to be seen.

I hadn't even realized. I'd been too absorbed in eating crab.

“Huh? Olto? Sakura?”

Did they leave the safety zone without my noticing?

Flustered, I called out their names. But there was no response.

Could they have left the safety zone and then died?

“G-Guys! Olto! Sakura!”

“Mm?”

Hearing my desperate cries, Olto promptly returned, responding as though he was saying, “You called?” The tilt of his head suggested he didn't understand why I was so panicked.

“Jeez, you scared me... Where the heck did you go?”

“Mm!”

Olto pushed apart the grass and pointed at something. When I looked, I saw a marker indicating a gathering node amid the grass.

“Hm? Oh, I see.”

“Mm-mm!”

Since he had nothing to do, he had gone to collect some items.

“You didn’t wander off too far, did you?”

“Mm.”

“Then that’s fine.”

My other monsters also came back soon after. Apparently there were several gathering nodes right by the safety zone. When I jumped up and down to check it out, I could see several markers coming in and out of view. This really was one of those times where being short was a disadvantage. It was an advantage in places like cramped caves, though.

“I see three of them...”

The gathering nodes weren’t even ten meters away from the safety zone. At that distance, I could just gather materials and return in a flash.

The three girls—no, including Reflet, the *four* girls—were still in a crab daze. I felt hesitant to go as far as to stop them from eating to ask them to escort me.

“Okay, let’s do this!” I exclaimed, making up my mind to head out for one of the visible gathering nodes.

Now that I thought about it, maybe I should have checked out what Olto had gotten before leaving... It had completely slipped my mind. I’d been too nervous about going outside of the safety zone to think about that.

“All right, just a little farther...”

I pushed aside the reeds and reached out my hand towards the gathering node. Once I obtained the items, I would immediately retreat to the safety zone. That had been my plan, but—

“Huh? W-Wait, is this...?”

Just as I was nearing my target, I saw the plants that were growing there and

reflexively stopped my hand in shock. This was big. No matter how many double takes I did, I could not assume this plant to be anything else.

“Hey hey hey... No way, is this really where it was *this whole time*?”

With a trembling hand, I grasped the plant and pulled it out. The plant was added to my inventory. I forgot about even running away. I opened up my window on the spot to check the item I had picked up.

Name: Paddy

Rarity: 4 / Quality: 1 ★

Effects: Ingredient. Edible.

I knew it! I hadn't been mistaken.

“Is this for real?!”

It just looked like grass, but what I had gathered was in fact paddy, or unhulled rice. I was no expert, but I was pretty sure if you removed the husks from these, you'd get brown rice, which you could then polish to get white rice.

“Think of the possibilities... I can make so many Japanese dishes I'd given up on until now!”

What a huge discovery! This had to be the biggest discovery to date in all my hours playing this game.

There were those players who would see others getting so worked up over soy sauce, rice, and sweets and say stuff like “Why do you want to eat rice so badly in a game? You can just eat that in real life.” But they must have been people who didn't practice any moderation, or were the unique sorts who could eat as much as they wanted without gaining weight.

The biggest reason people were so obsessed with recreating Japanese food in game: “No matter how much you eat, you don't gain weight.”

There were people who were dieting IRL or who couldn't eat their favorite foods for medical reasons. Even without such pressing reasons, there were also many people who just wanted to save money or to refrain from overeating and

overdrinking so as to watch out for their health. For those players, being able to eat their favorite foods in the game was a fairly important matter.

Incidentally, in LJO you could eat as much as you wanted, regardless of how full you were, though the effects of the food would be wasted. This was apparently a surprisingly big appeal of the game.

As people progressed through the game and more and more real-life foods were recreated, there'd also probably be an increase in players who were aiming to do just that. Even just being able to eat as much rice as you wanted would be enough of a selling point. That was how huge, huge, *huge* a discovery this was.

"Now I can eat as many rice-bowl dishes as I want!"

I'll mass-produce them to the point that the price plummets! I need to get Olto to grow these!

"Hey, Olto! You can grow this, right?"

"Mm."

"Huzzah!"

I never doubted him!

This is the best! And that's an understatement!

"I-I need to buy more hydroponic pools... Dang it, I don't have enough farms! No wait, I'll buy a farm in South Gate. I don't think I've reached my limit yet."

Thanks to my guild rank leveling up, I could buy more farms. *I'll build a great big paddy field and become a rice farmer!*

"Could I use my home base garden too? I should be able to expand it. Also, I can clear out some of the weeds and put in a field— *Grrk?!'*"

While I was getting excited thinking about all the possibilities, I felt a strong impact against my back and I was sent flying forward a few meters. I involuntarily let out a weird sound. I turned around to see one of those bastards from earlier behind me.

"What...?"

“Ribbit!”

“Aieeeeeeee!”

I forgot I was outside of the safety zone! This thing just took out half my HP in one hit! That little frog jerk looked like it was ready to chase after me too.

“O-Oh no! Help meee!”

As soon as I yelled, two small figures leaped out of the grass.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Tra-la-la!”

“Ribbit?”

Phew, that was close. If Rick and Eine hadn’t stolen away the frog’s attention, I would’ve been dead meat.

I escaped back to the safety zone with my dear life, where the three girls noticed something was up with me.

“Silver-Haired, it looks like you took some damage,” said Kurumi. “What happened?”

“I got distracted by a huge discovery, and I didn’t notice an oncoming enemy...”

“Heh heh... A huge discovery by Silver-Haired? Did you tame a dragon?”

“Rikyu, you fool! It’s not something as lame as a dragon!”

“Huh? A dragon’s lame? So what amazing thing did you discover, then?” asked Filma.

“Heh heh heh. Check *this* out!”

“Hm?”

Kurumi and Filma looked at me with blank expressions as I pulled out the unhulled rice with a flourish. I guess just showing it to them wasn’t enough for them to understand what it was. True, it wasn’t something you’d come across in your daily life. I had only learned about it by seeing it on TV, and hadn’t had many chances to see the real thing—just a few times at my neighborhood’s rice

shop.

“‘Paddy’? What’s that?” asked Kurumi.

“I think I learned about it in school?” said Filma.

“Heh, heh heh! Terrific! That really is a huge discovery!”

Rikyu’s the only one who knows what this is, huh?

“Isn’t it?” I said.

“Yes!”

“C’mon, what is it?”

“Yeah, please tell us!”

Kurumi and Filma really didn’t know what it was, so Rikyu kindly explained it to them.

“Whoa! So this is rice?”

“That’s really amazing!”

“It’s like I said, right? A huge discovery!”

Finally, it clicked for them just how significant this was. After all, having rice meant having double the recipes.

“I need to figure out how to handle this information, if I can cultivate it, and a bunch of other stuff too... But first, let’s collect some more!” I exclaimed.

“Got it!”

We had been planning to leave here, but now a fire had been lit under us all.

We’re gonna gather rice for as long as we can!

An hour later, after we finished up with our rice-harvesting party, we decided to disband for the time being.

“All right, so we’ll all organize our information, and then meet back up again at the square to go to the Quick-Eared Cats. Is an hour really enough time, though?” asked Kurumi.

“Well, all I need to do is see if I can grow the rice in the hydroponic pool, so yeah. Should be enough time.”

If we had information related not just to the paddy but also to cultivating it, we could probably sell it for more. My plan was to test a few out on my hydroponic pool and get all that information together.

Kurumi and the others would handle sorting through the information about the Subterranean Lake. *That* was probably going to be the more time-consuming task.

“Okay then, see ya later.”

“Yeah!”

Apparently they were going to go through their log and organize their information at a café in the Town of Beginnings.

I hurried to my farm.

“Olto, here’s the paddy we got earlier. You can grow it, right?”

“Mm!”

Olto pounded on his chest with a smile filling his face. He was telling me to trust in him.

For now, I selected one paddy to take out from my inventory. When I did, what appeared wasn’t just one grain, but a bowl filled with a mountain of unhulled rice. I guess this amount was classified as a single portion. With this amount, it would be easy to secure as much as could be planted in the entire hydroponic pool.

“All right then, now what? Don’t we have to turn them into seedlings somewhere?”

I was pretty sure I would have to plant the paddy in a seedbed, wait until it started sprouting, and then plant it in a rice field, right? I didn’t have a seedbed, but maybe I could buy one somewhere.

“Mm?”

While I was thinking things over, next to me Olto picked up the bowl. As he

held it up, Olto used Propagation. With a poof, the paddy's form changed in an instant.

"Huh? The bowl disappeared. And they turned into seedlings all of a sudden... There was so much of it, though. We just got two out of it?"

All that unhulled rice had produced only two seedlings. I guess we couldn't think about this in the same way as other crops. The unhulled rice Olto had Propagated was the amount collected from one rice plant. One rice plant got you one bowlful of unhulled rice.

And by using Propagation on that, he'd made two seedlings. Basically, each portion of paddy wasn't considered to be one grain of rice, but the heap of paddy harvested from one rice plant.

"Okay, so, what should I do with these?"

"Mm-mm!"

The farm was impossible after all. Olto beckoned me over with his hand like he was saying, "Come here!" He brought me to the hydroponic pool, as I had guessed.

"So, rice plants do need to be grown in a water-filled paddy."

"Mm!"

Olto nodded in agreement, then got in the pool, apparently not minding getting wet from the splashing water.

"Mm-mm. Mm-mm."

Then, as if he were in a rice field, he planted the seedlings in the hydroponic pool.

"Can we just wait now, like with regular crops?"

"Mm."

"Do we have to water it? What about fertilizer?"

"Mm. Mm-mm."

Of course, since it was a hydroponic pool, it seemed like we didn't have to do any watering. But we'd have to add fertilizer and do some weeding like with a

regular farm.

“It’s kind of a waste, but let’s get rid of all the water plants. Then, let’s hurry up and turn this into a paddy field.”

“Mm!”

“Oh, but we should experiment first.”

“Mmm?”

First, I wanted to try reducing the amount of paddy that was used during Propagation.

“How about half?”

“Mm-mmm.”

“Whoa! That didn’t work.”

“Mmm.”

My precious paddy turned into trash! It seemed like the entire bowl of rice was necessary after all. Then, after testing things out several times, I found that I could reduce the amount by ten percent. However, the leftovers disappeared as soon as Olto used Propagation on the rest, so it seemed useless to try to decrease the amount at all. The quality of the seedlings also went down, so there really was no benefit to it.

“Okay then, what if we increase it instead?”

If I doubled the amount of unhulled rice and propagated it at the same time, would those produce higher quality seedlings?

“Mm-mmm.”

“No good, huh.”

At least it didn’t turn into trash this time, so that was an improvement. It looked like when I increased the amount of rice used for Propagation, the extra amount didn’t get used up.

After that, I tried mixing multiple portions of unhulled rice together, but it seemed like Propagation was only possible with a fixed amount of the paddy. Sometime down the line, I wanted to test what happened when I mixed

unhulled rice of different qualities, but this was as much experimenting as I could do for now.

Besides, a surprising amount of time had passed.

“Oh well, I’ve figured out that growing the rice is possible. I should hurry over to meet up with Kurumi and the others for now. Olto, I’ll leave the farm to you all.”

“Mm!”

“...!”

After my monsters sent me off with a salute, I headed for the meeting place.

When I reached the square, Kurumi and the others were already there waiting.

They were three pretty girls gathered together, so they stood out quite a bit. Plus, they were celebrities, so that probably attracted attention. There wasn’t exactly a huge crowd or anything, but several people were watching them from a distance. The girls didn’t seem to be bothered at all, though. Maybe they were just used to that sort of thing.

It took some nerve on my part to call out to them given that, but there was no use in hesitating. I weaved through the other players and called out to Filma.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“It’s no problem,” she responded.

“We were just early!” Kurumi assured me.

“Heh heh... He has arrived.”

As soon as I spoke, a huge commotion broke out around us. Then, a bunch of people approached. Their faces looked super serious. Wait, did the girls’ fans think I was a weirdo hitting on them or something? Some of them looked like they were clearly listening in. I was pretty freaked out.

Are they checking to make sure I’m not saying anything weird to them? Do I look like that much of a creep?

“Heh heh... No surprise with Silver-Haired here.”

“We’re really getting more attention!”

“Huh?”

Obviously, the three of them stood out more than I did. Did these three really not realize how famous they were?

“Well, whatever. Let’s hurry up and go.”

There was no use standing around here making small talk, so I decided to urge us on towards the Quick-Eared Cats’ clan house. But for some reason, that group of onlookers was following us...

Just how far are they planning on tagging along?

It seemed like they intended to follow us to the ends of the earth if they could. Though I guess I could understand how these cute girls with idol-level popularity would have such a large group of fans following after them...

We headed for the Cats with those other players following behind us.

I tried listening in on their conversation, and I managed to catch a few words here and there, like “Silver-Haired” and “to the Quick-Eared Cats again.”

Maybe the fact that I’d been selling a bunch of info to the Quick-Eared Cats had been going around? It did seem like I was becoming a little well-known thanks to Olto and my other monsters, so was this little procession actually following after *me*? Wait, was *I* turning into a famous player? *Huh? Oh man, that’s not good.*

As we walked along, Kurumi and the others whispered to me.

“By the way, how’d it go?” started Kurumi.

“Can you grow it?” followed up Filma.

“Yup, it went perfectly.”

At my response, their faces relaxed into broad smiles.

“Great job.”

“Heh heh... The White-Rice Pioneer has done it again.”

“Don’t call me that. Well, this means we have more information to sell.”

“Hey, are you really gonna sell *all* the info on rice? If we keep some of it secret, you could make a killing,” suggested Kurumi.

“If the information spreads to everyone, then more people will grow rice, meaning more rice-based recipes will also go around, right? I think I’d be happier with that happening,” I said.

“You haven’t an ounce of greed, huh?”

No way—what’re you saying, Kurumi? I’m only acting out of devotion to my desire to eat as much rice as I want in game.

“Besides, if people use the information we sell now as a basis for their strategy, the stuff about the rice will come out anyway, right? In that case, isn’t it better if we spread that information first?”

“Heh heh... I knew it. The Silver-Haired Pioneer really has become the White-Rice Pioneer.”

Oh god no, please don’t have people start calling me White Rice! There’s no way that would happen, right?

“Never mind me, what about you, Filma? Are you all right with selling the info on the lake?”

“Yes, I don’t mind.”

I would say Filma had more rights over the information regarding the Subterranean Lake, but she was resolved to sell it all without hiding anything.

“It’s not my accomplishment alone. Plus, even if you did sell the information on rice, it’d probably be worthless without clearing the Subterranean Lake. I would also prefer if the information on rice spread around.”

Oh, that was true. Even if I sold my information about rice to the Cats, it’d be hard for any other players besides us to get their hands on the unhulled rice unless they cleared the Subterranean Lake. And even if I grew and supplied it, I would have no way of matching the demand there would be. Meaning, it would be necessary to sell the information about the Subterranean Lake along with the information about rice.

For Filma and the others, being the only ones advancing would give them a

huge advantage. They'd get a lot of benefit from hiding information about the Subterranean Lake. They were revealing that information for the sake of the rice. I couldn't be more grateful.

"You both need to be greedier. I'd keep things secret till the very end, and then reap the insane profits!"

"Tee hee."

"Heh..."

"And what're *you* laughing about?" Kurumi asked Filma and Rikyu.

"Heh heh... You could never, Kurumi."

"Yeah. You can't keep secrets."

"Yes I can!"

I watched the three girls' playful back-and-forth from behind, until we at some point reached the Quick-Eared Cats' clan house.

We entered the clan house, the bell clanging as we did. Once we were inside, I noticed the large crowd of players outside surging towards the entrance. However, the Quick-Eared Cats' stall prevented people not in your group from entering in order to prevent any information leaks, so this was as far as their pursuit would take them. Among their chatter, I could hear words like "Subterranean Lake" and "Mermaid" mixed in.

Could it be that the information about me—or, I should say, Filma and the others—clearing the Subterranean Lake was already spreading around, and they were after that? Well, Kurumi *had* divulged some information to other players, and soon after there had been that server-wide announcement about the lake being unlocked.

Dang, I had really gotten full of myself thinking I was a famous player or something, huh? I was just an extra! *Oof, that's embarrassing.*

"Hi there!"

"Welco—"

At the reception desk, Alyssa's smiling face suddenly stiffened the moment

she saw us. She stood there unmoving for a few seconds, but then a bold smile soon filled her face.

Then, she sprang up and thrust her pointer finger right in my direction.

“Nya ha ha! So, you’ve come, Yuto! Things won’t go like last time, I can assure you of that!”

“Huh? Uh, sure.”

Did I do something?

“You might have seen my pathetic side already, but this time, I’ve sufficiently prepared! Though that *is* thanks to the information I bought from you...”

I didn’t really catch the last part of what she said, but she must have been talking about how she had prepared money to buy information, right? The reason she looked so smug must have been because she had more money than I could imagine.

I understood how she felt. I was also the type who got a little overzealous in my spending when I had a lot of money. And that has led to a lot of mistakes...

“Hee hee hee. I don’t know how much you’ve prepared, but you better not underestimate the information we’ve brought with us today!” Kurumi responded to Alyssa’s declaration with her own smug look. *Is this some kind of budding rivalry?*

However, Alyssa also seemed fully confident.

“I guess it must be some pretty big information if a group of celebrities is bringing it? But you know, I’ve already heard about the Subterranean Lake being cleared.”

“Hee hee. I hope you don’t think that’s all we’ve brought. We’ve got some super crucial information, you hear? Something that could be considered even more valuable than strategy tips! Though I’m not the one who discovered it!”

“U-Um, what?”

She was talking about the rice, after all. Kurumi wasn’t lying. Hearing that, Alyssa’s face froze, then she started rubbing her upper abdomen. Did she have a stomachache? Huh? Why? I was sure our information would bring her some

huge profits again. Besides, people shouldn't be able to feel pain in this game in the first place. She was probably doing that unconsciously out of a habit she had in real life. In that case, was she a person who had had a long and stressful life IRL? Or maybe she was a young person with acid reflux?

"O-Oh wow, that's exciting! S-So? What are you here to sell besides the strategy for the Subterranean Lake?"

For some reason Alyssa was looking my way. *I'm not the one you should be looking at, though.*

"Oh, my role in the Subterranean Lake wasn't that great. I was just helping out," I told her. "I'd say it was mostly Filma that figured out the strategy."

"That's not true! I was only able to do so because I had Reflet with me!"

"So the blue mermaid and Reflet played a big role in the discovery? That means the key for clearing the Subterranean Lake has to be underwater, huh?"

Sharp as always, Alyssa. She was able to infer that info just from that little exchange.

After that, Filma took the lead in telling Alyssa the information on how to clear the lake. We hadn't been able to determine the conditions to make the boss appear, but we could tell her what we had been able to figure out by showing her our logs.

"At this stage, I don't think we can assume that it's absolutely necessary to have Aquamotion in order to make it out of the regular playing field. In that case, maybe having Fishing is what's essential?"

"No, I mean, wouldn't either be doable?"

"Hmm, yeah. If you can swim, then you can catch fish underwater. Or maybe beating the Charging Cherry Salmon could also be the trigger."

"And if you can use Fishing, then the important thing is probably making the good-tasting fish into bait and fishing with that. It'd be too much of a coincidence even for Silver-Haired to have pulled three blue-finned fish that way."

"That could be."

Our discussion was getting heated. It wasn't definite information, but since it was information regarding strategy for the southern area that had been left unexplored until now, Alyssa was also getting excited.

"Well, that was some excellent information! Now then—"

"Wait. That's not all," Kurumi said, cutting her off. Then, she looked at me.

Alyssa's gaze followed hers. With everyone staring at me, I let out a laugh.

"Ha!"

"Ah, aha ha ha... That's right."

"Heh heh... In a sense, this one's the winner."

"Yup!"

"B-Better than what you just told me...?" stammered Alyssa. "Wh-What is it?"

"Well, okay. First, why don't you take a look at this?"

I took out the paddy from my inventory and handed it over to Alyssa. The way she tilted her head in puzzlement made it clear that she didn't know what it was before appraising it. After all, at first glance it just looked like tiny seeds of some plant.

"This is— WHAAAAAAT?!"

"Whoa, you scared me."

Soon after, she realized just what it was I had in my hands. She leaned forward from the counter and shrieked.

"Th-Th-This is... Thiiiiiiis!"

"It's unhulled rice."

"..."

"Alyssa?"

She had suddenly looked down and gone silent. *What the heck is up with her? It looks like she's even shaking a little. Huh? Seriously, is she okay?*

"Wah..."

“Wah?”

“WAAAH! YOU GOT ME AGAIN!”

Fifteen minutes after Alyssa’s inexplicable howl, I was walking down the street in buoyant spirits. It was probably obvious to anyone who saw me just how elated I was.

“Man, I was expecting to get a lot for the information on rice, but I never expected it to be this much.”

To my amazement, the information on the Subterranean Lake and rice combined had come to a total of six million. And I hadn’t forgotten about the quest chain—but since I didn’t have all the information on that yet, I’d decided not to bring it up this time. For the time being, I’d just let Alyssa know that I would probably be coming back to sell her more information before long.

Alyssa was pleased, and gave me a strange, dry “Ah...aha ha...” laugh.

But wow, six million, huh? I guess since most players nowadays had more money than in the early stages of the game, that meant the price for information was going up too... But six million was crazy. Naturally, Alyssa would be paying it out to me in installments again.

Were the Quick-Eared Cats doing okay moneywise? When I tried asking, Alyssa just went “O-Of course we are! Really!” so I guess that meant they were doing just fine.

The information fee was split between my and the girls’ parties evenly. I’d been planning on suggesting a four-way split, but they told me it was better to split it between our parties this time.

Reflet had only helped out a little in the Subterranean Lake, and I’d even had to completely rely on the others during the boss fight. While I had been the one to discover the rice, their party probably would have been able to do so even if I hadn’t been there when they got through the Subterranean Lake.

While I had provided the information on how to cultivate rice, Filma was the one who’d played an active role in everything else. She had been a huge help on the battlefield, after all... But in the end, they insisted I take a two-way split.

Deciding things with a majority vote in a situation like that was a sly move on their part, honestly.

Besides, going back and forth on it would have been a waste of time. You see, I wanted to go buy another hydroponic pool as soon as possible. It was almost time to log out too, so I wanted to get everything prepared before that.

“All right, should we head out too?”

“Mm!”

“Our destination is the Water Elementals’ town!”

We set off at a brisk pace. One hour later, I had somehow managed to finish up all my preparations, before it was even log-out time. Sometimes, I even surprised myself.

“I ended up turning my entire vegetable garden at my home base into a rice paddy, but oh well.”

At least my home base was a Japanese-style house, so the rice paddy didn’t mess with the image. In fact, I’d say it enhanced the scenery.

“I spent a lot of the money I just got on expanding my garden and transplanting everything, though, huh...”

By paying money to the Farming Guild, I could transplant my crops. Using that service, I reduced my weed farm a bit and changed the fields I’d set up in my home base into hydroponic pools. The expenses had really piled up, but I regretted nothing.

“All of this is for the white rice.”

The reason I was cultivating the rice at my home base was because it was easier to keep a watch on its progress every day. Plus, having the ears of rice visible from the veranda was sure to look very tasteful. I was looking forward to the rice plants ripening.

“Mm-mm!”

“Oh ho, you’re pumped too, huh, Olto?”

“Mmm.”

I was sure Olto wasn't so much excited about the rice itself as about being able to plant new crops in a new field, but still, his motivation was very reassuring.

"Well, Kurumi's party let me buy half of the stock they harvested too, so I don't see us running out anytime soon. Let's grow everything we can."

"Mm!"

Since the girls couldn't cook on their own, they couldn't do much with the paddy alone. They had to rely on someone else who had the Cooking skill, like me, to actually make the food. They didn't want to wastefully spread the information, though, so except for what they gave the Quick-Eared Cats, they gave their rice to me. They sold it to me for much less than I had been expecting, on the condition that I let them be the first ones to try the rice once I had successfully grown it. I felt like they could have overcharged some other player for the paddy, but it seemed like they'd prioritized their desire for food.

"We need to work hard for their sakes!"

"Mmm!"

Well, I didn't have the Hydroponics skill, so really it was Olto who would be working hard.

"I'm counting on you, Master Olto!"

"Mm-mmm!"

I had always heard that rice farming was heavy work, but Olto seemed to be having a blast. He was planting the seedlings he made with Propagation into the hydroponic pool, getting himself completely covered in mud.

"Oh, whoa! They're growing!"

"Mmm!"

Thanks to Olto's Forced Cultivation EX skill, the just-planted seedlings were growing at a rapid pace. They must have already grown to about twice their starting size.

"I was expecting it to be impossible to harvest them in a day, but at this rate it shouldn't be too much longer, right?"

Either way, I was happy we'd made so much progress before the end of the day. For once, I was actually excited to log out, in anticipation for the next day.

"Though there's still something I need to do."

I handed a Glow Shroom I'd gotten from the Subterranean Lake over to Olto, who was done with the rice planting. These had gotten kind of upstaged by the rice and such, but they were what I had gone to the Subterranean Lake for in the first place.

"Can you grow this?"

"Mm..."

"Huh? You can't?"

It seemed like Olto didn't know either. This was how he'd acted when he Propagated the Red Panther Cap (White) too. It must have been possible for him to Propagate and grow the mushrooms, but not even he knew what exactly it would turn out to be. *Man, we really have been together for a long time. I can totally understand what he's saying by the subtle differences in his expressions and gestures.*

"Well, I'll leave it to you. Use this to water it."

"Mmmm!"

The quality of mushrooms changed depending on the water you gave them. I decided to use the water with the highest rarity I had on hand, the Subterranean Lake Water. Thanks to Filma selling me a stack of it, I still had a lot left.

"I'll leave it to you."

"Mm."

I was really looking forward to seeing what he could pull off.

I waved at Olto, who pounded on his chest in reply, as I headed for the veranda.

"Okay, time for the last experiment of the day."

Sampling the rice would have to wait until tomorrow. After all, I still didn't

know how to polish it. What I took out was a Glow Shroom that I hadn't given to Olto to be propagated. If I mixed this with a Glowing Walnut, I would be able to make Fluorescent Paint.

It looked like Sakura was using the workshop in the basement, so I decided to do a quick test here while I admired the garden. I mixed together my ingredients and animal glue. Normally I would have to add something to add color, but I would be leaving that out for this.

What I got out of it was a thick, clear liquid. At a glance, it looked like glue or something, but its name was in fact Fluorescent Paint. Plus, it had a high quality rating of six stars. That must have been because I'd used some higher-quality ingredients.

"Should I try painting something? Hmm, this should work."

I pulled out the wooden fence prototype Sakura had made earlier. It was a white wooden fence, like the type you would often see in the gardening section of a hardware store.

"Lemme apply a bit of Fluorescent Paint to this and... Wow, that looks cool."

The wooden fence glowed a bluish-white, standing out in the darkness of the night. *This'll make the fence super visible in dark areas.* The fact that I could also paint over other paints was convenient.

"Success."

To be frank, the paint didn't really seem to have a clear purpose, but it was interesting. I would let Sakura and Himka know they could use it as much as they wanted to. Just as Sakura had created the moss ball, maybe they could whip up some cool items with it.

The next day...

"Now then, let's see how the rice is doing!"

Since I had logged out in the futon at my home base last night, I could immediately check on the hydroponic pool in the garden when I logged back in. Back in the game, I jumped out of my futon and threw open the sliding screen

doors on the garden side of my house.

“Whoa, would you look at that! They’re growing!”

In the back of the garden, which was visible from the veranda, the green ears of rice were growing lushly. At this rate, I should be able to harvest them tomorrow or the next day.

“Very nice, the rice seems to be doing well. I knew I could count on you, Olto!”

“Mm!”

“Keep it up. How’re the mushrooms?”

I had kind of gotten my hopes up, but nothing was growing on the mushroom log. *Looks like it’s gonna take a while. I’ve just gotta be patient.*

Now then, what I *really* wanted to do was take it easy and do some crafting and experimenting on my farm, but I needed to head over to Toraus the NPC to continue the quest chain. If I was late, it wouldn’t just affect my favorability score with him—it was possible I might even fail the quest.

“I have to finish this at any cost. I just have to go do it.”

To be honest, the idea of going back to that menial labor depressed me a bit, but I had made a promise.

“Good morning!”

“Squeak!”

“Mm-mmm!”

“Hey there! I was waiting for you. Thanks for coming to help today too.”

When my monsters and I approached Toraus’s laboratory, a man in a white coat immediately came out to greet us.

The inside of the room was in the same disheveled state as the day before. All sorts of weeds were piled up, leaving not even a place to step foot.

Olto and Drimo, who hadn’t previously experienced sorting the weeds, were brimming with motivation. Meanwhile, my other monsters looked pretty

neutral. They didn't seem to absolutely hate being here, but they also didn't look happy.

We proceeded to do the same thing today as we'd done yesterday: single-mindedly sorting out the mountain of weeds. That was it.

"Mmm."

"Squeak."

Olto and Drimo still looked like they were having fun. Maybe they enjoyed doing work with everyone?

But how long will your smiles last, I wonder? Heh heh heh...

Well, in all honesty, this had to be the most boring and painful quest of all the quest chains, with these prolonged sessions of menial labor. I nearly felt my spirit break several times over the two days of this quest. But whenever I felt myself having enough, I somehow managed to make it through by admiring my monsters and drinking the refreshing tea Toraus occasionally brought over. *Yeesh, what a struggle.*

Chatting with Toraus also proved interesting. He answered my various botany-related questions, so I was even able to find some things out. Then, just before sunset, we had finished all our work.

"Finally, we're done!"

"Mm-mm!"

"Squeak squeak!"

Olto and Drimo's faces had turned expressionless by the second half. Now they were throwing their hands up in the air, delighting in the fact that they were done.

"Nice work."

"Mm."

As I was giving Olto a high five, Toraus served us some fresh herbal tea for the umpteenth time today.

"You were a huge help. Really, thanks."

“No problem. I learned a lot too.”

In fact, Toraus had taught me a lot about how to deal with the paddy. I’d thought I needed to procure some special tool to polish the rice, but a millstone would actually work just fine. I just had to put the paddy in the millstone and then leave it alone. Simple as that.

Even if I left it in there longer than it needed to be, it wouldn’t turn into a powder. Paddy could only turn into white rice no matter what, while brown or white rice would turn into rice flour if you kept crushing it for a long time. Being able to leave the paddy in the millstone without worrying about the time was an unexpected plus.

All things considered, I was glad I had bought the tower mill.

From what he told me, it also seemed like I could think up different ways to do things during the whole process. I could try drying it or changing up the way I removed the husks.

And that wasn’t all. Surprisingly, right before the quest ended, I learned a new skill. The name of the skill was Botany.

Or maybe it was because I’d learned that skill that the quest had ended? Learning the skill probably had something to do with how many weeds you appraised, but maybe the types and quality of weeds you appraised also had played a part. That said, I had no idea if it was possible to learn this skill outside this quest...

Anyhow, this was a pretty revolutionary skill. First off, I could now appraise more plants. I was amazed to see I could now appraise, collect, and cut down some plants I had previously thought were objects; the yellow trees that made up the maze in the Valley of the Yellow Trees, which I’d passed through before reaching South Gate, for example. There were some materials from felled yellow trees in Toraus’s laboratory, which I could now appraise without issue as well.

“Wow, so Yellow Wood is actually from those yellow trees...?”

Yellow Wood was a material used for making dyes. However, with people not knowing where to collect it from, it had so far been an item you could only

obtain in NPC shops.

“Suppose I should give you your reward now, huh? Here, I’d like you to have this.”

“Right, the 15,000 G.”

It wasn’t much, but that was fine. I considered the Botany skill enough of a reward.

“It’s getting dark already... What should we do?”

Should I try out this Botany skill first?

I left South Gate and went back to the Valley of the Yellow Trees, then walked around through the field occupied by the tree maze, surveying it. By doing so, I found a new logging node had appeared where previously there had been nothing. It was in a section of the wall of yellow trees that I had assumed was just a field object and not actual trees.

The actual cutting it down part was no different from the regular way. I just hit my Logging Ax against the logging node that appeared in the wall of yellow trees, and then I obtained an item called Yellow Wood Fragment. It had a one-star quality, but that was probably because of my low Logging skill. Now I would be able to make paint with this.

“Hmm... Sakura or Reflet can probably use it.”

Should I keep cutting down trees here? I should probably go set up the paddy in the millstone as soon as I can, though. Also, I want to get more paddy so I can try out some rice dishes. I didn’t know if I could harvest the growing rice plants tomorrow or the day after, so I wanted to collect more unhulled rice to cook later today.

“I want to go to other areas too...”

Thanks to having Botany, I would be able to collect some new items. The first thing that came to my mind was the safety zone in the same area where I had discovered the rice. The flowers that grew there glowed in the dark. Could I collect those?

There were other flower bed safety zones too, so I also wanted to check those

out.

“Ahhh! Dang it! I have too many things to do!”

Heh heh heh. No problem. Though adulting wasn't necessarily my strong suit, I was a working adult. Getting tasks done efficiently was practically my middle name! I could certainly get everything done by the end of the day!

I'll show you all the true powers of an office worker!

“I've got this!”

First, I need to come up with a plan!

“The first place I'll go will be...”

Afterwards, I followed my meticulously plotted itinerary, collecting and logging items here and there until right before my log-out time.

Phew, that was hard. But it was all worth it.

I ended up with some significant results concerning both items and information.

First off, relating to the Botany skill: after touring different fields, I was able to find several gathering and logging nodes. Yellow Wood wasn't the only new item I could obtain after all.

For example, inside the safety zone in the marsh where I'd gotten the unhulled rice—the pretty spot with the glowing flowers—I was able to obtain the item I'd been looking for: the Fluorescent Gentian. It wasn't classified as a weed, but as an actual item. They must have been in the same family as Glowing Walnuts and Glow Shrooms.

I was able to obtain the dye ingredient Green Wood Fragment in the Green Poison Swamp in the northern part of Zone Four by collecting it from the green briar shrubs that grew there. Just like with the yellow trees, they were just thought to have been objects.

It seemed like Zone Four was where materials for dye existed, but I didn't find anything in the Red Rock Mountain to the east or the Blue Desert to the west. My guess was that those items couldn't be obtained there with the Botany skill. The dye materials sold in the eastern and western Zone Five towns were called

the Red Stone Fragment and the Blue Stone Fragment.

That's right. Stones. Based on their names, they should be minable from rocks, right? Dyes made from minerals existed in real life too, after all. I bet that instead of Botany, some other special skill was needed. There was probably a skill called Mineralogy or something.

After testing out Botany, I moved on to experimenting with the rice. The first thing I was curious about was how the process differed from working with real rice. I had done a bit of research when I'd been logged out. Usually, rice was dried before threshing it, but how would I go about doing that in game? After all, I had harvested it as paddy, so it had effectively already been threshed. For now, I decided to try drying it with an art before hulling it.

Also, could I polish the rice even without a millstone? How would I cook it? Would there be a difference in taste and quality if I used an earthenware pot rather than a regular iron one? Also, if I gave some rice to Reflet, could she make sake and rice vinegar?

At any rate, I went ahead and tried a bunch of different things.

Although using the millstone to polish the rice would raise its quality, it was also possible to do it manually. I'd seen it in real life, where they put the paddy in an empty bottle or jar and used a rod to crush it.

But doing it by hand versus using the millstone resulted in totally different flavors. I had never really picked up on the different qualities of water and other foods, but I felt like I could really pick out the subtle differences in the rice. There were some pretty major differences in their texture and sweetness. Maybe as a Japanese person, my senses were particularly honed when it came to rice, or maybe this was the work of the devs.

This might have just been my personal preference, but I felt that the rice that had been polished in the millstone after drying it first was the tastiest. Also, after polishing, I was also able to obtain not just white rice but the rice bran too. However, I didn't know any other way to use the bran besides using it to make fermented pickles, which I had never done in real life. For now, I would simply give it to Reflet to have her make some pickled foods.

"Morning, everyone."

“Ya-ya!”

“Mrow!”

“Arf!”

After logging in, I moved from the bedroom to the veranda, where I saw my mascots sitting and gazing out at the garden. Mamori the Zashiki-Warashi, Dango the calico, and Nuts the mame shiba were all lined up in order. The view of the kitten’s and mame shiba’s rumps next to the little girl’s back was incredibly cute.

I quickly noticed why they were staring out at the garden.

“Whoa, no way...”

I had often heard the expression “sea of gold,” but this scene before me matched those words perfectly. The rice plants that had still been green yesterday were now golden, and the sun beaming down on them made it look as though they were actually shining.

“Ya!”

Mamori was beckoning me over and patting the spot next to her. *It’s like she’s saying, “Sit!”*

“Well, I guess I can stay for just a little.”

“Ya.”

Even though I had said “a little,” I ended up relaxing in that spot for about thirty minutes. Well, I was Japanese, after all. I could never get tired of looking at the sea of rice swaying and rustling in the wind. I gazed at the rice plants wordlessly as I sipped the tea that Kettle had brought by at some point.

Man, I’m so glad I get to look at this for days to come.

“Right then, it’s probably about time to harvest it, right?”

Hmm, or maybe I should leave the harvesting to Olto and go sell the information on Botany? But I had enough money right now, so maybe I should prioritize harvesting the rice. I also had to consider the time it took to polish the rice, so I wanted to harvest it sooner rather than later. Above all, I wanted to try

rice harvesting at least once.

“All right, off to the rice field.”

“Mmm!”

“Oh, hey Olto.”

Olto came running towards me from the direction of the field.

“Mm-mmm!”

“Were you waiting for me for the first harvest?”

“Mm!”

“...!”

“Trrrr!”

“Sakura and Olea, you’re both here too?”

Full of energy, the three of them started pulling me towards the rice field.

Harvesting was extremely simple. I just had to pull up the rice plant, and then the paddy would be put away in my inventory.

“R-Rice harvesting, huh...”

“Mm?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. It’s nice that this can be done so easily.”

It’s nice, but, you know...this isn’t really rice harvesting.

I pulled myself together and returned to my work.

“The quality is even higher than the ones we got from the marsh! Nice! Let’s keep this up and harvest the rest!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Aye!”

“Tra-la!”

“Oh, you all came too?”

At some point, even Rick, Fau, and Eine gathered around us. *Well, it’ll*

probably be fun doing this with everyone.

“Well then, let’s all get this done together!”

Then, we all lined up and continued harvesting—although Rick did bail partway through. The rice field was still full of water, and he had nearly drowned. He swiftly scrambled up to the ridgeway between the fields and became our cheering squad. The rest of us worked in the field for half the day, chattering all the while.

“The grilled onigiri might be the most efficient after all, huh?”

The day before, I’d tried cooking some dishes in earnest with the rice we had just harvested. Among all of those I made, the particularly tasty ones were the crab fried rice and the grilled chicken rice bowl. The seasoned rice dish with mushrooms and river fish was another good one. *Oh wait, can’t forget the pilaf*

—

Whoops, I got a bit off track there. Anyway, I was able to make lots of different delicious dishes using some extravagant ingredients. The buff effects, however, were surprisingly meager. Or rather, I should say that they didn’t match the richness of the ingredients I used. That might have been because my Cooking skill level was low, meaning I was unable to draw out the full buff effects of the ingredients.

Meanwhile, there was one dish with a simple recipe that used minimal ingredients *and* came with pretty good buffs. That was the onigiri.

For one, I substituted salmon for chopped sweetfish to make sweetfish onigiri, and in another I added minced broiled eel to make eel onigiri, and more—all of which were both delicious and came with good effects. And the most cost-effective ones were the grilled onigiri and the miso onigiri.

The grilled onigiri, which I just coated in soy sauce and grilled, temporarily boosted one’s HP recovery rate. The miso onigiri, which was just coated in miso, came with a buff that temporarily boosted one’s MP recovery rate.

I could eat them quickly right before the start of a fight, and they were easy to make, so I felt I had found a really good recipe.

Chew, chew. “Yup, that’s rice all right.”

“Squeak squeak!”

“Hum!”

Plus, even Drimo and Reflet could eat some of the rice dishes. For example, the crab fried rice: in Drimo’s case, he probably considered it vegetables and grain, and Reflet considered it seafood.

If I increased the number of ingredients I used, then maybe it would be possible for me to make a dish all my monsters could eat. That was probably worth looking into.

Well, it would be hard to find something that Olto and Bear Bear could also eat, with their sweet teeth. Especially when pairing that with Reflet’s tastes... Sweet seafood? Was that a thing?

“Hmm...”

Online Forum [The Master Celebrity] Silver-Haired, Amazing as Always, Part 13

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.

330: Takashima

Silver-Haired's unmanned stand is getting crazy.

331: Cho

Again?

332: Tundra

I'm not even surprised anymore. It's been noisy over there lately.

I actually feel like I've failed if I *am* surprised.

333: Cho

His lineup has always been absurd, and the stuff that's up for sale is pretty random.

It seems like the Olive Treant and the Zashiki-Warashi are restocking by prioritizing some surplus items.

Though occasionally some bomb gets dropped, so several groups are always checking in on it.

334: Tomato Mato

Recently it's been this sort of lineup, I think?

Sakura's wooden fans and chairs (with the wind symbol engraved)

Himka's pottery

Reflet's condiments and all sorts of alcohol

Honey collected by Bear Bear

the Olive Treant's olive oil

Each of their fan clubs have lined up in super long lines.

335: Takashima

This time, he dropped an even more massive bomb, though.

336: Tomato Mato

Oh no. What is it? I'm scared.

337: Cho

Oh, I know. The air elemental's cloth.

It hasn't been put on sale yet, right?

338: Takashima

That'll probably happen at some point, but that's not what I'm talking about now.

Brace yourselves. He's selling RICE dishes!

339: Tundra

Wh-What'd you say?!

Is that true?!

340: Takashima

It's true all right. The Zashiki-Warashi was just restocking them.

But there are only eight types. The crowd that was there bought them all up.

341: Tetsu

I bought some too.

The flavor was kinda...um...

342: Cho

No good?

That's unusual.

343: Takashima

Nah, that happens sometimes with Silver-Haired's unmanned stand.

I think it's probably failed cooking experiments.

344: Tetsu

Yeah, I think that's what it was this time too.

Btw, I bought a grilled onigiri coated with honey and filled with shredded fish. I can't even begin to describe the flavor.

345: Takashima

I got the seasoned rice with fruit and fish.

Honestly, I'm hesitant to say it tasted good...

346: Tundra

The more important thing is that it's rice!

Where'd he get it?!

347: Tetsu

Well, y'see...

I'm sure you'd find out from the Quick-Eared Cats, but the raid boss event is about to start.

I'd probably go after the event.

348: Cho

I heard Silver-Haired was the one who triggered the event, so he's gotta be participating, right?

349: Tomato Mato

That'll be our chance to get the info from the man himself!

350: Tundra

Oh, you're right!

I bet he'd tell us if we asked him!

351: Cho

Oh yeah? Well, good luck.

I definitely won't be doing that.

352: Tomato Mato

Why not?

353: Tetsu

This is some important information, so if we bombard him, there's a high chance he'll just get annoyed at us.

Also, he's got a lot of players around him.

And you know what else, right?

354: Takashima

Here's a hint: the Defenders.

355: Cho

What hint? That's just the answer.

356: Tundra

...sry

357: Tomato Mato

Okay, true, I won't bombard him...

358: Cho

I feel like we talked about this before?

359: Tetsu

Whenever you try to get information out of Silver-Haired, you can be sure they'll pop out of the shadows.

Though I do think that's a good thing, since it means Silver-Haired is being protected.

360: Takashima

And we would probably report anyone that was giving him trouble too.

361: Cho

So I guess all that can be done is to go to the Quick-Eared Cats, huh?

The clan house has been crowded lately, so maybe going to the stall's a better idea?

362: Tundra

Urgh...! The price for the information on rice is so expensive!

But well, I guess it is worth it...

Dang it, I wanted to buy potions before the raid boss!

Which one am I supposed to splurge on?!

[Mascots Are Too Cute for Their Own Good!] Thread

for Discussing Mascots, Part 8

A thread for discussing the newly implemented mascot feature.

Let's show off our mascots!

Screenshots are VERY welcome.

No talking badly about other people's mascots.

Information on new mascots is also welcome.

108: Namihei

The Zashiki-Warashi's "Diary" skill is insane.

109: Meow-ralysis

Silver-Haired's little Mamori really was the one who sparked the flame. Her video's still holding a sweeping victory in the rankings.

Aaah, I wanna huff Dango's fur!

110: Nukumoria

I think there are around five Zashiki-Warashi now.

We know how to get them now, but it's really difficult, and the amount of cash you need to purchase a Japanese home is a pretty big obstacle.

111: Nocturne

I heard that a top frontline player has shut themselves up in their Japanese home and just frolics about with their mascots every single day.

They even announced they were retiring from fighting and were just going to play with their mascots from now on.

112: Miaow

I get it! I totally get it!

I get caught up playing with my cat mascot too!

A whole day passes before I know it.

113: Meow-ralysis

Ooh yeah, been there.

114: Nukumoria

I haven't! And I don't get it!

115: Namihei

No, I'm not talking about how cute the video is.

Well, it is insanely cute, but I'm talking about the content of the video.

I wasn't expecting this kind of bomb to drop...

Ten minutes ago, a new "Mamori's Diary" video was posted.

116: Nocturne

Oh, a new Mamori video dropped?!

117: Nukumoria

What do you mean about the content being insane?

Is it a new mascot?

118: Meow-ralysis

Could it be a new cat?!

119: Miaow

N-No! It's not!

I'm watching it now, but it really is crazy!

It even rivals new cat information!

120: Nocturne

Coming from you, the cat fanatic?

I'm watching it now too, but what's so crazy about it?
It's just a video of cute mascots, isn't it?

Ahhh, I want a Zashiki-Warashi.

121: Namihei

Pay attention to the background when the mascots are
playing tag.

122: Nukumoria

The background?

Umm, you mean that golden rice field-looking thing?

123: Namihei

It's not a "rice field-looking thing"!

It's a straight-up rice field!

And that's a Gnome in the back harvesting the rice!

124: Meow-ralysis

It's true! That is a rice field!

That means rice has been discovered!

125: Miaow

I wanna eat rice...

I'm on a diet, so I haven't eaten any in a week!

Where can I get it?!

126: Nukumoria

Wow, the number of views is shooting up fast...

Guess Silver-Haired's taking first place again this week.

127: Namihei

More accurate to say *Mamori* is.

128: Meow-ralysis

Should we try to check out Silver-Haired's home base and farm?

129: Miaow

All right, I'm headed for the Cats!

130: Nocturne

No, but really, Silver-Haired never changes...

131: Nukumoria

We've moved on from being amazed by him to just immediately thinking "It's definitely Silver-Haired, all right."

Whenever anything happens, first you have to check what's going on around him.

And then heading to the Quick-Eared Cats right after is becoming the norm lolol

132: Namihei

I bet the Cats' submaster is screaming again.

Chapter Two: Raid Boss Event, Begin!

“Should we start heading over to South Gate?”

“Mm?”

“For the raid boss event, of course.”

I felt like the raid boss was going to be a bit too much for me, but I *did* help trigger it, so I wanted to participate.

“I’ve put my items and money away in my storage, so I should be fine even if I die.”

I wanted to avoid respawning if possible, but I didn’t know what the event would be like. It was possible the raid boss would be so crazy strong that it would instakill me. Fighting against a giant enemy—even in a game—was terrifying. My monsters, however, seemed totally unconcerned.

“Growl growl!”

“Squeak squeak!”

“Chirp chirp!”

The three warriors among us were lined up, their expressions fully determined. They stood in front of me as I sat on the veranda, as if making some appeal, like “You’re not going to take us out of the party, right?” Well, I wasn’t even sure who to bring with me, to be honest. So if they wanted to come, I would bring them.

“All right. Bear Bear, Drimo, and Rick are for sure coming. Who else...?”

I had enough attackers now. Which meant for my healer, I’d bring Reflet. Fau would cover the buffs. And maybe our frontline defense would be Olto. I would ask Sakura, Himka, and Eine to be our substitutions.

“All right, we’ll be back. I might summon you in, so be ready for that.”

“...♪”

“Tra-la!”

“Hm!”

“Trrrr!”

Sakura and the others staying behind pumped their fists as they saw us off. That must have been their way of wishing us luck. I teleported from the Town of Beginnings to South Gate, which was now overflowing with people. They all seemed like players hoping to participate in the raid boss battle.

“It’s Silver-Haired—”

“Is that—”

“First time seeing Silver-Haired in the flesh—”

“Silver-in-the-Flesh—”

Their gazes were focused right on us. Well, I was used to my monsters attracting attention, so I already knew how to ward off their stares and ignore them. They didn’t bother me at all! That said, I thought it best to move to the edges for now.

At any rate, I doubted this many players could all fight at once. Were they going to divide us up into servers? While I was pondering that, someone called out to me.

“Yo, Yuto. I figured you’d be at this event, seein’ as ya made it happen. Though I did think ya might pass it up since it’s a battle event and all.”

“Hey, Tagosack. Haven’t seen you since yesterday.”

Tagosack was the same as ever, with her rough way of speaking and jumpsuit-like outfit. Her very mannerisms and posture were manly and super handsome. She was surely much more popular with the ladies than me—despite being a girl.

“Like you said, I triggered this event, so I’m here. But how’d you know?”

“Oh y’know, the Subterranean Lake bein’ cleared has made a lot of buzz already. I bet everyone doing this raid boss battle knows about it.”

“Oh, really?”

I looked around me a bit nervously. I, a player with no battle skill whatsoever, had cleared an area that no one else had been able to. There were probably players here who were envious of my having leeches off Kurumi's party to get through it. And they wouldn't exactly be wrong about that. A quick glance somehow didn't turn up any glares, though...

"What's up? Why do you look so antsy?"

"O-Oh, it's nothing."

"You sure? Well, all right. Anyway, take a look at this."

"Hm? Hey, wait a minute! What the heck is that?!"

"Heh, pretty cool, ain't it?"

What Tagosack showed me was a thin, black, paperlike food item about the size of A4 paper. A faint sea smell tickled my nostrils. Although at first glance it didn't look like much, its value was immeasurable. By which I mean I really wanted it!

"Seaweed?!"

"Oho." Seeing the surprise on my face, Tagosack laughed like a kid after a successful prank.

"How'd you get this?!"

"You can collect it from an area in the western part of Zone Eight. Once you get to Zone Eight, the path branches off into several fields. Down one of those ways, there's an oasis in a place called the Quicksand Corridor where you can find a gathering node for it."

"Can it be grown?"

"If you've got a hydroponic pool, sure. I've been making it work with a net and a fence I made myself. Thing is, you need it to be salt water. Then you'll have the perfect seaweed pool. I tried planting some aquatic plants in there, but they withered away."

So was that oasis a saltwater one? I bet if you kept heading west, you'd reach the sea. Maybe the game had set it so the seawater was only flowing into the oasis from underground. It would be a long while before I actually made it out

that far, but I *really* wanted seaweed. While I was testing out different onigiri recipes, there were so many times I'd wished I had it...

"...Hey. Do you think I can get some of that in crop form?"

"I'm not gonna say no now after showin' it to ya. In fact, not many people have Hydroponics, so it doesn't seem like this'll spread around much. If you can grow it, that'd be great. I don't need any compensation or anythin'. Take as much as ya like."

"Whoa, really?! I owe you one!"

Now I can make the perfect onigiri!

Tagosack was eyeing me strangely as I celebrated, though. Why?

"Look, seaweed is rare and all, but it doesn't serve much of a purpose right now. Someone's used it as topping for some Japanese-style pizza, but that's probably 'bout it."

Ah, right. Without rice, it was pretty difficult to find ways to use it. But hey, wouldn't this be a great transaction? It sounded like Tagosack had Hydroponics, so she should definitely be able to grow rice. Also, I would feel bad taking something as good as this for free.

How about we do an exchange, then?

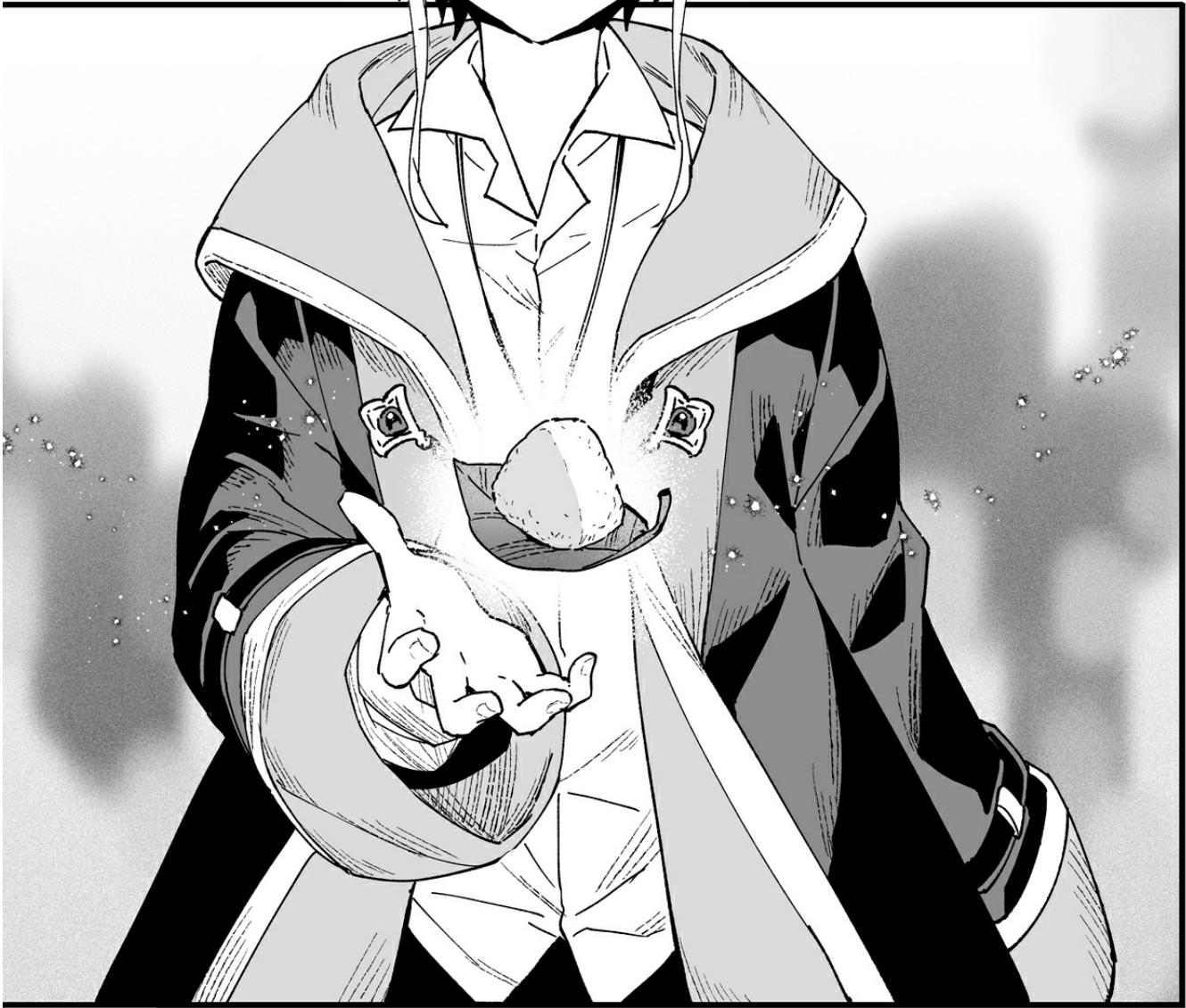
"About compensation..."

"Nah, I already told ya, I don't need any."

"Sure, sure. Okay then, how about you just try this?"

"What is it? A new Yuto culinary creation? Well, if you say so—"

Seeing the white lump I took out of my inventory, Tagosack went completely still. Then, gingerly, she took the onigiri from my hand.



“Hey hey hey! You—!”

“Heh heh heh. How 'bout it? Are you surprised?”

“Course I am! It's a rice ball! A salted rice ball!”

The moment after Tagosack's inadvertent shout, the surroundings went dead silent, and everyone turned their eyes towards us. No exaggeration. *Every* single player in the area was looking at us, wide-eyed. They weren't reprimanding us for being loud, and they didn't look upset either. Rather, I couldn't sense any emotion from them. Maybe they were focusing on listening. But those emotionless gazes of theirs were a little scary.

“...”

The crowd of players had simultaneously gone silent and surrounded me and Tagosack. They weren't really getting up close, though—they were just staring at us while keeping their distance... I'd never thought blank expressions could be so intense.

“Ah...”

“Oh...”

This isn't good. I had gotten so excited over the seaweed, I had completely forgotten about our surroundings. Tagosack must have realized what she'd done too. Her expression had stiffened.

Even I, who was used to people's stares, couldn't ignore ones as fierce as these!

“S-Sorry, Yuto.”

“It's okay, I let my guard down too much too.”

Then, gradually, murmurs rippled through the crowd.

“Rice ball?”

“Rice?”

“Rice!”

“Rice, rice!”

“Whoa! Riiice!”

For some reason, I was reminded of a scene in a film I saw a long time ago, in which an explorer was surrounded by the tribal inhabitants of an unexplored land.

“Wh-What should we do, Tagosack?”

“Uh, well... Should we run? Though since the event’s startin’ soon, we can’t really go far.”

“Either way, we can’t really escape from here.”

Since the crowd was for some reason keeping a certain amount of distance from us, we weren’t in danger of being mobbed by them. However, we had no path to escape. They were surrounding us on all sides. I understood how they felt, though. If I were in their place and hadn’t gotten my hands on rice yet, I would probably be doing the same thing.

They probably weren’t trying to intimidate us by surrounding us or anything. They were just trying to get as close as they could to observe and find out even a sliver of information.

A man’s voice broke that strange atmosphere.

“Everyone, I understand how you feel. However, you are bothering Yuto and his friend here.”

The owner of that voice was a handsome, purple-haired man. Was it just my imagination, or did I actually see his white teeth sparkle? It was Siegfried, the Purple-Haired Adventurer, who appeared. He was among the throng of people, but he stood out on top of his white horse.

As soon as he started moving, the throng automatically parted and made a path for him. *Is that what dignity can achieve? Nah, maybe people are just scared of standing in front of that giant horse, game or not.*

“It has been a while, Yuto. The people here have no ill intentions, of course. I hope you can forgive them.”

“Sure, I get it.”

Siegfried was the same as ever, intervening in a situation like this with a smile.

Also, his invigorating demeanor left everyone with dumbfounded looks on their faces. I would have expected his sort of type to be more disliked, but there was no one around jeering at him or anything. Siegfried had a number of accomplishments, and everywhere he went, he role-played as a knight, helping out everyone, player and NPC alike. People must have expected this from him. I wasn't surprised.

This was my chance to calm the situation, though, even just a little.

"Hey, so, I sold the information about rice to the Quick-Eared Cats, so it's probably up for sale already, okay?"

The instant I said that, the crowd of people started freaking out. There were even some people who were about to rush out of the crowd and then stopped themselves. They probably realized that, even though they wanted to get to the Cats ASAP, if they did that, they wouldn't make it back in time for the event.

But that should have settled things a bit, right? No, they were still looking at me. *What do I do?* As I worried over it, someone else called out to me.

"Silver-Haired!"

"Huh? Oh, hey, Fuka."

"Been a while!"

Fuka, the Chef, was running down the path Sieg had made. And a few other people I recognized were with her.

"Asuka, Usami, and Ishida are with you too, huh?"

They were all Chefs like Fuka. They had really helped me out at the flower-viewing party and the tea party, and I had even exchanged some recipes with them.

The ones that appeared along with Fuka weren't just the Cooks either. I also saw the high schooler party catching up from behind: Tsuyoshi, Takayuki, Hinako, Cerulean, and Ivan. I was surprised to see that they had formed a team with the Chef players. I guess they were connected in some way without my knowing. However, before I could greet them, Fuka came up close to me.

Fuka, your eyes are scary! I guess she can't help it, considering her position.

“So?! Rice! Do you still have rice?”

“Huh?”

“Rice, I said! Rice!”

“Huh? Uh, I mean, a little.”

Losing to Fuka’s forcefulness, I ended up answering without even thinking. The moment after I did, an even louder commotion than before broke out.
Shoot, I should have said I didn’t have any!

“...You want some?”

“Yeah!”

Fuka’s eyes sparkled as she looked at me. This girl wasn’t paying any attention to anything around her, huh? She was just acting on the simple thought of “I want rice!”

That’s fine. If rice is what she wants, rice is what she gets! If that’s what it takes to get the attention and envy off me, so be it!

Oh, but...if I gave Fuka rice here, wouldn’t the other players come swarming over too? I mulled it over for a moment, when another voice came calling out from behind Fuka.

“Huh? Rice? Might there be rice here?”

Here was another kid who couldn’t read the room. It was the Swordfighter with short, red hair—Tsuyoshi. He was the poor kid whom people suspected of being a couple with his friend Takayuki, the Lancer with blue hair parted in the middle.

He was looking at me with eyes as sparkly as Fuka’s.

“...Yes.”

“Wow! So there *is* rice in the game! Does it taste good?”

“It’s all right.”

“I’m so interested! Do you have any more?”

This guy was something else, and I wasn’t the only one that thought so. His

friends, and even the other players watching our interaction from the sidelines, seemed to have the same feeling. Even if he wasn't exactly an amateur when it came to games, he didn't seem super well-informed, which probably explained his naive behavior.

That said, Tsuyoshi's words sprang an idea in my mind. This was my only choice if I was going to bring the situation under control.

"I do have onigiri on me, but not very many."

In actuality, what I didn't have many of were successful onigiri. Since I couldn't make much use of my failed dishes during the event, I had left them back at my home base. *Huh?* Speaking of which, I thought I had placed those failed foods in my inventory box? Olea and Mamori couldn't have put them out at my unmanned stand, could they? No way, not even they would sell failed items.

"Silver-Haired?"

"Oh right, sorry. Let's see, I don't have a lot, and they're just test products. They're not really good enough to sell. So, since it was kind of fate that I met up with you, my friends, I'll gift them to you."

Did this seem deliberate on my part? But by saying I only had onigiri on me—and a few at that—I should have created some appeal. Tsuyoshi fell right for my hammy performance.

"Really? I can have some?"

"Yeah. I have just enough to give to my friends that are here now!"

"Woo-hoo! Score!"

Sorry, Tsuyoshi. I utilized your innocence.

"Here, it's grilled onigiri."

"Sweet, thanks!"

"How about you, Ivan?" I asked my fellow Tamer friend, Ivan, as I held out another onigiri. I didn't see his monsters with him now, but he was probably planning on summoning them based on the situation.

“You sure? This is pretty valuable.”

“Only if *you* want it.”

“R-Right...”

Ivan seemed to understand what I meant. He took a brief look around him and saw that the other players were staring at Tsuyoshi.

“What should I do...?”

“So, what’ll it be? If you want it, shouldn’t you just take it?”

“Urgh! Adults are so sneaky...!”

“Heh heh heh. That’s what being an adult is all about. Well, if you don’t want it, then—”

“I’ll take it!”

Ivan’s interest in the onigiri must have won out—he quickly took the one I was about to put away. Everyone else did the same. They each took an onigiri in the end, bitter smiles on their faces.

“Oh, this is an interesting flavor. What ingredients did you use?”

“I could eat my fill of this!”

“I expected nothing less, Yuto! It’s delicious!”

“Oh, it comes with a buff!”

Excellent. The surrounding players now started looking elsewhere besides me. Now, we’d share the likelihood of being barraged by questions in the middle of the event. As I chuckled to myself, Asuka approached me.

“Um, for payment...”

“Oh, no. I don’t need anything.”

I felt like I wanted to thank them instead. Did my face betray that feeling? Maybe Asuka had guessed at her and the others’ impending misfortune. Realizing that it wouldn’t be strange for her to face an onslaught of questions during the event, she looked up to the sky as if praying for help. But then, it seemed she quickly resolved herself for it.

“...Okay. Thanks for this.”

You don't have to look so grim... Although, thinking of what was to come, that probably wasn't an overreaction on her part.

“It's all for the onigiri...!”

“O-Oh, yeah. Sorry.”

No, really. I am.

After I was done distributing the onigiri, that strained atmosphere softened a bit. However, the unpleasant stares of the other players persisted. *I knew it, it's not going to be easy to be freed from this!*

The thing that disrupted that restless atmosphere was an announcement from the devs.

“The raid boss event will commence in five minutes. You will now be transported to a playing field specially prepared for the event.”

Everyone seemed to suddenly remember that we were just about to start the raid boss event. They all hastily went back to their preparations.

I-I'm saved! I sighed with relief, and immediately after, a screen popped up asking me if I wanted to join the event. I selected “Yes” without hesitation.

Then, the scenery in front of me started to become distorted. The effect made it feel like I was actually warping. Evidently, I was being teleported. Then, my vision faded to black. Before I could even be alarmed, the scenery around me changed. I was in an unfamiliar forest. It wasn't like I was familiar enough with the forests in the game to say “Oh, this is *that* forest” after a quick look, so it was possible I was in a forest I knew.

“Umm, where are we...?”

“Mmm?”

“Growl!”

Olto and Bear Bear were excited over the sudden change in scenery. *All right, my monsters are with me.*

This looked like a small clearing in the middle of the dense forest. However, a

wall of light surrounded the area, which we apparently couldn't cross. The reason I knew that was because Rick and Fau didn't hesitate to charge straight at the wall. They bounced back with a *boing!*

"Chirp chirp!"

"Aye!"

Thankfully, they didn't take any damage...but you guys, don't be so reckless.

My other monsters were also surveying the clearing with deep interest.

"Hey, everyone, don't go moving around on your own, okay?"

As soon as I told them that, a voice abruptly called out to me.

"Oh? Is that you, Silver-Haired?"

"Huh? Kokuten?"

When I turned to look behind me, there was Kokuten, the frontline player who had been super helpful during the last event. He was also with his other party members.

"It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"Yeah. So you guys are participating in this too, huh?"

"Well, it is a raid boss, after all."

Come to think of it, Kokuten had said that he and his party were playing the game so they could have fun fighting against monsters. A raid boss battle must have been the kind of event they couldn't pass up. It looked like we'd been sent to the same area by coincidence.

"Anyway, you looked to be having a hard time earlier."

"Y-You saw that?"

"It was hard to miss something as conspicuous as that."

"Ha...ha ha..."

I should have guessed. I was a little afraid of what the end of the event would be like. As I cradled my head, another player hesitantly came up to talk to me.

"Um, excuse me? You're Silver-Haired, and the chief of the Monster Hunting

Division, right?”

“Monster Hunting Division? Are they talking about you, Kokuten?”

“Ah, that’s right. Our clan is called the Monster Hunting Division. I’m the clan master.”

“Whoa, you made a clan?”

“Yes. How would you like to join, Silver-Haired? The only requirement to join is that you be a working adult.”

He seemed confident that I was a working adult. Though I didn’t really mind whether or not my IRL status as an office worker was exposed or not. There were even some people who just let that kind of information slip during small talk.

Regardless of that, I decided to decline.

“I don’t want to have to feel like I’m in the office even in game.”

“Ha ha, I understand. However, we’re pretty laid-back, so if you change your mind, just let me know.”

“I’ll do that.”

I liked that about Kokuten—he wasn’t very pushy. He seemed like an adult that really understood when to quit.

“So, I guess because of our clan name, people started calling me the chief.”

“Gotcha. So you’re the chief of the Monster Hunting Division.”

Even while I was speaking with Kokuten, I was still being vigilant of my surroundings.

It looked like as many as thirty players had been summoned to this clearing. Kokuten must have been the highest-ranking player among all of us. At some point, other players started gathering, with Kokuten in the center. With this being the case, it didn’t seem like we’d have any tension with people fighting over being the leader, so I didn’t have to worry about that. Though one problem did remain.

“Excuse me, Silver-Haired?”

“Yes?”

“Earlier, you know... You mentioned rice, didn’t you?”

So that’s what you’re interested in, huh? But while I was planning how to respond, they suddenly started getting all flustered and panicked.

“Ahhh, I’m sorry, I’m sorry! You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to!”

“Huh?”

“I’m sorry! Really! Never mind, forget I asked!”

What was that all of a sudden? If I had to describe their expression, it was like they were scared. Or even horrified. *I didn’t do anything, though?*

Maybe it was the surrounding players they were scared of? After all, it seemed more like they were apologizing to the people around us rather than to me. Though despite there being some players looking at us, it didn’t seem like they were trying to intimidate the question asker or anything.

“Um, it’s not that I don’t want to tell you, but since I sold the information to the Cats, I can’t say too much about it. Sorry.”

“Oh, not at all, I’m the one who’s sorry.”

“R-Right.”

“Seriously, I’m sorry!”

Hmm, they must act like this towards everyone. After all, I didn’t know why they would be scared of me. In fact, since I was surrounded by adorable monsters, there was nothing intimidating about me at all. I could understand if they were to look down on me for being a small-fry Tamer or a weakling who only gathered cute monsters, but I could see no reason to be scared of me.

“We will now proceed with the explanation of the event.”

“Oh, it’s starting.”

Oh well. No use thinking about it. Let’s just enjoy this event.

“At present, you have been divided into groups of thirty players—”

To summarize, the thirty people gathered in this spot had been randomly

selected to be put in a party together. Apparently, other players were somewhere else in the same playing field and were on standby just as we were.

Also, three hours from now, a boss was going to appear at the base of the rocky mountain in the center of the field. The boss was going to slowly move south from where it spawned, so we were supposed to defeat it to stop its progression. If the boss crossed a set line, we'd fail the event.

I could tell right away where the mountain was. Even from where we all were, the tall, skinny, almost towerlike mountain was in clear view.

It probably didn't take that long to get there normally. However, there was a reason this vast forest had been prepared specifically as the playing field. This field was filled with materials limited to the event, which you could use to make items that would be helpful in the boss fight.

Additionally, a little south of the rocky mountain was an abandoned fortress, which we could use as a base. However, being an abandoned, run-down fortress, it couldn't be used until it was repaired. So basically, we needed lumber and building stones.

"I doubt we'll be useful in battle, so should we try focusing on collecting materials?"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Aye!"

Fortunately, Rick, Olto, and Fau were here. We should be able to manage.

As we were discussing our game plan, the start of the event was signaled and the boundary wall encircling us disappeared.

"It's started, but what's the difficulty level of this forest?"

I was focused on collecting materials, but were there monsters in the forest? Were they at a level we could handle on our own? While I was pondering for a bit, I heard a cry of warning from Rick in my ear.

"Chirp chirp!"

Apparently a monster had already appeared. I saw Rick charging towards the trees at full speed.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Graaaah!”

The enemy was a lizard, apparently—a komodo dragon with a bright-red body. With such a vibrant red color, the gigantic lizard was easily visible even among the trees and grass, and it looked unexpectedly powerful. Honestly, I was even scared seeing it from afar. If that was true for someone like me, who was actually fine with reptiles, then someone who disliked them would probably scream.

“Urgh, Rick! Be careful!”

If this were a real-life situation, you’d definitely be its dinner! However, it turned out I needn’t have worried. The lizard was extremely weak. Rick’s single preemptive strike had defeated it. This was an event in celebration of unlocking Zone Five, after all, and taking into consideration the second-wave players too, they weren’t going to deploy any super strong enemies. At this level, my monsters and I should be able to explore with just our party.

“All right, what’d we get?”

We’d already been made aware of the fact that we wouldn’t be getting XP during the event, meaning the only benefit of defeating monsters was getting the drops.

Name: Event Iron Ore

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 10★

Effect: Ingredient. Disappears at end of event.

“Let’s see, looks like an event-only item.”

So this was how we obtained the materials.

“Silver-Haired, did something appear?” Kokuten, who had been watching from the side, called out to me.

“Yeah, this thing.”

“I see... We might be able to use this to repair the fortress, right?”

“Probably.”

“What are you going to do now, Silver-Haired?”

“Me? I figured I won’t be able to do much against the boss, so maybe I could gather materials and make some items that would help in the fight.”

“I see.”

“What about you guys?”

“Well, I don’t think we’d be much help in gathering... So I guess we’ll hunt monsters.”

While I was chatting with Kokuten and his party, for some reason other players also came gathering around us. The event had started, but it seemed like no one had left the clearing.

“Pardon me, but what should the rest of us do?”

Well, I think you can do whatever you want at this point... Why are you asking me? At least ask Kokuten.

Still, why wasn’t anyone acting on their own initiative? Was there a chance that we’d happened to gather a bunch of people bad at asserting themselves?

The other possibility was that they were second-wave players. If that was the case, it wouldn’t have been odd for them to ask for directions from a top player like Kokuten. The reason they’d come to me must have been because I had defeated a monster. Either that, or they were scared of talking to Kokuten directly. Clad in their solid-looking armor, Kokuten and his group really gave off the strong impression of being top players. Though if you actually talked to them, you’d see they were really nice, humble people.

In contrast, my appearance was weak as heck. It must have been really easy to come up and talk to me.

“I was planning on doing some gathering while I explore this area.”

“Huh? Wh-What about us?”

“It’s not like they told us we all had to do the same thing, so I think we each

can do what we want to, right?”

It seemed like these people wanted all of us—who were randomly assembled—to act together as a group. How should I deal with this? If they were all a bunch of second-wave players, then I could understand if they didn’t know what to do during an event. I would feel kind of sorry for them if I just abandoned them.

Wait, was this my chance to act as a seasoned mentor? Could I get away with acting cool and imparting my event knowledge here?

No, no. Let’s not. Kokuten was here, after all. I’d be way too embarrassed to act all self-important towards rookies in front of a top player.

“The monsters don’t seem that strong, so you can go gather materials or you can fight. Whatever you want to do.”

That’s what I told them, but naturally no one made a move to act and they just stood there looking uneasy.

“B-But...”

Stop trying to read my expression, I meant what I said... Oh, right! It had completely slipped my mind, but I was one of the ones who had triggered this event!

Tagosack had told me there were a lot of people participating in this raid event who knew about that, and it seemed like these players were among those. They must have been under the misunderstanding that I was managing the players participating in the event. Thinking of it that way, then, that explained why these players had come looking to me specifically for direction.

“You don’t have to worry about me. It’s not like I’m the leader or anything.”

“Ah-haaah...”

So they *were* indecisive players after all.

“How about this: those of you who don’t know what to do, why don’t you come with us to the fortress?”

Kokuten thankfully wrapped things up. No wonder he was a clan master. In the end, everyone besides me and my monsters went to follow Kokuten. It

looked like I was right—they wanted to ask for Kokuten’s instructions more than mine.

But, you know, I did make one misstep.

“Are they really all going to the fortress...?”

While I watched Kokuten and the others leave, I wavered over what to do next. After all, I had also been thinking about going in the direction of the fortress. But if I were to go near there now, I’d definitely run into them again. And since we had just parted ways, that’d be super awkward.

“I don’t have a choice... I’ll just go to the fortress later. First, let’s start gathering materials.”

“Mm-mm!”

“Aye!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“There might be some fishing and mining nodes here. Reflet and Drimo, I’ll count on you for those.”

“Hum!”

“Squeak!”

Seeing the other monsters answer me with a salute, Bear Bear spoke up impatiently. They hopped up and down next to me, as if saying, “I’m here too!”

“Growl! Grooowl!”

“Don’t worry, I have a job for you too, Bear Bear. I don’t know what sorts of monsters are going to appear. Do your best protecting everyone.”

“Growl!”

In fact, depending on the enemies that appeared, we might have more than gathering on our hands. The role of guard was going to be essential—or so it should be.

“All right, so let’s head out! Let’s head in the opposite direction of the fortress for now.”

At the very latest, we would go there before the boss appeared.

We eagerly set out into the forest, and then immediately spotted some unfamiliar grass. Among the green weeds, there were some shoots of grass of a clearly different color that resembled red spring onions.

Name: Bird Repellent Grass

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 10★

Effect: An item hated by birds. Turns into trash thirty minutes after collecting. Disappears at end of event.

So it's bird repellent. Did that mean the raid boss this time was going to be a bird-type monster? Or maybe there were bird enemies? It would be kind of scary if things turned out like that one Hitchcock movie I saw a while ago.

"Well, oh well. Let's gather a little more, and then I'll test out my Concoct and Alchemy skills on them!"

"Mm!"

Following that, we walked around collecting more Bird Repellent Grass. Since there were areas where it grew in clusters, I was quickly able to obtain ten of them.

"Should I check out the recipes?"

Thinking that, I searched recipes and I found I was able to make the item called "Bird Repellent Medicine (Liquid)" using three of the Bird Repellent Grasses.

Name: Bird Repellent Medicine (Liquid)

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 10★

Effect: Deals damage on contact with a bird. Disappears at end of event.

Evidently you could deal damage to a bird if you threw the liquid medicine in this small bottle at it.

“Should I make a bunch of this medicine?”

Honestly, it seemed like it would be difficult to hit a bird with such a small bottle...but since I didn't have much else to do, I decided to just go ahead and keep making them.

I passed by other players along the road, but there was no one among them I knew. Based on the direction they were going, it looked like most players were headed towards the fortress. Unfortunately that meant I couldn't avoid standing out, since I was going the opposite direction. People were seriously staring at me. Well, nothing I could do about that.

I kept on walking as I had been, and after a short time, I arrived at the edge of the event field. It had probably been about fifteen minutes since the start of the event. I knew it was the edge of the field because of the transparent wall there. Past the forest stretched a lush grassy plain, but I couldn't step foot onto it.

“An invisible wall, huh?”

“Aye!”

“Don't be mad. It's not like the devs did that on purpose.”

“Yuh-aye!”

“I know, I know. I'm sure banging your nose hurt.”

“Aye...”

Fau, who had been triumphantly flying in front, had smacked into the wall and was now fuming with anger.

“At any rate, this is a dead end, huh? The field is more confined than I thought. Or maybe it's actually spacious considering this field is only being used for a raid boss battle?”

If the boss was the type that would try to run away, that would be pretty annoying.

“There really is nothing in that grassy field.”

The dense grass was all the same height with no undulations. Putting it bluntly, it was like the devs hadn't bothered to put any effort into it. It must have just been for background purposes.

"Squeak squeak!"

"Oh? What's up, Drimo?"

"Squeak!"

While I was staring at the empty field, Drimo came calling for me. It seemed like he had discovered something. He was pulling on the hem of my robe. I followed after him and saw something jet black between the forest trees. When I approached it, I realized it was a rock.

The rock mass was a little shorter than the surrounding trees, and it looked to be about five meters in diameter. It was clearly not just part of the landscape.

"Squeak squeak!"

"Ack! Drimo, wait a sec!"

I was about to carefully inspect the rock, but Drimo dashed towards it before I could stop him. Then, continuing the momentum of his dash, he jumped up onto the black rock.

"Oh, crap! Guys, be on your guard!"

"Mmm!"

"..."

"..."

Olto and I stood ready on alert, but nothing happened. In the silence, only Drimo's "Squeak squeak!" could be heard as he climbed up the rock. I thought something would have been triggered, but the rock was just a regular old mining node.

"Squeak! Squeak!"

Having finally arrived at the summit, Drimo put his all into swinging his pickax. When I checked my inventory, I saw I had obtained more event-only items.

Name: Bird Repellent Stone

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 10★

Effect: An item hated by birds. Turns into trash thirty minutes after mining. Disappears at end of event.

Name: Bird Repellent Ore

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 10★

Effect: An item hated by birds. Turns into trash thirty minutes after mining. Disappears at end of event.

The Bird Repellent Stone could be turned into an item called Bird Repellent Medicine (Powdered), the powdered version of Bird Repellent Medicine (Liquid). For throwing at a flying enemy, it would probably be easier to use than the liquid version.

I couldn't do anything with the Bird Repellent Ore. Apparently you needed some smithing skills like Smelting. The same went for the event-only iron ore.

"Dang, maybe I should have brought Himka here..."

I even considered whether I should just learn Smithing on the spot, but I didn't have any smithing tools either way.

"I'll just put it away in my inventory for now."

There were still thirty minutes to go before the item expired. In that time, I could probably happen across another player that had Smithing. And if I didn't, then I would summon Himka.

"Growl?"

"...Don't worry about it. I'm counting on you to be our guard."

"Growl!"

Sorry, Bear Bear. If I end up calling in Himka, it'll be you I'm switching out. After all, the enemies were scarce, and they were super weak too. Moreover, it seemed like gathering was important here.

“There’s probably other stuff we can collect, so let’s keep walking around as much as we can.”

“Hum!”

“Oh, yeah. If there was a river or a lake around, Reflet could also participate...”

“Humm!”

“I get it, I get it. I’ll look for one! Stop pulling me!”

Reflet, wanting to participate too, led me along for twenty minutes. We walked clockwise around the perimeter of the field. Gathering and mining nodes popped up along the way. Then, we were able to reach what Reflet had been hoping for—water. What we found was just a small spring, though.

“Humm!”

“Ah—hey! You don’t even know what could be in there!”

“Hum?”

“Don’t look at me like that... Look, the monsters so far have been weak, but that doesn’t mean that’ll be the case here too. Let’s be cautious.”

“Hum.”

She seemed to get it; she was nodding repeatedly. I slowly approached the spring with Reflet, who was walking on her tiptoes. Then, we peered towards the middle of the spring from the outer edge.

“It looks pretty deep.”

“Hum.”

We couldn’t see the bottom.

“I don’t know about a spring. Maybe it’s more of a large well?”

“Hum...”

“Hmm. My Presence Detection isn’t detecting any monsters. Guess it’s time to dive in?”

“Hum!”

Reflet was all for that. However, the spring was narrow, so we'd have to go in carefully.

"Olto, can you keep looking around for stuff?"

"Mmm."

"Let's go, Reflet."

"Humm!"

And so, Reflet and I jumped into the spring together. We dived down gradually as I checked the walls just in case for any items, through the moss and algae growing there. However, in the end we reached the bottom without finding anything.

Was there nothing down here either? I really didn't think there would be a spring placed here so ostentatiously just for there to be nothing in it, but...maybe this was just meant to be a source of water to be used for concocting items?

"Hum... Hum!"

While I hadn't been able to find anything, Reflet started tapping energetically on my shoulder over and over. Then, as if saying, "Look over there!" she pointed to the bottom of the spring. When I looked more carefully, I saw several objects that looked like white stones buried there. I dug them out and returned to the surface.

"*Phew!* Drimo, Bear Bear, give me a lift!"

"Squeak!"

"Growl!"

As they were slowly dragging me up, Reflet also came back up. Unlike me, however, she rose to the surface and used the momentum to leap out of the water, sticking a clean landing.

I managed to pull myself back onto land and then immediately took out the white stone I had found at the bottom of the spring from my inventory, since Reflet was looking at me expectantly. *She doesn't take a break, does she?*

“Let’s appraise this thing.”

Name: Bird Attractant Stone

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 10★

Effect: Draws the attention of birds. Turns into trash thirty minutes after collecting. Disappears at end of event.

It wasn’t a bird repeller, but a bird attractor. Got it, so this had the effect of gathering birds.

“What can I make from this—Bird Attractant Feed? It looks like it’s not medicine this time, but bait to lure birds.”

Well, it had been hard to get, so it had to be a useful item. Afterwards, we continued walking and collecting materials, when I spotted the marker I had been eagerly hoping for.

“A logging node!”

That was the first one today. Did that mean there weren’t many logging nodes here? I quickly got to work hitting my ax against the node. The item I obtained was lumber with a name and effect I had already grown used to: bird repellent.

“It seems like we can make some building material if we gather enough of these, but I feel there are too few logging nodes around.”

I had been walking around for so long and this was the first one I’d found, after all. There were way too few of them. If that was the case, it seemed like they weren’t meant to be used to repair the fortress, but to be processed with Woodworking instead. Maybe I could make some equippable accessory with a bird-repelling effect.

“Hmm, I want to do this properly...”

This was valuable material, after all. I decided to summon a monster that could handle this, just this once. There wasn’t a very high chance I’d be lucky enough to run into someone I knew with a high-level Woodworking skill, after

all.

My gaze automatically shifted to Bear Bear.

“Growl?”

Damn it. Those are the eyes of someone who wasn't expecting to be switched out!

“...Sorry!”

“G-Growl?”

“Return, Bear Bear! Come out, Sakura!”

“...!”

I'll have to apologize to Bear Bear later. I'm sure they're mad.

“...?”

“It's nothing, Sakura. You think you can make something with this wood?”

“...♪”

I explained the situation to the just-summoned Sakura and handed her the lumber. She accepted the wood with a happy grin. I guessed it wouldn't be a problem. Sakura started carving the wood right then and there, and after a short amount of time, she had created a round object.

“...!”

“Is this a brooch?”

Name: Bird Repellent Brooch

Rarity: 1 *Quality*: 7★ Durability: 228

Effect: Defense +7. An item hated by birds. Disappears at end of event.

Weight: 1

Its defense was low, but as I'd thought, it came with a bird-repellent effect.

“This is great. Yeah. No matter how you look at it, birds seem to be a major part of this event, so this can’t hurt to have. Sakura, can you make more of these for now?”

“...!”

While I was checking out the brooch Sakura had made, Olto came back from what I had assumed was his gathering mission. And he had another player with him.

“Hey. So this is where you were, huh?”

“Huh? Lewin? What are you doing here?”

The person Olto was leading along was the dwarven Blacksmith of the Quick-Eared Cats, Lewin.

“I heard you were goin’ the opposite way of the abandoned fortress. I thought maybe you’d found somethin’, so I went lookin’ for you. Then, wouldn’t ya know, I bumped into Olto here.”

“Oh, really?”

Lewin being here was a huge help. Now the Bird Repellent Ore wouldn’t go to waste.

“You’re just the person I need!”

“Am I?”

Now that I had Lewin, who was being helplessly pulled along by Olto, I decided to show him the materials I had obtained so far: the Bird Repellent Ore and the Event Iron Ore. Lewin had also apparently gotten hold of the same items, so he told me how to use them.

“Oh, so you can combine these two?”

“That’s right. You can make a Bird Repellent Ingot from the Bird Repellent Ore. And this ore can be turned into the Event Iron Ingot.”

They could be used individually, but the Bird Repellent Ingot was brittle, and the Event Iron Ingot was just iron. Combining the two together, however, would produce an Iron Ingot with the bird-repelling effect.

“If you have some more of these, I’ll make them into ingots.”

“Oh, you sure?”

“No problem. In exchange, I want ya to do somethin’ with the grass I have here, sonny.”

“Sure, you can leave that to me!”

I handed over the ores to Lewin, and in an instant the ingots were completed. As usual, he was quick at his work. That said, he actually seemed to have the same impression of me as I had of him. He was nodding in admiration at the medicine I had made. I guess it was always something of a marvel to watch someone work at a craft that was different from yours.

“But what can the ingots be used for?”

“Even if I made ’em into weapons, they’d still basically just be iron. I don’t think I can make somethin’ too strong with it. So I s’pose it’s meant to be building material.”

“Ah, right. To repair the fortress.”

“That’s my guess.”

I could understand that. Even though they had an antibird effect, having iron weapons wouldn’t be much of an advantage at this point. Furthermore, there was a high chance the material would expire at the end of the event, so it’d be inefficient to use it for making weapons.

“By the way, where’d ya get your hands on that brooch there?”

“Sakura made this out of wood from here.”

“Ya found a loggin’ node?! Where?!”

“Let’s see... Should be over there.”

“Many thanks! Could ya show the way?”

“Oh, you don’t have to thank me,” I responded. Working together to gather materials was necessary to clear the event, after all.

I led Lewin to where the logging node was. It hadn’t disappeared, so Lewin was able to successfully get lumber from it too. Immediately after that, I

received a shocking revelation.

“Oho? This does seem good for making a brooch.”

“Lewin, you can craft with wood?”

“Course I can. I make staffs, don’t I?”

“...Dammit!”

“Wh-What’s the matter?! Why’d you curl up in a ball all of a sudden?!”

I didn’t have to replace Bear Bear with Sakuraaaaa!

“Y-Yuto?”

“Sorry. I was just regretting a choice I made.”

“I-I see. Don’t let it get ya down, you hear me? It’s best not to let things you can’t change get to ya.”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry for scaring you.”

Lewin was right. There was no use in regretting things I couldn’t undo. Maybe in an effort to help change the topic, Lewin quickly asked about what I would do next.

“What’re your plans now, Yuto?”

“Hmm, I guess I was going to keep going around the perimeter a bit more, and then head to the fortress?”

There was still time, and there was probably a spot I could get more Bird Attractant Stones.

“Bird Attractant Stone? You found somethin’ like that?”

“Yeah. But they’re probably going to be hard to get.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because they’re in deep water.”

“Hrm...”

From what I recalled, Lewin couldn’t swim. He even got scared getting in the waist-high water of the canal. It would probably be impossible for him to dive

into that spring. He said it was because he couldn't swim in real life, so there was no chance of him doing so in game without getting the Swimming skill.

After briefly discussing our plans, we decided to keep moving together. We both made up for what the other lacked.

"Besides, I think bein' with you will be interestin', Yuto."

"Interesting?"

Oh, he meant being with my cute monsters. *Heh heh heh, I get it. Lewin actually loves cute things! Especially small animals!* Even now, his gaze was following Rick.

Lewin and I walked through the woods, gathering items as we went. As we were doing so, I saw someone approaching us. Apparently there was at least one other player who wasn't heading towards the fortress—a strong one at that, as evidenced by the two komodo dragons that he defeated the instant they leaped out in front of him.

Seriously though, his moves were incredible. He dodged the komodo dragon's first surprise attack with a backflip, and then took one of them down with a follow-up roundhouse kick. Then, he performed a triangle jump by kicking off a tree—no, he kicked the tree twice, so was it a square jump?—bringing him into a flying kick to take down the second enemy.

His acrobatics were off the charts. Also, all his moves were shockingly fast. They would definitely be impossible to pull off in real life. Watching him, I couldn't help but wish I was as strong of a player. I doubted I'd be able to do a cartwheel, much less a backflip, even using the game's assist functions.

While we were watching him, he also seemed to notice us. He was clearly walking straight for us. Then, as we closed the distance between us, a surprised look appeared on his face. *What's up with him?*

"What? A-Aren't you Silver-Haired?!"

"Who are you?"

"Is this for real? Are you really him?"

It seemed like he knew who I was, but I had never seen him before. He was a

showy young man with bluish-purple hair. Were those small stars painted under his eyes a fashion trend or something? His appearance really stood out, so I felt like I would have remembered him if we had met before.

“Ah, sorry, sorry. I’m just stoked about running into a celebrity.”

“Celebrity? Are you talking about me?”

“Yeah, dude! As someone playing a similar class, I’ve got mad respect for you. Oh right, I’m Sakkyun, a Summoner. Nice to meet you!”

He gave me a casual salute as he introduced himself. *A Summoner, huh? I’m kind of interested.*

But then I realized something.

“Wait wait wait. You’re a Summoner?”

“I sure am, why?”

“With those moves? You’re not a Fighter or something?”

He’d shown off so much skill instakilling those komodo dragons, and he was a *Summoner*?

“Oh yeah, I’m training my melee skills too,” Sakkyun said nonchalantly.

Seriously...? We both summon monsters, but he’s completely different from me... C-Could it be that I just have devastatingly terrible motor skills? But my PE grades were always a little above average!

“Huh? That you, Lewin? You two together, then?”

“Fancy seein’ you, Sakkyun. Yuto, this guy’s a bit ostentatious, but he’s not a bad sort.”

“Yup, that’s me! The ostentatious Sakkyun!”

Yeah, he sure was. But I didn’t dislike him. He seemed like a free spirit. I sort of admired him for that.

“But anyway, this is perfect. I have a favor to ask you, Lewin.”

“...You want me to make something with your ores?”

“Bull’s-eye!”

Sakkyun made finger guns with both hands and pointed them at Lewin. He must not have had Smelting either.

Should I use this opportunity to invite them to form a team? I was interested in meeting other Summoners besides Mattsun, and I was curious about Sakkyun having such insane moves while having a similar job class to mine. Maybe even I could someday be able to pull off those superhuman moves, like the top players I saw in videos did.

“Hey, Sakkyun, would you want to join us?”

“Huh? You sure that’s cool?”

“Yeah, as long as you don’t mind, then definitely.”

“That’s my line, man! Abso-freaking-lutely! Woo-hoo!”

Despite his frivolous appearance and behavior, Sakkyun really did seem like a decent guy. He was bowing his head and smiling. By teaming up with us, Sakkyun had gained crafting abilities, while we had gained fighting ability. This was truly a win-win relationship.

With the flashy, dependable Sakkyun in our party, we kept moving. Soon after, we were met with a sight unlike anything we’d seen until now.

“I’m not going crazy, right? That’s a gorilla?”

“It’s pretty massive, huh?”

“Is it a miniboss?”

There, right before our eyes, a brown gorilla lumbered aimlessly around the forest. Even in its slouched posture, it looked to be close to two meters tall.

Lewin had guessed it was a miniboss, but was it really? If it was a boss, then I questioned why it was just ambling around like that.

“Well, in the end we have to choose between runnin’ and fightin’ it. What should we do? ’M on board either way.”

“Hmm, it’s really up to you two,” I said. “Honestly, we don’t know how strong an enemy it is, so I would have just run away from it if I were on my own.”

“I think I wanna try fighting it. If we die, then we get a funny story out of it to

tell people how we died before the boss fight even started, right?”

Lewin seemed to agree with Sakkyun. “As a member of the Quick-Eared Cats, I feel like I want to challenge it too. But you don’t need to force yourself, Yuto.”

“That’s true. You don’t gotta worry about us.”

I sighed. “No, I’ll come too.”

Lewin and Sakkyun were completely determined. I couldn’t just flee by myself at this point. Besides, I was the one who had invited Sakkyun to party up in the first place. I couldn’t bounce the second a strong-looking enemy appeared and still call myself a reasonable human being.

“Yo, Silver-Haired’s a man of principle, huh! All right! He knows when to get things done!”

“Oh, not really.”

Sakkyun had already come across as a chatty jokester who didn’t take things seriously, but once we got to know each other he became even chattier and friendlier. I guessed that was to be expected.

“Me and young Olto here will be in the front line. And Sakura will be b’hind us. The rear guard can play things by ear.”

“Got it. Sakkyun, will you take the front line?”

“You know it! All right then, I gotta work hard to show you my good side, Silver-Haired!” Sakkyun declared. Then, he summoned his monsters: a Hard Rock Golem and a Lake Turtle—a tanky golem and a large turtle with a shiny, bluish-black shell.

“These guys’ll be our tanks too. I’ll go in for a hit-and-run attack.”

“Mm-hmm, that should work. It’ll be hard for us to coordinate seein’ as we just threw our party together. Yuto, stay away from the front, got it?”

“You don’t have to tell me.”

And so, with the protection of our dependable front line, we slowly inched towards the gorilla.

“Oog oog oog!”

“Ooga ooga oog!”

“Gah! There’re two of them!” I heard Sakkyun cry from the other side of the golem.

When I took a closer look, I could see that there were in fact two gorillas, and they were running towards us. They weren’t bosses or even unique monsters—they were just regular enemies on the playing field.

“Ooga ooo!”

Holy crap, they’re terrifying! The gorillas, with their brawny muscles and grating vocalizations, were moving towards us at a ferocious speed. It was incredibly intimidating. Unlike me, who was left flustered, Sakkyun reacted immediately.

“Grah! How about this?! Come out, Tama!”

“Graaaaawr!”

Sakkyun summoned another monster. This one was a White Tiger, a tiger with pure-white fur.

“Whoa, what is that?! It’s so cool!”

“It’s a White Tiger. You know the Breeze Kitty enemies at the Air Elemental Gate? This is what they turn into after a few evolutions.”

“Really?! Tamers can’t tame those kittens...”

Unfortunately, Breeze Kitties were exclusive to Summoners. I couldn’t believe they turned into such awesome-looking tigers! Why couldn’t I tame them?!

The summoned White Tiger pounced on one of the gorillas while Sakkyun launched an attack on the other. They must have activated their techniques while the golem was stopping the gorillas’ preemptive strike.

“Take this!”

“Oog?”

“And this and this and this! And thiiiis!”

“Oog ooga oooog...!”

“Whoa! That was awesome! Sakkyun, you’re amazing!” The scene was so impressive I couldn’t help but cheer. I was already surprised to see him lift the gorilla into midair with some uppercut attack, but then he even had a follow-up attack to that. Sakkyun leaped up towards the gorilla, which flailed in the air, then he used both fists to pummel it with blows before finally slamming it to the ground with a forward-roll ax kick.

The attack wiped out the gorilla’s HP gauge, the beast disintegrating into nothing.

Every one of Sakkyun’s moves reminded me of a fighting-game critical. Melee fighters were *not* to be underestimated. If PvP was implemented in the future, there was no way I would stand a chance.

The White Tiger tore the other gorilla to shreds, easily defeating it. Seeing that, Sakkyun muttered awkwardly, “Maybe those were super weak enemies or something?”

It seemed like the gorillas weren’t actually that powerful despite their menacing appearances.

“I think it’s more that you’re just awesome, Sakkyun!”

“Not at all. I’ve still got a long way to go.”

“Says the guy with anomalous monsters,” said Lewin. “This guy here managed to end up a high-ranking player even as a Summoner.”

Just like Mattsun, aka “the Smoky One,” with her Herculean Ogre, Sakkyun had abnormally strong monsters. The White Tiger must have been one of those unusual creatures. It was apparently an evolved form of the Breeze Kitty that came out of a failed Monster Synthesis experiment.

“Moreover, you’re on the very front line, aren’t ya?” said Lewin. “You were the MVP in the raid boss battle for Zone Nine.”

“The players participating in that battle just decided to start calling me that on their own.”

“I heard when the question of who to call MVP came up, everyone agreed unanimously that it should be you.”

So he really is a top player! And with those close-range techniques, he truly is amazing!

Incidentally, his crazy moves were on par with those I had seen in the official videos uploaded of top melee players. So much so that it was unbelievable he was a Summoner.

“I mean, those moves you used to take down that gorilla were awesome! So does training your fighting skills make you move like that?”

“Hm? Oh yeah, I guess so. I think anyone could do that if they trained, probably?” Sakkyun agreed readily. *Is that true, though? In that case, maybe I could also—*

What stopped me from considering learning fighting skills was Lewin’s exasperated expression.

“Hold on, hold on. There’s no way just *anyone* can move like that. This guy even ranked high in the Martial Arts Tournament. It’s not normal!”

“I just got lucky with that. Plus, I’m nothing compared to Silver-Haired, y’know?”

Me? In fact, I didn’t see any way I measured up to Sakkyun. I guess I could win in terms of cuteness of our monsters? But that was really it.

“You say that, but you’re a top-class Summoner...” I protested.

“Huh? No no, like I said, I’m nothing compared to you.”

“No no no. I’m low-level, and I haven’t even made it to the front lines, so that’s not true at all.”

Sakkyun was an elite player even as a Summoner, which was usually considered a weaker class, and even his secondary fighting techniques were top notch. Moreover, he fought on the front lines, and even his name was well-known? He was a *true* top player.

I was jealous. I really couldn’t help but admire a player with such strong combat skills. Should I be trying a little harder? But even if I started training now, his moves were from a whole different dimension... Maybe I would be better off taming more fighting-type monsters.

“Well, all I can do is keep plodding along like I have been,” I said.

“...Lewin?” Sakkyun gasped.

“That’s just how he is.”

“Ha...ha ha...”

After that, we decided to take a five-minute break where we were. Since Sakkyun had summoned the White Tiger, he had exhausted a lot of his MP. He probably didn’t have to go so hard against those gorillas.

I was wondering what we should do about keeping watch, but Lewin spread out a large Protective Mat. It was big enough for the monsters to sit on too. I took out food for my monsters from my inventory and handed it to them.

“Here, Olto.”

“Mmm!”

“And this is for you, Drimo.”

“Squeak.”

“And for Fau...”

My monsters would be okay with that, but what would I have to drink? I was kind of feeling tea over juice.

“Oh right. Let me try that out.”

What came to mind was the fresh herbal tea. I had failed at it before, but maybe I could make it now that I had Botany. Toraus had taught me the recipe. That said, it was extremely easy to make.

“Just need to boil the water, then put in the lemon balm Toraus gave me...”

After that, I just had to wait one minute. That was it. The important part wasn’t the recipe, but having the Botany skill. Anyone could easily make it if they had that skill.

If I just needed weed water, then I could make it by just boiling the tea for longer. You might wonder who would even do that, but weed water was a surprisingly important item. You could use it to make dyes and poisons.

“Is that tea you got there?” asked Sakkyun.

“Yeah. You want some?”

“Absolutely!”

“Is that okay with you, Yuto?” Lewin chimed in.

“It’s really just herbs and water, so it barely costs me anything. Have as much as you want.”

“Then I’ll gladly have some.”

And so, I handed teacups to Lewin and Sakkyun. They were ceramics made by Himka. They hadn’t been painted yet, so they were just plain white, but they were still pretty enough.

Lewin and Sakkyun tasted the fresh herbal tea and voiced their admiration. I gave them some food as well.

“Try this too.”

“Whoa! Is this onigiri?”

“Yeah. They’re kind of odd takes on it, but I want to hear your thoughts.”

The onigiri I handed to each of them were ones I had made using some more daring choices of ingredients.

I gave Sakkyun an onigiri filled with vegetables lightly pickled in fruit vinegar. I thought it would be a good substitute for dried pickled plum or pickled cucumber, but the result was a flavor different from what I was expecting. If anything, it was more like Western-style pickles. It wasn’t bad, but it was questionable enough that it probably wouldn’t sell. But since it did replenish some MP, it would be a pretty good choice for Sakkyun at the moment.

I gave Lewin an Italian-style grilled onigiri that was filled with cheese, tomato, and olive oil. Since I hadn’t used a seasoning like salt, the ingredients ended up clashing more than I’d thought they would. I should have used tomato sauce. This onigiri had the effect of healing HP continuously, which was why I had given it to Lewin, as a front liner.

“How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing, don’t worry about it.”

The flavors of the onigiri weren’t good enough to warrant payment. I was really grateful just hearing their impressions of them.

“These are just test products. Just give me your opinions on them.”

“No no no. Heck no. There’s no way I can eat something so valuable for free.”

“They might be valuable now, but they’ll be put on the market soon.”

“Even so, they’re valuable *now*! All right then, let me give you this in return!”

“Umm... Wait, no. Then *I’d* be getting too much!”

“I don’t have any way to use them.”

In exchange for the onigiri, Sakkyun had, to my surprise, presented me with monster meat he had obtained in Zone Eight. It was Big Pig Meat, currently considered to be the most delicious meat around.

“This is so much meat, though...”

“I’d say it’s an even exchange, wouldn’t you?”

He was sending a transfer request to give me ten pieces of that high-quality meat. *Ten pieces of quality meat for one onigiri made as an experiment? No way.*

“Actually, since the price of the meat’s been going down because of overhunting, maybe ten’s not enough?”

“Wait, hold on. You don’t have to give me any more!”

“Hey now,” Lewin said, interrupting our back-and-forth. “Just go through with the exchange. The rice balls don’t have any price attached to ’em yet, plus both of you seem to be thinkin’ you’re gettin’ somethin’ good out of it.”

There was no use arguing back and forth here, so I supposed I should just accept the transaction. Lewin also gave me some ingots for Himka to use. These were also items from the zones farther ahead, but oh well. I had unexpectedly turned into the Straw Millionaire, just like that old story.

“We don’t have much time, so let’s hurry up and eat.”

“You’re right. Oh yeah, do you need more herbal tea?” I asked Sakkyun.

“Oh yeah, I do,” he responded.

“Here ya go. I definitely don’t need any payment for this. Just tell me what you think.”

While I started preparing some fresh herbal tea again, Sakkyun was doing something strange.

“Sakkyun, what’s with that kind of zazen-style way you’re sitting?”

Unlike Lewin and I, who were sitting cross-legged on top of the mat, Sakkyun had taken out some colorful cloth and was sitting on top of it in a sort of zazen style. We were taking a break right now, so he could have been sitting more comfortably. So I thought, but it seemed his sitting that way wasn’t just for show.

“This is a technique called Simple Meditation.”

From what I remembered, it was a skill that slightly increased the automatic MP recovery rate by just sitting zazen style. In exchange, it slightly lowered your automatic HP recovery rate. The magic classes could also learn a technique called Meditation, but for that, you couldn’t move your body at all.

Since Sakkyun’s skill was “simple,” it wasn’t as restrictive as that, and he could do other things with the top half of his body without disrupting the technique. That was an unexpected convenience. Though naturally, the recovery rate paled in comparison to Meditation.

It was a technique you could learn by leveling up the combat skill Yoga. The cloth he had spread on the ground apparently raised the effect of Yoga skills. Right off the bat, one thing piqued my curiosity.

“Yoga’s a combat skill?”

“Seems so.”

If Yoga was considered a fighting technique, the only thing I could think of was a certain street-fighting Indian man.

“So will you be able to stretch your arms at some point too? Or breathe fire?”

Nah, at the least, you'd probably be able to float in the air or teleport. In actuality, however, the skill didn't allow you to do anything so outrageous.

"As of now, I can learn arts that make me more flexible and correct my acrobatic moves, and also techniques that increase my resistance to status effects, so it really seems like a support skill. Besides that, I can learn submission techniques."

"Ah, so it's that type of skill."

But this was a fantasy world. There was still a possibility that Yoga would be revamped someday.

"If you learn a technique that lets you stretch your arms and legs, please let me know."

"Roger."

Sakkyun responded by giving me a casual salute. We decided to go ahead and exchange friend codes.

"Oh, right. Silver-Haired, you mind if I take a pic?"

"A pic?"

"Yeah! When I friend request people, I like to take a pic of us together. That cool?"

"Oh, sure."

"Sweet! All right then, say "Sup peeps!"

"S-Sup peeps?"

"Ooh nice, I got a good one! I got your famous monsters in there too."

He showed me the picture, and I saw that my monsters behind me had also ended up in the shot. They were all looking at the camera. Even Drimo was right in the corner of the picture. *Did you guys want to have your picture taken?*

"All right, everyone. Say cheese!" I said.

"Mmm!"

"Squeak!"

“...!”

They really didn't seem to mind having their picture taken after all. Even Sakura was striking a pose.



While I was snapping away pics of my monsters, Sakkyun suddenly groaned.

“Hnnn...”

“What’s up? Is there a problem with the screenshot?”

“That’s not it. This is just *too good*,” he said, indicating the cup.

Ah, that’s what he means. The fresh herbal tea really was delicious. I was surprised myself.

“I’ve never had herbal tea before. I’m shocked.”

Sakkyun was apparently the type to rush through eating his food in game. Although he agreed that nothing was better than delicious food, he had no complaints about eating portable foods.

“Maybe I’ll try drinking herbal tea in real life too? Like, haven’t there been herbal teas at the drink bars in most diners lately?”

“Oh yeah, I think you’re right.”

“Man, I’ve been missing out till now.”

However, hearing Sakkyun’s words, Lewin crossed his arms and tilted his head, and said he wasn’t so sure about that.

“I’ve tried drinkin’ herbal tea in real life before, but it wasn’t to my liking.”

“Oh, really? Did you get the cheap kind?”

“Rude. I actually bought a pretty nice one. One of those twenty-pack boxes with several different flavors. But I didn’t think any of them tasted good at all.”

“You like how it tastes in game, though, right?”

“I do.”

That was odd. According to Lewin, there was a surprising number of players who had the same experience.

“There’re some people in my clan too who, after drinkin’ your herbal tea, got crazy into tea in real life, but there are also some who tried it in the real world and said it was bad.”

“Why’s that?”

“We’re still lookin’ into it, but it’s probably because your sense of taste differs between the game and real life.”

The sensations players experienced from various stimuli differed slightly to what they would experience in real life. For example, if feelings of pain or touch surpassed a fixed threshold, they would be reduced by a certain amount, and the same went for players’ sense of taste and hearing as well.

Due to that very slight difference, it was possible for players’ food preferences to change within the game. There were apparently many people who found that a flavor they didn’t like in real life was toned down in the game, and as a result tasted good to them.

“So you’re saying even if herbal tea tastes good to someone in game, that might not be true offline.”

“That’s right.”

I had also wondered at first why herbal tea was so popular in game. Even though I knew there were a lot of people who didn’t care for it IRL, so many people who’d drunk my tea had said it was delicious. That must have also had to do with the subtle differences between the game and real life. Since I also drank herbal tea outside the game and didn’t mind a little bitterness, I thought the herbal tea in game just had a milder flavor.

“But anyway, fresh herbal tea, hm?”

“What’s up, Lewin?”

“No, it’s nothin’. Yuto, you said this tea was a new creation, right? Will you be sellin’ us the information?”

“I was planning on selling it after the event.”

“That’s fine, then.”

Lewin must have realized fresh herbal tea couldn’t be made normally, but he avoided asking me for the information here. Well, I was going to sell the info to Alyssa after the event ended, so he’d find out soon enough.

“What did you think of the onigiri and tea?”

“They’re delicious! No notes! But I’d probably say pickles and herbal tea

aren't the best combo."

"Gotcha."

"They're totally fine on their own, though. With the onigiri having an MP-recovery effect and tasting like this, I have no complaints! As long as the price is low."

"I'm apt to agree with the young whippersnapper here."

So, they weren't bad individually. Lewin had the same impression. The combo of fresh lemon-balm herbal tea and rice was iffy, apparently. I had eaten the rice with regular green tea when I was trying it out, so I hadn't noticed that.

The price would be decided naturally after rice started entering circulation. Until then, it was probably better for me to enjoy it on my own rather than putting it out on display. I would probably just bother people if I foisted random test products on them like I was doing now.

After that, I decided to ask about something that I was curious about. Actually, I had been wondering about it this entire time.

"Hey, Lewin."

"What is it?"

"Have you always talked like that?"

I felt like he used to talk more normally before. He never said things like "whippersnapper" and "sonny." And wasn't he talking normally earlier in the conversation? I felt like his speech was all over the place.

"Oh yeah! I was wondering the same thing! I feel like you're talking like a grandpa now. Kinda weird, right?"

Sakkyun seemed to also sense something off. But wasn't calling it "weird" going a little too far? Sure enough, Lewin grimaced and retorted angrily, "This makes me sound more like a dwarf, y'hear?!"

"O-Oh, right! I see."

"So that's what you're doing!"

"I'm right in the middle of changin' my speech style bit by bit, so just mind

your own business...”

Lewin’s ears were bright red. He must have been embarrassed. Even his angry shout seemed like an effort to cover up his embarrassment.

So he was changing his speech style to enhance his role-playing as a dwarf? *Of course he would! He went as far as to choose to be a dwarf in a game where your character was attractive by default! I actually really respect his dedication!*

“I-I like it, the way you’re speaking,” I said.

“Hey, no fair, Silver-Haired! I-I think so too! I like it too!”

“Wait, didn’t ya say it was weird?”

“N-No? I didn’t, right? Silver-Haired?”

“Wh-Who knows? I’m not sure about that...”

“Wha—?! Silver-Haaaired!”

Forgive me, Sakkyun. I’m more scared of Lewin than you.

“Hmph. That’s enough, now.”

So he really was just hiding his embarrassment. He immediately let it go.

“...All right, let’s get back to explorin’.”

“S-Sure.”

“Okey dokey.”

Sorry, Lewin. His ears were still red. I apologized to him in my mind—I was for sure not going to apologize to him directly. He would just get mad at me, after all. Following after Lewin, who had stood up to hide his embarrassment, we recommenced our search of the area. We soon came across another gorilla, but these guys really were deceptively weak. Even Rick was easily able to beat it one-on-one.

Maybe I could also beat one on my own. The difficulty was probably adjusted so that it was only a slight struggle for second-wave players.

“The trees in this area are a little different from the others.”

“They sure are.”

The trees growing in the area with the gorillas looked to be of a different type. Until now, we had been in a coniferous forest, but this area alone had broadleaf trees.

I didn't know what that meant. After all, there weren't any logging nodes. On top of that, there weren't any gathering nodes either, and the drops from the gorillas, which frequently appeared now, were the same as from the komodo dragons.

"What's our move? Considerin' the time, maybe we should start makin' our way towards the abandoned fortress. But I also feel like there has to be somethin' here."

"We're on the complete opposite side from the fortress, so I think we better start heading that way, right?"

Why were they looking at me? I guess I had been the one to invite the two of them to form a team, so did that mean I was the leader? Plus, with my monsters, I had the biggest faction! If we put it to a majority vote, we would come out the winners.

What's that you say? My monsters shouldn't be included in a majority vote? No way. Olto and Sakura even looked human, so they had the right to participate, right?

"That's true... But I want to check out the area."

"All right, guess that's what we're doing, then!"

"Sure. No objections from me."

There was no need for a vote.

"Let's just take a quick look around."

Then, as we continued walking forward, we discovered a conspicuously large tree. The height of the tree was the same as that of the trees around it, so we hadn't spotted it from afar, but when we approached, we were overwhelmed by the thickness of the trunk. The trunk's circumference must have been about five times larger than that of the other trees. Plus, its roots were wrapped around a large rock, so it gave off the impression of being a true natural

mystery.

It looked considerably dignified, or maybe I should say impactful. It exuded all the stateliness and presence that you'd expect of an ancient tree. Furthermore, in front of that old tree was a beautiful spring about ten meters in diameter. The clean water, sparkling in the sunlight, combined with the majestic tree created a scene I could have gazed upon forever.

This sort of spot just *had* to have something to do with the event. Thinking that, I decided to look around the area. I started with checking out the perimeter of the spring, but I didn't find anything special. I peered towards the middle, but there wasn't anything in there that looked able to be collected.

Reflet had already jumped into the water and was in the process of searching each and every corner of the spring. Unfortunately, the results were unsatisfactory.

"What about you, Reflet?"

"Humm?"

When I questioned Reflet about her search after she resurfaced, she just shook her head. I didn't see any fish either, so did that mean the spring really was just part of the scenery?

Lewin and Olto were inspecting the large rock entwined in the roots of the tree. They pushed aside the roots to see if maybe there was a gathering node there, but there wasn't anything that stood out. Sakkyun was also helping out by climbing the tree, but it seemed he also came up empty. He was sitting on a branch, his legs dangling, and said lamentingly, "Nothing's here!"

I walked around the tree as well, but there really was nothi— *Wait, I see something over there.* I walked over the roots, which were like a giant, twisting snake, and approached the spot I had noticed.

"Whoa, look at that!"

When I finally reached the base of the tree, I saw a logging node. It had been a struggle to get here, so maybe this wasn't just a regular logging node. There had to be some important item here. "Hey guys, come over here! There's a logging node!" I called excitedly to Lewin and Sakkyun, who were still looking

around the roots and rock. However...

“So where’s this logging node, then?”

“Yeah, I don’t see anything.”

“Huh? Come on, there’s a logging node right here, clear as day.”

“Where?”

“Yeah, where?”

I showed them over and over where it was, but the two of them just tilted their heads in confusion. It really seemed like they couldn’t see the logging node. I decided to go ahead and fell it to prove I wasn’t lying.

“Here we go...”

I took out my Logging Ax and struck the logging node. When I did, it made a satisfying clanging sound and an effect played, signaling I had successfully felled it. *See? I was able to cut the wood.*

But apparently, those two couldn’t see the effect either.

“Let’s see what I got...”

Name: Bird-Killing Aromatic Wood

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 10★

Effect: Burn to produce smoke that deals damage to birds.
Disappears at end of event.

A new item had landed in my inventory.

“See? Look at this.”

“Hrm? I see, this is—”

Right after I tried showing the item I’d obtained to Lewin and Sakkyun, the clearing we were in became enveloped in a white light. When I looked closer, I saw that the area we were in was enclosed by a white wall.

“Well, this looks familiar.”

In response to my mutter, Lewin exclaimed sincerely, “It’s a boss arena!”

Well, that seems about right. Judging by the timing, my interaction with the logging node had undoubtedly been the trigger.

“Graaaaaaaaah!”

Suddenly, a gigantic gorilla with an ominous, black, shaggy coat appeared in the middle of the clearing. At over five meters tall, it was far larger than the gorillas that were ambling around the forest. Its face was so fiendish it made me wonder if it was part demon—fangs protruded upward from its lower mouth and its eyes were bloodshot. On closer look, I could see it even had horns growing from its forehead. Apparently, its name was “Ogre Kong.”

It really is part demon!

“Sorry! This happened because I just went ahead and interacted with the logging node!”

“Oh well, nothing we can do about that now!”

“Sakkyun’s right. If ya hadn’t gone ahead and done it yourself, Yuto, I was about near to tell ya to!”

“The more pressing question is, just how strong is this thing?”

“I’m getting the impression that this one’s not as tough as it looks either...”

“Graaaaaaaaah!”

“Well, I reckon I’ll go on in the front. I’ll be able to gauge its strength after takin’ a hit from it,” Lewin said. Then, he readied his shield and valiantly strode forward.

Lewin! You’re the best!

“Let’s go!”

“Y-Yeah!”

“We got this!”

Lewin took the lead along with Sakkyun’s golem and squared off against Ogre Kong, who was glaring at us. Its menacing face twisted into an even more vicious expression before it jumped to its feet.

Ba-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum—

It started pounding—or maybe I should say drumming—on its chest with both fists. The intensity of its drumming was on a whole other level from the gorillas I had seen at the zoo. It was insanely intimidating. *All right then, what kind of an attack will you throw our way?*

—dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum—

“Th-This drumming’s going on for a while, huh?”

The heavy bass sound of the drumming continued to reverberate around us. About fifteen seconds had passed since we had readied ourselves.

—dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum—

“It’s never-ending!”

Ogre Kong just kept beating its chest. As it continued, its black fur seemed as though it was gradually turning red. That *had* to be related to its drumming. Should we be letting it keep this up?

“Wh-What should we do?”

“Does its drumming have some sort of enhancement effect?”

“Should we fire an attack at it?”

Eventually, we decided to switch up our strategy. Instead of waiting for it to attack us, we were going to hit it with our own preemptive strike.

“It’s all you, Sakkyun.”

“Roger that! Haaah! Instant Summon!”

Sakkyun thrust out a hand in front of him, and a magic circle was drawn in midair. From inside that circle appeared a snake-type monster covered in bluish rocks in place of scales.

Instant Summon was a Summoner skill that evoked a monster for a short time to use just one of its abilities.

“Go! Rock Shoot!”

“Hisss!”

In response to Sakkyun's order, the blue snake attacked Ogre Kong by spewing a rock out of its mouth. The fist-sized stone made a direct high-velocity hit on Ogre Kong, who was perhaps too engaged in drumming to make a move to dodge it.

—dum-dum-dum— Ba-dum!

Oh, it stopped drumming. It looked like the attack had interrupted it, but Ogre Kong's red fur didn't return to normal. Soon after, it leaped into the air.

"It's coming!"

"Urgaaaah!"

Ogre Kong used the momentum of its jump to swing its right fist down towards Lewin, its little finger positioned downwards—aka a hammer fist.

DA-THUMP!

"Hnnngh!"

The sound of a tremendous impact reverberated around. Lewin managed to block the attack, but he was knocked back several steps, even taking some mild damage.

The damage he hadn't been able to completely abate must have pierced through his shield. Lewin wasn't a fighter, but his armor was some of the finest. He was a blacksmith, after all. He always made sure his armor was the best of the best. Plus, his Shield Skills level was also fairly high.

And even he wasn't able to completely block the attack, despite all that? That made it obvious just how substantial the power behind that attack had to have been.

"This enemy's 'bout as strong as a Zone Nine boss!"

"Whoa, seriously?"

"Course I'm serious!"

"Isn't this going to be rough with just our party, then?"

Besides, Sakkyun and Lewin were the only ones with any real combat ability. While my monsters and I had every intention to fight hard, I doubted we'd be of

much use against an enemy that had been appraised that highly.

“Everyone! Don’t move too far forward! It’ll probably kill us instantly!”

“Mmm!”

“Olto! Don’t be reckless!”

Olto had stepped forward to protect me, but our enemy was way too strong for that. However, with complete disregard for my panic, Ogre Kong started moving.

“Urgaaaah!”

“Mm!”

Then the absolute worst thing happened: it came running towards us. At this rate, the only thing I could do was pray for Olto to make it out unharmed.

“Olto! Do your best!”

“Mmmm!”

“Urgraaaaaaah!”

Ogre Kong leaped into the air and then brought his fist down towards us. In the face of that attack, Olto raised his hoe up above him.

It’s no use! Ogre Kong is clearly bigger and scarier and stronger! Olto’s done for! What can I do?!

Sensing the overwhelming difference in their strengths, I watched on in despair. But then—

“Mmm!”

“Urgah?!”

“Huh?”

Olto’s hoe easily repelled Ogre Kong’s fist, pushing its entire giant form back. After it landed, Ogre Kong swung its fist around like a hook, but that was also rendered meaningless in the face of Olto’s hoe.

“Olto, that was amazing!”

“Mm!”

Or maybe Ogre Kong's just weaker than we thought?

Afterwards, Lewin took the enemy's attacks by using his Provoke skill to shift its target to him and, as expected, Ogre Kong was repelled by his shield. What was more, Ogre Kong ended up falling flat on its back from the shield's counter. Evidently, it wasn't such a strong monster after all.

"But that first attack was definitely a heavy one."

There was a big difference between Ogre Kong's first attack and the attacks that had followed it. The reason for that was obvious to see.

"Does the color of its fur change its attack power?!"

"It's not such a huge threat when it has black fur, huh?"

After Ogre Kong unleashed its first attack, its reddened fur changed back to black. That must have brought its attack power right back down again.

Ba-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum!

"It's started drumming again!"

"Ugh, it's so loud!"

Ogre Kong had started up its drumming again. As it did, its fur started changing once again to red. Apparently, its pattern went something like this: drumming → raise attack power → attack → return to normal → drumming, and then repeat that cycle.

"Sakkyun!"

"I know!"

"You too, Yuto! Even just one hit should stop it!"

"Got it!"

Things turned out just how Lewin had guessed. One hit, no matter how weak, would make Ogre Kong temporarily stop its drumming. If we repeated that several times, it would attack us without having powered up too much.

Lewin repelled the enemy before we all hammered it with attacks over and over, and we were basically able to stop it in its tracks. By "basically," I meant that once every few rounds of this, Ogre Kong would escape up the giant tree

and drum on its chest up there.

For those moments, we had to rely on long-ranged attacks or ask the help of monsters who could fly. However, the dense canopy got in the way, so our attacks weren't very effective. Lewin, as our designated front liner, ended up taking damage several times.

I thought it would be a good opportunity for Rick, who could climb trees, to really take an active part, but...he got caught up in the moment and went too far forward, then was blown back by the gorilla's roar.

"Chirp!"

"Riiiiick!"

Thankfully, it happened during the enemy's low attack power state. But still, the attack took out half of Rick's HP. He fainted, furthermore, and he had to retire from the front line. This fight really would have been impossible with just my monsters and me, but the gorilla must not have been that strong of an enemy for Sakkyun and Lewin.

"Let's finish this here!"

"Graaaaah..."

Ogre Kong took an overhead kick from Sakkyun that wiped out its HP gauge before it disintegrated into polygons right before our eyes.

"That thing was surprisingly weak, huh?"

"I'm not so sure 'bout that. Its final enraged state there was pretty rough. Though we were able to take it down fast thanks to ya, Sakkyun."

I hadn't noticed because I was just launching magic attacks from the back, but Lewin had apparently been treading on some thin ice. He checked the durability of his shield and groaned.

Ogre Kong was the type of boss that, once its HP dropped to ten percent, would fly into a frenzied rampage. Its fur turned a bright red, its horns doubled in length, and its movements also became substantially faster.

However, even when Lewin took damage, he would immediately heal with a self-recovery skill, and since he hadn't taken any direct hits, I thought the fight

hadn't been a big deal for him, but...

"Its attack power was as high as when it fully charged up its drumming, and even its speed went up two levels. If Sakkyun's attack had been just a little late, I would've taken even more damage."

So the miniboss wasn't specifically made with second-wave players in mind? We had taken it down in ten minutes, so it probably didn't have that much HP, but its offensive power was on par with a top-of-the-line boss, which felt unbalanced.

"Should we take a quick break?" I suggested.

"I'd appreciate it. My shield's in need of repair."

"Meditation time!"

I also needed to thank my monsters for their efforts. Everyone had fought hard. Except for Rick, who had swiftly fainted and gone beddy-bye.

"Chirp..."

Rick hung his head in disappointment at being beaten. He looked frustrated that he was the only one who hadn't been able to help.

"Come on, Rick. Don't be so down on yourself."

"Chirp..."

"You can still do a lot in the next one, right?"

"Chirp?"

"The real fight is yet to come, you know?"

"Chirp!"

Rick raised his head as if saying, "Oh yeah, you're right!" He had seriously forgotten. *Yup, he's an adorable goofball.*

"The raid boss battle is going to be the real deal. I'll be counting on you then."

"Chirp chirp!"

Rick clenched his fists, seemingly brimming with motivation. That seemed to have cheered him up. But I was actually more worried now that he was overly

excited. I just hoped he wouldn't do anything reckless with all that pent-up enthusiasm.

"Chirp chirp!"

It'll be fine, right?

"All right then, guess I should take a look at the drops I got, eh?" said Lewin.

"Oh yeah," Sakkyun responded.

Hearing them say that, I also decided to check my inventory. The drops from Ogre Kong were stones—an armful of small, glossy black stones.

Name: Bird-Eating Demon Primate's Gallstones

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 10★

Effect: Place down to keep away birds. However, depending on the type, there may be a chance they'll initiate an attack? Disappears at end of event.

Birds again. But this was a boss drop, meaning the effect must be more promising than the items I could collect elsewhere. I also checked the item that I got from the logging node before the boss appeared.

Name: Bird-Killing Aromatic Wood

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 10 ★

Effect: Burn to produce smoke that deals damage to birds. Disappears at end of event.

This was also interesting. It was similar to the bird-repellent-type items, but with smoke, you could affect a large number of bird enemies. We'd be sitting pretty if we walked into a Hitchcock world at this point.

"By the way, what was that about earlier?"

"What do you mean?"

Sakkyun spoke up as we rested briefly at the base of the old tree. He was sitting in his usual zazen style, of course.

“I mean, I was wondering why you were the only one who could see that logging node.”

“Hrm. Now you mention it, there *was* that little problem too. Well, this is Yuto we’re talkin’ about though, so that’s probably enough to explain it...”

“Oh, that?” I hadn’t had the time to think about it at the moment, but now I understood why. It was probably the work of either Plant Knowledge or Botany. “That was probably thanks to my skills.”

“Oh, you mean Plant Knowledge?”

“That’s mighty odd. I’ve got Plant Knowledge myself, after all.”

Lewin also had Plant Knowledge, which meant it had to be because of Botany.

“It’s the advanced version of that. I have a skill called Botany that I got from a quest.”

I was planning on selling the information on how to obtain that skill later, but just telling them the name of it was probably fine.

“Wow, really?”

“...!”

Sakkyun just looked impressed, but Lewin’s eyes widened in astonishment.

“What’s up, Lewin?”

“Yuto... You... Man...”

He sighed at me! But for some reason, Sakkyun seemed to understand Lewin’s reaction.

“Ah, this is one of those Silver MVP moments,” he said to Lewin. “Is this some bombshell info?”

“Well, y’see, I’ve got all the skills related to craftin’ in my head, but I’ve never heard of a skill called Botany afore.”

“So you’re saying it’s some completely unique skill right now? Silver MVP!

Phew!” Sakkyun let out a whistle and gave a shrug of his shoulders.

“Silver MVP?”

What was that?

“It means of course you’d be capable of doing something like that. Anyway, why is it that a skill like that was the trigger here? Did the devs set this up just for you?”

“Naw, of course it’s not just for Yuto. There’re probably other more advanced harvesting proficiency skills like Botany. I figure only people who have those types of skills can discover the special items here.”

I only had Plant Knowledge and Botany, but apparently there were other skills of the same type. As far as Lewin knew, there was Mineral Knowledge, Aquatic Knowledge, and Animal Knowledge. That meant it was extremely possible there were skills called Mineralogy, Aquatic Ecology, and Zoology.

“Look around. There’s water, a rock, and there’s even a thicket over there an animal could be lurkin’ in. So, if you’ve got an -ology skill that pertains to those things, then you could probably see something other than the old tree’s loggin’ node.”

“Ah, yeah. Now that you say it, that definitely seems possible.”

It really was unnatural to have such a beautiful spring and that huge rock entwined in the tree’s roots without there being some special interaction prepared for them. Maybe there had been hidden items in previous events that only those with the appropriate -ology skill could find.

“Is it the sort of skill you can acquire immediately?”

“It takes a lot of time and effort to get it, so I think I’m probably the only one who has it?”

One would have to continue the plant quest chain, but I hadn’t heard of anyone else besides me who had made a cherry blossom tree bloom. There was probably no one else who had made more progress through the quest than me right now. You could say this was the only item I felt confident I was running in the lead in.

“I was thinking of going to sell the info about it to Alyssa once the event’s over.”

“I’m super curious... But no, I won’t listen! I don’t have any worthy information to offer in return! I’ll wait until it shows up on the Quick-Eared Cats’ message board!”

I would have told him if he’d promised not to spread it around, but Sakkyun had covered his ears, showing he wasn’t listening. *Well, all right.*

“Right then, I won’t ask either. You’re sellin’ it to my clan later, anyhow,” said Lewin. True, it wasn’t as if he would be able to learn it here even if I told him, so that was fine.

Afterwards, we looked around the old tree to see if there were any scenery changes, and confirmed that there were none.

“All right, should we head to the fortress?”

“Yes, let’s.”

“Sounds good to me!”

The fortress was located just south, past the rocky mountain where the boss was set to appear. It didn’t take long for us to run there, only occasionally gathering materials as we went. After not even twenty minutes, the abandoned fortress came into view.

“Wow, it’s pretty big.”

“Mm!”

“...!”

Olto and the others seemed surprised at the unexpected size of the fortress too. They were holding their hands above their eyes and gazing at the large structure. I had been expecting something smaller, but it was around the size of an elementary school. It was a full-scale three-story fortress equipped with tall outer walls. Hundreds of players were clinging to those walls, busy repairing and reconstructing the fortress. However, having seen the same scene as me, Lewin muttered the completely opposite sentiment.

“It’s a small one, eh?”

“Huh? *That’s* small?”

“How many players do you think’re participatin’ in this event? There’s no chance everyone could fit in a fortress that size.”

“Ah, yeah, when you put it like that...”

If we really forced people to squeeze in there, we could probably fit three thousand individuals, but any more than that would be impossible. Though we couldn’t exactly have a proper fight with all of us packed in like a crowded train anyway.

“Did they divide us up into servers?” Lewin wondered aloud. “They usually use special servers for events.”

“You’re probably right.”

Sakkyun’s and Lewin’s words made me remember the previous one.

“Oh, now that you mention it, we were split into servers for the last event too.”

“In that case, they’ll probably do *that* again.”

“‘That’?”

“Server rankings. They had that last time too.”

He was right. During the last event, they had announced not only individual intraserver rankings, but *interserver* rankings. It seemed like there had been a difference in the rewards you received based on your rankings too.

Lewin and Sakkyun both stared at me as I pondered this.

“Looks like we lucked out, then.”

“Yep, sure did.”

“Hm?”

What are they talking about?

Chapter Three: Bird Nightmare

The abandoned fortress, built in the middle of the wilderness, looked even more impressive as we drew nearer. The stone structure was built on top of a small, rocky hill. We ascended the slope towards the gates, where we saw the hustle and bustle of many tens of players.

“Seems we made it in time for the boss fight, eh?” said Lewin.

“Looks like it,” replied Sakkyun.

Following the two of them, I entered the abandoned fortress. There, I was met with a familiar face.

“You finally made it!”

“Sukegawa, you’re on this server too, huh?”

It was Sukegawa, the lewd blacksmith. At first I had been put off by his nickname, but now it felt strangely normal. Sukegawa looked oddly worn out as he looked down at us from atop the stairs.

“Yep, that’s right. And I was kinda put in charge of gathering blacksmiths. So, Lewin, I’ve actually been waiting for you!”

Sukegawa was the leader of the blacksmiths. *I-Is that a good idea?* I did hear there weren’t very many female blacksmith players, so maybe it was fine. Besides, he was a guy who got things done when he needed to. Things were sure to go smoothly under his lead. Probably.

“Anyway, Sukegawa, you knew Lewin was in the same server?”

“There’s no way Silver-Haired, Lewin, and Sakkyun moving together wouldn’t stand out. I heard a lot of eyewitness reports, so I figured you’d make it here at some point.”

Ah, understandable. Well, my monsters had been getting more well-known recently, and Lewin and Sakkyun were also celebrity players. So moving together had made us conspicuous, huh?

“Lewin! Hurry up and help us!”

“O-Oh, right now?”

“We don’t have nearly enough blacksmiths! We’ve got plenty of carpenters, so I think we’re fine with repairs, but we don’t have enough of the essential building materials!”

He must have been talking about the Event Ingots. The crafters were apparently making nails and other items out of Event Bird Repellent Ingots and using them to repair the fortress. However, since they had so few blacksmiths, there had been delays in the production of nails and iron plates. That was definitely not good.

“C’mon! Hurry up!”

“I heard ya! Stop pullin’ me!”

Guess this is where we say bye to Lewin.

Lewin was not Sukegawa’s only target, however.

“Silver-Haired, you tamed a unique salamander, right? You got him with you?”

Evidently, he had been hoping for Himka to be here too. But unfortunately, I didn’t have him with me now.

“I had Himka stay behind today. Also, I already used a Tamed Monster’s Orb on the way here, so I can’t waste another.”

I had switched Bear Bear out for Sakura to ask her to use her woodworking skill, after all. Though if I had met up with Lewin a little earlier, then I wouldn’t have wasted a summon!

“That so? Oh well. I’ll make do with just Lewin.”

“What’s that s’posed to mean?!”

“Aha ha ha! See you later, Lewin!” said Sakkyun, waving goodbye to Lewin as he was dragged away.

“See you.”

“Yuh-aye!”

“Chirp chirp!”

Fau and Rick, who were especially attached to Lewin, were sad to part with him. They must have been disappointed to not be able to play in his beard anymore.

“Look here! I’m comin’ with ya, so lemme go!”

Good luck, Lewin.

“Lewin got taken away, but what’re you going to do, Sakkyun?”

“Hmm, yeah. I think I’ll—”

“Sakkyun, there you are.”

“Whoa! If it isn’t Kokuten! ’Sup?”

“I wanted to ask first, but you’re good with helping defend the fortress, right? Silver-Haired, you said you’d be coming to the fortress later, so I figured you’d probably be fine with it.”

“Huh? That’s a given, isn’t it? Isn’t it?”

“Yeah. It’d be ridiculous if we came all the way here and didn’t help, right? The point of this raid boss event is teamwork, after all.”

Hearing our responses, Sakkyun looked relieved and gave us a wry smile.

“There’s a surprising number of players here wanting to show off. The first players that got here actually told other players they couldn’t come in, saying they were occupying the base.”

What the...? Were they stupid or something? Our enemy was a raid boss, so there was no chance of winning if we didn’t cooperate.

“Well, other players gave them a real earful and they ended up leaving in tears.”

“They brought that on themselves.”

“Anyway, there’s no shortage of those problem players. Since you and Sakkyun both actively cooperated in the last event, I figured you were just running a little late.”

“Oh yeah, a bunch of stuff happened. Right, Silver-Haired?”

“Yeah, that’s right, Sakkyun.”

Mainly gorillas, gorillas, and more gorillas.

“Really? Well, I’ll ask you for more details later. In the meantime, do you mind coming with me, Sakkyun? I’m gathering everyone who can fight so we can figure out how to work together.”

“All righty!”

“How about you, Silver-Haired?”

“Oh, I don’t think I have the courage to join a party with a bunch of fighters.”

Especially after seeing Sakkyun in battle. I would be completely out of my element. The only future I could see was one where I died immediately and got in everyone’s way.

“Ah, right. Sakkyun’s a special case, so don’t worry about him, okay? The other fighters are all more low-key. Plus, there are some rearguard Mages too.”

“Is that right? I think I’ll stick with the crafters this time, though. My monsters will be able to help out more there too.”

“Understood. I believe the crafters are testing some stuff out in the large room in the interior of the fort, so I suggest joining up with them there.”

“Got it.”

I was also curious about the Bird-Eating Demon Gorilla’s Gallstones and the Bird-Killing Aromatic Wood I had obtained in the boss area.

“Well, I’ll see ya later!” said Sakkyun.

“Yeah, see you.”

“See you guys later too!”

“Mm-mm.”

“...”

“Humm.”

Olto, Sakura, and Reflet gave Sakkyun the same two-finger salute that he

does! Oh no, he's a bad influence on them! But actually, it's also kind of cute, so I guess it's okay.

"Squeak?"

"You're as composed as ever, Drimo."

Well, I really couldn't imagine Drimo giving that casual two-finger salute and going, "'Sup peeps!"

"Squeak."

"It's not like I'm telling you that you *should* do that!"

Please put your fingers down! I'd rather you stayed how you are.

"All right, should we head to where the crafters are gathered?"

"Mm."

Kokuten said they were in the large hall just ahead, right?

The image I'd had was of a wide room with floors and walls made of stone, but it was an even more fantastical place than I'd been anticipating. A giant crystal about two meters in size was floating gently in the middle of the room. It was emitting a mystical light, a sight so beautiful I didn't think I could ever tire of looking at it.

"Mmm."

"Humm."

"..."

Olto, Reflet, and Sakura were gazing at the crystal as well, their mouths hanging open. It must have been an unusual sight for them too. Olto's reaction was especially great. The sparkle in his eyes was on a whole other level from the others. However, he wasn't the only one like this.

"Mmm."

"Mm-mm."

Several other gnomes besides Olto were staring up at the crystal with the same twinkling eyes. Maybe the atmosphere the crystal provided was similar to

that of the Earth Elementals' town? That was also a mystical place lined with crystals.

Did this crystal have any importance for the event? Or was it just part of the scenery? Well, I'd find out once things got started.

"Feel free to do what you want, Olto."

"Mmm."

The rest of us would take over from there.

At any rate, there were a lot of people here. The players in this hall had split up into several different groups in this large room, with about ten groups of about twenty people. It didn't seem like people were just acting willy-nilly; each group was working on a specific task. I was still hesitating, unsure if I should call out to someone, when another player approached and spoke.

"Yuto! I've been waiting for you."

"Sawyer, you're here too!"

It was like all my male friends had been assembled in the same server as me. I guess this sort of thing happened sometimes. But I was glad he was here too. He was easy to talk to.

"I was just making my rounds of the map," I explained. "Oh right, what should I do with the materials I gathered and items I made? Is there somewhere you're consolidating them together?"

"Oh, yeah."

Sawyer caught me up to speed with the situation so far. The crafters had divided up into several groups, with one of the groups working on crafting regular items with the event materials, and another working on creating event-only items with those materials. Other than that, there were groups working on making items with buffs, and groups working on making items to be used in the fight.

I took out the items I had collected during my journey and lined them up on a table.

"Thanks for crafting them already. And the workmanship on that brooch is

amazing. I wouldn't expect anything less. Is that Sakura's work?"

"Yeah, she made it on the way."

"That thirty-minute time limit is pretty strict, huh? We haven't been able to gather materials because of that."

Hence why there was also a squad collecting materials around the fortress.

"We'll need to bring these ingots to the blacksmiths."

"Oh, got it. I should have handed that stuff over to them before."

Then, I showed Sawyer my event items. There were also some unfamiliar-looking materials placed on the table.

"Is this meat?"

Next to that was what looked like an onion, and there was also something that looked like an aromatic herb. Evidently there were also food ingredients among the event-only items.

"We collected those around the rocky mountain. The meat came from a monster called the Rampaging Bull, and the onions and aromatic herbs were drops from a monster called the Rampaging Plant."

The Rampaging Bull was a large, ferocious bull. The Rampaging Plant was a plant monster that attacked with long ivy vines, with its main body remaining underground. Both their names were pretty basic.

"We don't have nearly enough players who can cook, so the amount of ingredients is getting a little unmanageable. Yuto, could I ask you to handle the cooking?"

As Sawyer said, the other groups looked extremely busy. Well, I guess they had no choice but to prioritize making healing items.

"Got it. Reflet and I will take a crack at the cooking."

"I appreciate it. Once the gathering squad comes back, I'll have them help you. Oh, and you can do whatever you want with the ingredients here!"

"Understood. Let's do our best, Reflet."

"Hum!"

I watched Sawyer return to the group that was concocting potions, then Reflet and I went to stand in front of the table that had the meat placed on it.

“They really just look like regular meat and vegetables... I wonder what they taste like?”

I decided to try grilling the ingredients together, adding some salt for seasoning.

“It really is just regular meat. A little tough, but edible enough.”

Plus, it came with an effect: automatic HP recovery. The effect itself was pretty low, but it suited the raid boss event.

“Let’s add in more vegetables and try making a meat-and-vegetable stir fry. Reflet, can you cut the veggies?”

“Hum!”

And so, I took out some vegetables from my inventory and attempted to make stir-fried meat and vegetables. However...

“That’s odd.”

“Hum...”

I had added in vegetables I’d grown on my own farm, which were of a higher quality than the vegetables harvested during the event. I had been expecting them to add a good effect. However, although the flavor improved, the crucial effect disappeared. It was possible for ingredients to cancel out each other’s effects, but I had made sure to pick ingredients that wouldn’t do that. I’d figured they might enhance the automatic HP recovery effect, not make it go away completely...

After experimenting a few more times, I was able to confirm something.

“It looks like if I use anything other than ingredients from the event, the effect goes away.”

Even just using my own ingredients, with none of the event ingredients, negated the effect as well. While cooking during the event, I could only use ingredients that had been acquired during the event.

“Humm.”

“Condiments don’t seem to have that problem, though.”

“Hum!”

The only ingredients I was able to use were the meat, onions, and aromatic herbs that had been obtained during the event, as well as water produced with magic and a few types of seasonings. If I could only use items from the event, I was going to be fairly limited in what I could cook. Grilled meat and herbs, hamburger steak, and soup with meat were about all my options.

“Could you make the soup, Reflet? I’ll tackle the hamburger steak.”

“Humm!”

Reflet was better suited to making soups, since she could produce higher-quality water than I could. Our roles assigned, we started cooking.

“First I’ll pound the meat, then mix it with the finely chopped onions and the aromatics...”

I made one hamburger patty to start and tried grilling it. Normally that would take about ten minutes, but this was a game. After merely one minute, I had made a well-cooked, appetizing hamburger steak.

In real life, it was difficult to make hamburger steak without a binding agent. A novice would have difficulty forming it or it would fall apart after baking. But here, the game powers were at work. What I had before me was a proper, soft and juicy, beautifully shaped hamburger steak.

“And it comes with a slight automatic HP recovery effect.”

Since I had only used event ingredients, the effect remained.

“All right, and how’s the taste...? Mm. It’s pretty good.”

For seasonings I simply used salt and pepper, but the aromatic herbs had added a nice accent to it. The herbs had a sort of shiso-like flavor, so more than a hamburger steak, it kind of had the flavor of beef meatballs. There might be some people who wouldn’t like this sort of flavor, though, so I thought maybe I should try making it without the aromatic herbs.

However, the hamburger steak I made without the herbs didn't come with any particular effects. Apparently, I had to use the meat, onion, and aromatic herbs together.

"Hmm. Grilling it really makes the shiso smell strong..."

In that case, maybe it was better to boil it.

"Reflet, how's the soup coming along?"

"Hum!"

"Ooh, that looks good!"

I took the bowl Reflet presented to me and took a little sip. The flavor reminded me of a soy-sauce-based broth.

"How are the meatballs?"

The ingredients were about the same, but this dish was entirely Japanese. Just reducing the spices made a huge difference. Also, the scent of the soy sauce subdued the bitterness of the aromatic herbs, mostly diminishing their peculiar taste. The tough meat also became tender and soft.

"If the effect is the same, then this dish is probably the better choice. Easier for people to eat."

"Hum."

"Okay, let's make a huge batch of soup!"

"Hum!"

We didn't have time to be picky about the flavor or variety, nor to make both hamburger steak and soup. We would just focus on making the meatball soup. Reflet and I divided up the work between us and started cooking. Though since we only had one pot, we couldn't make enough for everyone at once. The best way to do things was probably to have me prepare the ingredients, with Reflet then taking care of the actual cooking.

As the two of us got to work on our own tasks, several players walked up to us at a quick pace.

"Silver-Haired! We'll help too!"

“Ishida, you’re in this server too? And Usami?”

The two people at the forefront of the group were both friends of mine.

There was Ishida, the Cook who had some strong feelings about Fermentation. And next to him was Usami, the black-haired elf pâtissier who, although dressed in a traditional Japanese outfit, was actually Scottish. The two of them often met up to exchange ingredients.

“We got held up gathering ingredients,” Ishida told me.

“Sorry about that!” followed up Usami.

Evidently they were a part of the material-gathering squad.

Ishida and Usami took out a bunch of ingredients as they apologized. They had an abundance of meat, onions, and aromatic herbs. With this much, I should be able to make plenty of soup.

The meat chunks were hefty, and you could get ingredients from one onion several times, so if our cooking went well, we should be able to make enough for everyone in the fortress. I was glad I had decided on making soup. If we were going with the hamburger steak, we wouldn’t have been able to use water to increase the yield.

“Okay then, let’s make soup together.”

“Yeah!” they all exclaimed.

“Humm!”

Now that the players who could cook had assembled, we had more pots to work with, so we’d definitely be able to make a large amount of soup. There wasn’t so much as a recipe, but I taught them how to make the dish, and we all got to work preparing the ingredients. As we did so, I overheard the conversation Ishida and Usami were having as they cooked at the table behind me.

“What’s up, Ishida? You seem antsy.”

“The water nymph’s handmade soup...”

“Yeah yeah. Don’t stop working now.”

“Listen! This is soup made with water the water nymph made, using ingredients the water nymph chopped, that the water nymph worked hard to mix all together! This rivals the wine she makes by stomping on the grapes!”

“Aye, I got it already.”

Ishida was a big fan of Reflet’s. Usami, meanwhile, was getting mad at all the noise he was making. Well, Undines were adorable, so I really couldn’t blame him. Besides, as a guy I could sympathize with him and the emotional ups and downs he was experiencing over food handmade by a cute girl, even in a game. All the water we were using now was made by Reflet, so it wasn’t a stretch to say the soup was handmade by her. Okay, maybe it was a stretch, but telling everyone it was a meal made by Reflet would really boost morale.

“Reflet, could you go stir the other pots too?”

“Hum?”

“Start with Ishida’s pot.”

“Humm!”

“Whoa! Silver-Haired, you’re a genius!”

“Right?”

This way, declaring these were all made by Reflet shouldn’t be a problem!

“You too, Silver-Haired...? Ugh, men!”

“B-But this’ll definitely raise morale! Right, Silver-Haired?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Hmm? Fine, then.”

Yikes, Usami’s eyes! That’s the same look girls give Sukegawa! But this was to raise the morale of the guys. I had no other choice!

“Hum?”

“I-It’s nothing, Reflet. Let’s finish up the cooking for now.”

“Hum!”

Feeling Usami’s scornful glare boring into my back, I continued cooking.

“Let’s see, next up is...”

We had pretty much finished up the soup, so I was about to consult with the others about how we would serve it. It was at that moment when it happened.

“We’re under attack! Anyone who’s free, go help with defense!”

“Are the items done?”

“Oh no, this is bad.”

“Birds, birds! It’s birds!”

Several people came rushing into the great hall. They must have been players who had been stationed to protect the defensive wall.

“Under attack? But the boss isn’t supposed to be here yet!” Ishida protested.

“It’s not the boss! A huge swarm of birds just showed up and started attacking!” replied the Thief player who’d come to report the attack.

I see. They never did say that the boss would be the only enemy to attack us. There were mob enemies roaming the playing field, after all, so it wasn’t strange for there to be small-fry enemies attacking the fortress too. The devs had completely outsmarted us.

“There are so many of them. It’s becoming a real problem!”

“Wait, wh-what should we do?”

“This is bad, really bad!”

“Sh-Should we go up too?”

“Everyone! Let’s support the others by bringing them our finished event items! But half of us need to stay behind and keep making items!”

Sawyer’s command restored calm to the crafters who had been on the verge of losing it. They followed his orders and fell perfectly into line.

“Silver-Haired, let’s go!”

“R-Right!”

Most of the cooking was done, so it was probably fine to leave just a few people behind. Honestly, I wanted to stay behind, but I got swept up in

Sawyer's enthusiasm and ended up agreeing.

"All right, everyone. Let's go!"

"Squeak!"

Drimo was pumped up at hearing there was going to be a fight. He propped his pickax upon his shoulder and ran off ahead.

I walked up the stairs and onto the defensive wall. There, I saw countless black specks obscuring the sky. A lot of players on the wall had taken damage. However, the birds that had attacked were already far from the wall.

"What's the situation?" I called out to Kokuten's party members, who stood nearby.

"Oh, Silver-Haired!"

After a brief explanation, I learned that the birds were using a hit-and-run attack pattern. They attacked all at once as a swarm, then retreated up into the sky after a while before descending once again. *This really is Hitchcock's world!*

"Individually, they're weak. So much so that just the impact of colliding with us kills them."

The problem was there were too many of them. Even if each bird could only deal one point of damage, if multiple birds attacked all at once, the damage would stack. Plus, since the attacks were coming from every direction, it was difficult to completely defend against them.

"It's rough for anyone in light armor."

"Really?"

My armor was light even compared to other light armor. The idea of getting pecked to death by birds was scary as hell.

"Wh-What should we do? Can we make it with Olto's Guardian skill?"

"Mm?"

However, I had no time to worry about it.

"Those damn birds are coming!"

I watched as the swarm of birds covering the sky—tens of thousands of them—undulated like one giant creature as it headed straight for us. It brought to mind a large flock of starlings in flight I had once seen—although this swarm was about several times the size.

“Focus on defense first and foremost!” I exclaimed to my monsters. “I’m counting on you all!”

“Aye!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Fau, Rick! Get behind me!”

“Aye?”

“Chirp?”

Sorry. I know you’re eager to fight, but I have no idea what’ll happen if you two get mobbed by those birds.

While I was in the middle of hastily rearranging our formation, I heard the shrill cry of the swarm.

“Chreep chreep chreep chreep chreep—”

Each individual bird was probably not that loud, but all of them chirping together at once surrounded all of us in a terrible cacophony.

“They’re so loud!”

“Mmm!”

Even Olto was scrunching his face up in displeasure. However, the volume was not the only vexing part of this. Their cries disrupted concentration, inhibiting any skill that required focus and drowning out any directions people tried to pass to their companions. At this rate, we wouldn’t even be able to coordinate as we normally would.

And my party had another problem.

“__”

“Fau, don’t strain yourself!”

“——”

Fau’s Singing and Musical Performance skills were being blocked out by the noise of the birds, and it seemed like their effects were being negated. In fact, I couldn’t hear the sound of her lute or voice at all. Moreover, her performance was interrupted when one of the birds struck her. The buffs she had used before the fight began remained, but it looked like the debuffs she tried to use on the enemy turned out to be useless.

“Fau, listen to me!”

“Aye...”

I caught Fau, who had lost her balance from a bird collision, and held both her and Rick in my arms. Olto and Sakura protected me as I did so. I watched their HP get chipped away by the tiny birds’ onslaught. Being attacked from all angles made defending with shields or weapons meaningless. This was a huge pain in the neck.

Thanks to Reflet’s healing, no one took enough damage to die. The automatic HP-recovery effect of the food we’d made was also subtly at work. Without those, we probably would have ended up in more of a crisis.

“Squeak! Squeak squeak!”

Drimo was swinging his pickax from a spot a bit farther away. His attacks were hitting right on the mark and he was knocking down a considerable number of birds, but there were just too many of them. It seemed inefficient to attack with a weapon. So, I decided to try using a certain item.

“Take this!”

“Chreep chreep chreep chreep!”

Oh, it’s working, it’s working! Throwing the Bird Repellent Medicine at the birds caused a dramatic change. The bottles burst in midair, and the birds that were doused in liquid medicine fell to the ground with a thud. The birds that were covered in the cloud of powdered medicine changed course and retreated.

But even using those items only reduced their number by a small amount. In

order to cut down their numbers even more, it was probably necessary to use magic...

“Can anyone use any AoE attacks?”

None of the magic wielders around me had tried to use an AoE attack. It was true that the birds’ onslaught could hinder the completion of incantations, but I figured they could manage if a tank protected them. So why weren’t they using any?

Maybe there was a reason they weren’t? If the combat unit had agreed among themselves not to do so, then I probably shouldn’t jump the gun and use magic myself.

While I was worrying over what to do, one of the players stationed next to me sprang to their feet. They looked like they’d had enough of the birds’ onslaught.

“Dammit! Eat this!”

“Hey! Stop!”

“You idiot!”

Some of their companions—who looked panicked for some reason—tried to stop them, but before they could, the player unleashed a magic attack. An explosion of flames burst right in the center of the swarm, engulfing more than a hundred birds and eliminating them.

Wow, so magic really is effective. It was probably best for the fighters to use items like the Bird Repellent Medicine and for the Mages to attack with AoE magic. That was my thought, but there was no way someone hadn’t already thought of that and carried it out. They had probably tried it out before we arrived at the wall, and after establishing that it didn’t work, were now holding back on their magic use.

“Chreep chreep chreep chreep chreep—”

“Aaahhhh!”

“P-Protect us! Isn’t that your job as a tank?!”

“Dammit! Defense Up! Area Shield!”

There was a clear change in the birds' behavior: the surrounding birds rushed towards the Mages all at once. A veil of black birds cloaked the party, obscuring them completely. Even the players' voices were drowned out by the cries of the birds. I had no idea if they were all right in there. It looked like the tank had tried to use some defensive skills to protect them, but...

"Chreep chreep chreep chreep chreep—"

Are they okay?

When the birds left that spot, the players were nowhere to be seen. They must have died.

What a horrifying thing to see. It was as if I had witnessed them get pecked and devoured by birds until not even bones remained.

"Jeez..."

I've got goose bumps.

Immediately after, the birds all retreated back to the sky. Apparently this stage of the attack was over with.

"Are we all more or less okay?"

"Hum!"

"It's thanks to you, Reflet. Still, if this keeps going, won't things just get worse and worse?"

"Silver-Haired!"

"Kokuten!"

"You make it out okay?"

"Somehow."

Kokuten came over to talk to me, a worried look on his face. Behind him, his friends offered me apologies, probably for forgetting to tell me not to use magic. But they'd been in a state of emergency, so I didn't fault them. Besides, I had survived, so I really wasn't worried about it. The more important thing was what we were going to do next.

"We've also figured out a few things."

If you used magic, you'd end up drawing a massive amount of the birds' aggro, and they would attack you all at once. However, after that concentrated attack, the birds would immediately return to the sky. The assault just now was a lot shorter than the first one, probably thanks to the party that had used magic and fallen victim to the birds.

"If we have a party sacrifice themselves, then I believe we could get through this with minimal casualties, but..."

"No one wants to do that?"

"That's right."

Obviously. Everyone knew that would mean dropping out, and they didn't want to die. Though if this were an event where you could be revived, then people might have been fine with suicide missions.

The other thing they had figured out was that using items or skills didn't increase the amount of hate you pulled much at all. That made sense. I had used Bird Repellent Medicine and hadn't ended up with the birds concentrating their attacks on me, and even Fau, who had used her Singing skill, was fine. It seemed the birds' behavior pattern was very different from regular bosses'.

"We've got a strategy in the works. Would you be willing to help out too, Silver-Haired?"

"Of course, but can I really do anything?"

I might've been decent at crafting, but my battle skills were sorely lacking. However, Kokuten gave me a firm nod.

"Yes, I have just the role for you!"

Kokuten's direct gaze was fixed right on— No, not on me. On my monsters.

"Aye?"

"Hum?"

"Let's head back inside the fortress for now."

After that, we moved locations to the command post, where Kokuten told me about the strategy he and a few other players had thought up. Besides Kokuten,

some other strong-looking players were also sitting in the command post. Everyone here was a highly respected member of the combat unit. I felt incredibly out of place.

But Kokuten, paying no attention to that, had just finished his explanation.

“Let’s see, so basically, in order to disperse the birds’ hate, all the Mages have to release a simultaneous attack, is what you’re saying?” I asked.

“Correct. However, there are a few problems with that.”

First off, they didn’t know to what extent the hate would be dispersed. Even if everyone unleashed an attack at once, there would definitely be a fraction of a second gap between them. It was impossible for everyone to do it at exactly the same time. Meaning, in the worst-case scenario, there was a possibility that either the first or last player to launch their attack would have all the birds’ hate focused on them.

“Though it did seem like it dispersed their hate when we first made the mistake of using magic, so I don’t think we have to worry about that, but...”

There was also the possibility that the amount of hate someone gathered would depend on the power or element of the magic attack. That did seem plausible. If my shabby magic drew the same amount of hate as a super magic attack by an expert Mage, I would have a thing or two to say to the devs, after all.

“We were also thinking of making teams of advanced Mages and tanks and distributing a good number of recovery items to them, but...we haven’t been able to reach an agreement.”

Apparently there were some people complaining that it was preferential treatment for higher-level players. There was also no shortage of players who thought it was better to wait and see how things went instead of taking an unwise gamble.

“They seem to think something might change if we can just hold out until the boss appears.”

“Oh, that does seem possible, doesn’t it?”

“Yes. However, I don’t think anything will change.”

Moreover, taking out as many birds as we could before the boss appeared could also have some beneficial effects. For example, maybe the boss would be weakened according to the number of birds we defeated.

“Considering the severity of the birds’ counterattacks, and taking into account that this is an event, I believe it would be worthwhile to reduce the number of birds.”

“I see.”

That was definitely true. The birds’ tenacity really amped up the difficulty.

“It probably is better to take out the birds, then...”

“You think so too, Silver-Haired?”

“Yeah. I’m a little scared, but I’ll help out.”

Hmm, what should I do about my monsters’ battle formation?

Fau had been in considerable danger earlier. Plus, there were too many enemies for an evasion tank to be effective, and her debuffs were rendered useless. She didn’t have an AoE attack, so she wouldn’t be able to do much even if she did attack. In contrast to that, I *did* have a monster who had an ability that could be extremely effective against those birds.

“Should I summon Himka...?”

Himka’s Counterattacker skill had a built-in autocounter ability. Wouldn’t he be close to unbeatable against the birds, which could be taken down with one hit? Though there was a note that said the ability would only last while his MP did.

However, I had already used a Tamed Monster’s Orb once, and Fau could still take part as a buffer. I also wanted to let her participate in the boss fight.

Should I wait a little longer?

“To summon...or not to summon...”

If I’d been going to summon him, then I should have done so earlier when Sukegawa asked. I felt like I’d kept being one step behind throughout this entire

event, what with first switching out Bear Bear for Sakura for the latter's carpentry skills, and now with Himka. Thinking about that, I couldn't help but hesitate a little on whether to switch out Fau for Himka. What if, when the boss appeared, I needed Fau's abilities?

Though there was no other monster I could switch out. Without Olto as our tank, I would die instantly. And Sakura could be a tank as well as fight with magic. I couldn't part with Reflet, our healer, and Drimo was our strongest attacker. Rick could attack multiple enemies at once with his Nut Bomb skill without focusing their hate, so I didn't want to take him out of the party either.

"Which means it has to be Fau..."

"Aye?"

First Bear Bear and now you. Don't look at me with those innocent eyes... You're not doing it on purpose, are you?

"Aye?"

No! Those eyes are lethal! They're stabbing me in the heart!

"W-Well, I can still use a Tamed Monster's Orb two more times, so I can summon you back if I need to."

Sorry, Fau!

"Return, Fau!"

"A-Aye?"

"Come out, Himka!"

"Hmm!"

Fau disappeared, along with her wide-open eyes that said, "Huh? No way, me?" and in her place appeared Himka, his right hand on his hip and his left fist punching up high into the sky. Had he been waiting to be summoned?

"Himka, I'm counting on you."

"Hm-hm!"

I decided I would think about how to get back in Fau's good graces—at this moment, dealing with the birds came first. *Do your best, Himka.*

“Are you done, Silver-Haired?”

“Oops, sorry, Kokuten. I kept you waiting.”

“No problem. Switching out your party is important.”

“So, was there something you wanted us to do?”

Before we moved over to the command post, Kokuten had clearly been staring at my monsters.

“That’s correct. Although I’d say the fact that you’re helping is enough.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m sure a lot of other players will join in to help too if it means being able to fight with you and your monsters.”

“He’s right. Challenging a raid boss with Silver-Haired would be like a party.”

“Yeah, totally.”

Not only Kokuten, but even the other players around us said the same thing.

“No way, I don’t think that would be enough to get people to cooperate...”

We might have a chance with players that liked cute things, but I doubted there were that many of them. Kokuten, however, was firmly shaking his head, his expression serious.

“Not at all. What are you saying? Considering how popular your monsters are, it’s a surefire thing.”

“They’re like idols.”

I felt calling them idols was a bit of an exaggeration, but I guess my monsters’ cuteness had captured the hearts of more people than I had realized? *Way to go, guys!*

“I want to fight with your monsters too.”

“If you put a Music Box on sale with your fairy’s tunes, I bet they’d sell like hot cakes. That’s how popular she is.”

“Honestly, even just the sound of the other monsters’ voices... *Slurrrp.*”

“Wipe the drool off your face! But actually, that’s a great idea. A chorus of

monsters singing together! That'll sell!"

"I want one of those Music Boxes too!"

The other players all started making a ruckus. But I just had one question.

"A Music Box?"

There were music boxes in this game?

"Huh? You don't know? They've been getting a lot of attention recently."

Apparently, Music Boxes were items for musicians: people could record a song on them, which could then be played back by expending MP.

The item's original purpose was to allow players to get the effects of Singing and Musical Performance even if they didn't have those skills themselves. Although the effects were downgraded, the item was revolutionary in that anyone could use it.

However, recently people had been using it as just a way to enjoy music rather than as a buffing item. If you failed at recording a song on the Music Box, it would still play music but not give you any buffs. But since people were happy using it just to listen to music, that wasn't a problem.

In the case of people recording original music they created in game, gaining effects wasn't really the point in the first place. The Music Boxes made by players who were popular for their singing were apparently being sold for super high prices. There were even some players who had already cultivated their status as divas.

"Hmm, I've still got a lot to learn about this game."

Could I sell a Music Box with Fau's songs recorded on it? But just buying a Music Box itself cost a lot of money, so maybe it wouldn't net me much of a profit? Plus, if fairies eventually became easy to tame, my Music Boxes would immediately start getting overlooked. In that case, it didn't seem worth it.

After our brief meeting, we decided to go with our Simultaneous Area-of-Effect Magic Bombardment Plan, to be carried out by the players that could wield magic. I was surprised to see so many people switch from opposing to supporting the plan when we explained to them that my monsters would also

be participating. It went just how Kokuten and the others had said it would.

Though it was probably less so because of the popularity of my monsters, and more so as the result of people getting excited and not wanting to miss out on all the festivities.

“Let’s win this together!” Kokuten cried.

“YEEEEAAAAH!”

There was an earth-shattering cheer in response, signaling the start of our plan. Everyone began preparing all at once. The second-wave players seemed like they had gotten into the swing of things now—they also promptly got moving.

“Oh, right. I have some meals I’d like to distribute.”

“Oh, you made some?”

“They’re handmade by Reflet!”

“YEEEEAAAAAAH!”

As I had assumed, Reflet’s handmade dishes resulted in a boost in motivation for the guys. Though some girls were also shouting with joy. But actually, weren’t people getting a little *too* excited about this? Their level of enthusiasm was so tremendous, it scared me a little. I hadn’t been expecting this. At this rate, they’d riot if I kept them waiting, so I needed to pass the dishes out quickly.

“All right, I’ll ask the culinary unit to distribute—”

“Wait!”

Kokuten cut me off with a fierce tone. When I turned to look, he was staring at me with an intense, serious expression.

“Wh-What’s wrong?”

“Could you have your monsters serve the food?”

“Huh? Sure, that’s fine...but wouldn’t it be faster to split up the work?”

“Nevertheless! Please, I’d appreciate it.”

“O-Okay.”

Doing that raised morale even more. Plus, even the female players who hadn’t been delighted by Reflet’s handmade meals smiled when they were personally delivered food by cute monsters. This must have been what Kokuten was going for. What a smart guy.

Then, ten minutes later, we took to the defensive wall to face off against the birds yet again.

“Chreep chreep chreep chreep chreep chreep—”

The large swarm of birds that blotted out the sky was as intimidating a sight as ever. But the players were glaring up at that black stain across the sky, unflinching. That must have been thanks to the sense of security they felt in having a plan.

“Please begin your incantations!”

At Kokuten’s signal, the players started chanting simultaneously.

In a regular raid boss event, parties served no purpose. All the participating players were one raid party, after all. However, the event this time was special; until the boss made its appearance, the party system still existed. That was exactly why if a Mage cast an AoE spell, the birds retaliated against their party members as well.

Naturally, you could also form multiparty teams. We were taking advantage of that this time by adopting a strategy where we incorporated a good number of tanks who could put up protective barriers into parties with Mages. That way, even if the birds made a concentrated attack on them, they would be protected by the tanks’ multiple bulwarks and wouldn’t be instakilled like the last party.

My and Kokuten’s parties also formed a team. Kokuten’s party had three people with tank skills, which made our defensive power shoot through the roof.

“All right! I’ll start the countdown! Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five...”

As Kokuten started counting down, the Mages all took up their staffs. They

had already finished with their chanting, and their spells were currently in a held state. Incidentally, the stronger your magic skill was, the longer you could delay activating your magic after chanting. At the lowest, once you reached the level where you could use the weakest area magic, you could delay your spell by only three seconds.

My Aqua Shock skill took five seconds to prepare, so I'd still be able to make it in time if I started chanting after the countdown began. Sekisho, one of the Mages in Kokuten's party, had a spell that took almost fifteen seconds to chant. I was looking forward to seeing what that was like.

"Chreep chreep chreep chreep chreep chreep—"

As the birds' boisterous cawing gradually grew louder, we all launched our magic attacks at the flock. A horizontal wall of almost one hundred AoE magic spells shaved down the swarm of birds. Even though we were in the middle of battle, I couldn't help but stare. It was almost like a magic-skill showcase. Flame and wind attacks were the most numerous. Next was water, and then maybe earth? I also saw a few special magic techniques, including things like thunder and ice here and there.

The attack Sekisho used was a wind-magic spell called Aero Blast, which released a burst of pressurized air that caused an explosion. Not only was it very powerful, but the way the caster could designate the point of attack with just their gaze was especially brutal. That meant the target couldn't block the attack just by intercepting it. On the other hand, the skill was unusable in dark places, so you had to be selective in where you used it. But it was considerably powerful in an open area like this.

"Chreep chreep chreep chreep—"

"The remaining birds are charging in! Silver-Haired, you and your monsters get behind us!"

"Got it!"

"We're counting on Reflet's healing abilities!"

"Leave that to us! Himka, engage the enemy!"

"Hm!"

“But if the situation looks bad, come back right away, you hear?”

I had to warn him—the way he was jumping up and down so enthusiastically worried me. If things didn’t go as planned, I could see him rushing in by himself.

“Hm-hm!”

He repeatedly nodded his head, but did he really understand?

“Chreep chreep chreep chreep—”

“They’re here!”

Even though we had reduced their numbers, countless birds still whirled around in the sky. I almost doubted that we had taken out any at all.

At this rate, we would be swallowed up by the swarm of birds, just like last time. Countless black birds were flying around us. They were roughly the size of a pigeon or a crow. But since they collided hard against us one after another, they ended up packing quite a punch.

Of course, the fact that Kokuten’s party was protecting me was the only reason I had enough time to examine the birds. I didn’t expect any less from a party with advanced combat capabilities. They were completely unshaken even in a situation like this, and as they knocked down the birds, they were able to endure their attacks with self-healing and self-reinforcement techniques. Wouldn’t they be just fine even without Reflet’s healing? They looked so composed that I couldn’t help but think that.

There was, however, someone who was not just on their level, but actually beyond it. And that someone was none other than my own Himka.

“Hmmmmmm!”

“Chreep chreep chreep!”

“Hmmm! Hm!”

His Counterattacker skill was working even more perfectly than I had imagined. All Himka was doing was standing there, cloaked in a red light, while birds threw themselves against him and died.

The surrounding birds were drawn to Himka due to Counterattacker’s

provoking effect. The birds were swarming around Himka like poor flies to a light trap, dropping as they turned into polygons and disappeared. Eventually, Himka had successfully crushed a massive number of them just with his imposing stance in the few minutes before they escaped back up into the sky. Not to mention he took no damage.

Kokuten looked surprised. He must not have been expecting much from our combat ability, but Himka had achieved some great results. It was understandably surprising.

“Was he using Counterattacker by chance? That’s quite a rare skill.”

“It’s amazing you knew what it was just by seeing it.”

“Well, an acquaintance of mine was actually trying to decide whether to learn it or not, but in the end they gave up on it.”

A surprising number of players had the same skill Olto had, Guardian. If you progressed through the regular route as a tank, you’d be able to fulfill the requirements without issue, after all.

In order to learn Counterattacker, however, one needed to learn counter and revenge skills, which activated effects based on the damage you took from enemies.

It was extremely difficult to use counter skills in this game especially. Even with system assist, it was hard to counter a fast-moving enemy’s attack. It wasn’t as if there were zero players who used them, but there were a lot of players who were discouraged by how difficult it could be. Kokuten’s acquaintance was one of those players who had given up on following that path due to the difficulty of countering.

“However, I can see now that autocounter skills would be effective, and there are other ones too. Let’s try to find people who can use counter skills before the next onslaught.”

“Right!”

We called for not just fighters but crafters as well, and as a result we were able to find a dozen or so people who had autocounter abilities. *Seek and ye shall find, I guess.*

Surprisingly, if you respawned over fifty times, you would fulfill the requirements to learn it.

“Fifty times, huh? That’s a lot.”

“Yeah, well, that’s thanks to you, Silver-Haired,” said one of the players.

“Huh? Me?”

What did he mean by that? Did I do something?

“I tried dying a bunch to see if I could get a title like yours!”

“Yeah, same here! I didn’t get one, though!”

“I did the same! I even tried several different ways of dying.”

It looked like a lot of players here thought that if they died and respawned a bunch, they would get something like my title. When you respawned, you lost your items and the money you were carrying, so doing that fifty times seemed pretty rough...

“W-Well, I appreciate your cooperation.”

“Leave it to us!” they all exclaimed.

As a result, we incorporated their abilities into our strategy before the next attack, allowing us to crush even more birds.

The image of the players with counter skills standing in a row while the birds rammed into them and died went beyond reassuring and straight to just plain bizarre. At this rate, with their help, we would also be able to get through the next attacks surprisingly easily.

However, an announcement cruelly intercepted my wishful thinking.

“Time is up. The boss will now appear.”

It just wasn’t going to be that easy.

“The boss is here...” Kokuten muttered with a frown after hearing the announcement.

The original plan had been to send out troops a little earlier and intercept the boss in front of the rocky mountain the moment it appeared. However, the

birds' onslaught had kept us stuck at the fortress, and the boss had ended up showing up before we could lay down our defensive line.

"What should we do, Kokuten?"

"We have no choice but to have our combat unit head over there."

"Yeah, I agree."

"Oh, Sakkyun. When'd you get here?"

Sakkyun had been stationed in a different spot so I hadn't been able to see him fight, but it seemed he had taken a pretty active part. He had summoned his monsters that had AoE attacks and autocounter skills and slaughtered birds in droves. Although being able to switch out monsters adapting to the situation was always one of a Summoner's strengths, the reason he'd been able to take such an active role as he had was because he was a top Summoner.

"Can't we take some people from the crafting and repair units?"

"I think that would be best too, but we don't have enough people in the repair unit."

The work to repair the fortress had also slowed due to the bird attacks. Since the items the crafters were making were going to be absolutely necessary from here on, he was also hesitant to spare people from there. While Kokuten and Sakkyun were discussing things, some people from the crafting unit came out from inside the fortress, with Ishida and Sawyer in the front.

"Kokuten, we'll fight too!"

"While I appreciate that, are you sure?"

"We've finished making about eighty percent of the items."

"The others should be able to take care of the rest."

They must have been thinking we'd be fine as long as they finished crafting before the boss reached the fortress.

With those players added to the mix, Kokuten and his party discussed what our next move would be.

"The birds are gone now, so I'd like to reduce our defense of the fortress and

head out to attack the boss, but... What do you think, Silver-Haired?"

"Huh? What do I think?"

"Yes."

Why was he asking me? Was Kokuten being considerate of me too since I had been the one to trigger this event?

"Hmm, I think that's a good idea. Will it really be okay if we neglect the fort, though? The devs outsmarted us earlier too."

"I see! That's very true."

Kokuten clapped his hands together in understanding, but his admiration actually worried me.

"I-I don't have any proof of that, though."

I just thought it'd be bad if the birds appeared again with a delayed attack. I was probably overthinking it, though. No matter how devious the devs might be, they wouldn't repeatedly trick us. In actuality, the birds really had completely disappeared. The sky wasn't seventy percent bird anymore—it was one hundred percent sky. However, since I had been out of step this whole event, I couldn't help but be pessimistic.

Hearing what I had to say, Kokuten and the others started conferring with each other, their expressions serious. *No no, that is just my own paranoia. You don't need to discuss it so seriously... Huh? I have a point? And you're going to make sure you leave behind a strong defense at the fort? For real?*

They decided to have half of the players head for the boss.

"A-Are you sure? Wouldn't it be better for all of us to go?" I couldn't stop myself from asking. But Kokuten and his party were unwavering in their decision.

"It's risky to dispatch our forces without first scouting out the boss's abilities."

"Well okay, when you put it that way."

In the end, they decided to leave behind half the people who could use AoE attacks and autocounter skills—including my monsters and me—in preparation

for another bird attack.

Some players had an aversion to the swarm of birds. I included myself among those who were kind of scared of them, but there were also people who had a visceral dislike of them or who were hopelessly terrified. Personally, for me it was a similar sensation to being surrounded by a swarm of bugs, so I could understand being disturbed by them. That player from earlier who couldn't stand around anymore and had unleashed a magic attack must have been one of those people who couldn't handle birds.

"Good luck!"

"Mmm!"

"Hmm!"

We faced the troop that was heading out to fight and waved to them from atop the defensive wall. They all waved back at us. It was strange, just seeing off our allies heading off to battle really made this feel like a proper event. My monsters saluted back players who saluted them, and then some other players also started saluting.

"The monsters saluted me!"

"What an adorable salute!"

"I could fight for ten years on that salute!"

"Mm!"

"Hm!"

At some point while they were exchanging salutes, almost everyone joined in and gave salutes. *Huh? Am I supposed to join in too?* As I was hesitating, Kokuten, who was at the end of the line, looked up at me.

"Silver-Haired! Take care of the fort!"

Kokuten... When you say it like that, it makes it seem like I'm the leader of the ones staying behind.

Oh well. We had already decided on the plan of action. Everyone would help out with repairing the fortress, and if Kokuten called for us, we'd head out to

fight. That was all. *Huh? The birds, attack us? Nah, no way. That was just Kokuten's party being overly concerned. The sky was clear, with not a single bird in sight.*

"All right, let's get to work on repairing the fortress. Himka, I'm counting on you here too, okay?"

"Hm!"

This time, Himka would be able to take a very active part in this.

"Okay, Himka, could you help out the blacksmiths here?"

"Hmm."

Lewin probably had some work for Himka to do. The rest of us would handle transporting the building materials. Apparently there weren't many people with carpentry skills, so we would have to take on as many odd jobs as we could.

"All right then, bring this over there."

"Hummm!"

Reflet and I carried a sizable stone block together. The masons had made these. They were apparently event-only blocks that had a bird-repellent effect. I hadn't obtained the materials for them myself, but apparently they were abundantly available in a quarry to the south. They were fairly heavy, but Olto and Drimo were each easily able to carry one on their own. Those two were as reliable as ever.

"Mm!"

"Squeak!"

"Chirp chirp!"

Rick was...just getting in the way? The face he was making made it seem like he was hard at work, but he was just dangling off the block. I picked him up with my fingers and placed him on my head.

"You stay there."

"Chirp?"

"You can be our cheer squad."

“Chirp!”

And so, we worked diligently at our task of hauling materials, until players from the crafting unit came running up to the defensive wall. There was a look of panic on their faces, but I hoped that was just my imagination.

“Silver-Haired!”

“Wh-What is it?”

“Something weird’s happening to the crystal! It started glowing!”

I knew it was important!

I excused myself from the other players and headed for the great hall. There, just like the others had reported, the crystal was glowing with a bluish-white light.

At first the light was dimmer, so I thought I was just imagining things. But the light just kept getting brighter.

So it really wasn’t just a decorative object. But no one understood what meaning it could have.

“Any clue, Olto?”

“Mmm?”

“Guess not.”

“For now, let’s just keep an eye on—”

“Silver-Haired! We’re in trouble!”

Oh, come on! I keep getting pulled in every direction!

Online Forum [Farming Rocks!] A Farming Thread for Farmers by Farmers, Part 10

This is a thread where people who own farms in LJO can exchange information.

From topics concerning large-scale farms to small home gardens, all questions are welcome here.

Please make it clear if your post contains unverified information.

While we're grateful for actual farming tips, we're not sure how practical they'll be in the game.

333: Choregi

So rice hasn't been discovered yet, huh?

334: Charm

Unfortunately not.

Man, I wanna eat oyakodon until I go bankrupt!

335: Tsugarun

What I want is raw egg mixed with rice.

336: Daichi

All I want is basic fried rice.

337: Charm

Ooh, that sounds good too!

At any rate, eggs and rice! That's the best combination!

338: Choregi

I feel like if I could alternate between eating pickled food and white rice, I could do that forever.

339: Terrill

This is a very timely discussion you're having.

340: Tsugarun

Hm? Timely?

Care to elaborate...?

341: Terrill

Rejoice. And then despair.

For rice has been discovered!

342: Tsugarun

Whoa! Finally!

343: Charm

Where?!

Where can I get my hands on it?!

344: Daichi

Tell us, you sexy person!

345: Terrill

Ha. Ha. Ha... It's in Zone Six, just beyond the Subterranean Lake!

If you'd like to know more, then you should go ask the Quick-Eared Cats!

346: Charm

'Scuse me?

347: Tsugarun

What'd you say?

348: Choregi

Well that's impossible for me.

I'm still in Zone Three.

349: Tsugarun

No, hold on, that's not the problem here!

When did the Subterranean Lake get cleared in the first place?

Damn it, I haven't checked the log from when I was signed out!

350: Thomas

You all are talking about that here too, huh?

Jeez, that topic is dominating every thread I visit...

Everyone's talking about how Silver-Haired's done it again.

351: Charm

So Silver-Haired was the one who discovered rice?

352: Terrill

Silver-Haired was passing around some rice dishes at the raid boss event.

353: Choregi

He's amazing.

He's so famous that even second-wave players like me know his name.

I wouldn't expect anything less.

354: Tsugarun

I wonder if he can keep this up and discover apples too?
I'm sure if anyone could, he can!

355: Thomas

Relying on Silver-Haired in your time of need?

Though I also keep finding myself thinking "If anyone can, it's Silver-Haired" lololol

356: Tagosack

Hey!

I just grew and harvested rice!

357: Charm

Wow, you move fast! No surprises there.

So, how is it? Do you need Hydroponics to grow it after all?

358: Tagosack

You need Hydroponics plus a hydroponic pool.

It turns into seedlings when you use Propagation, so that's a little unique, but you can cultivate it normally.

Farmers like us can probably harvest it in three or four days.

359: Thomas

Oh crap! I just changed my Farming skill into

Arboriculture!

But I need ten whole points to get Hydroponics! I don't have enough!

360: Tsugarun

I have just enough!

This is why I keep saying to plan out how you use your points.

361: Daichi

My Farming skill is about to reach level 50. Should I go for Hydroponics?

362: Thomas

That depends on your farm and what your goal is.

If you *really* want rice, you should go for Hydroponics, but as of now there have only been three types of crops discovered that can be grown with Hydroponics. *And* you need a hydroponic pool.

With Arboriculture, there are plenty of crops you can choose from. And if you want a Lakeside Tree, a Sacred Tree, or a Tree Nymph like Silver-Haired introduced, then you should probably learn Arboriculture.

363: Terrill

Well, you can always get derivative skills by using bonus points, so you can just pick without worrying too much about it, y'know? If you have a lot of points to spare, that is...

364: Charm

I say Hydroponics is the only real option right now!

This is the chance to make bank!

I leveled up my Cooking skill, so now I can get rich quick off of rice dishes! Yay!

365: Tagosack

If that's what you're going for, you better start now.

The Cats are selling the info on how to clear the Subterranean Lake, so it'll start circulating soon.

In fact, there were already a good number of players gathering in Zone Six.

I was surprised to see people on the front lines coming back just for that. Though I guess their goal is probably to explore a new area.

366: Tsugarun

I'm getting some messages from friends asking me to secure them some rice.

It looks like players who are part of culinary groups or who are interested in food and drink are starting to pursue rice.

Once I get some rice plants, I'm sure they'll buy them from me for a considerable sum.

If I play my cards right, I should come out of this with a good profit.

367: Daichi

Maybe I should try doing that.

I've been wanting a new farm anyway.

368: Choregi

This discussion is still way out of my league for a

newbie like me.

Ahh, I want to get more farms soon!

369: Thomas

Grrrr... Is there any way I can get bonus points fast...?

At this rate, there'll be a stable supply of rice around before I can even learn Hydroponics!

370: Tagosack

Level up the normal way.

371: Thomas

No way!

It'll take forever to gain four levels!

372: Terrill

Gain a title, and get bonus points from the reward.

373: Thomas

Who do you think I am, Silver-Haired?!

Please, don't compare us! We're not the same!

I mean seriously, twelve titles?! And he just got another!

374: Charm

All right then, how about you rank highly in the event?

375: Thomas

Damn it, I should have participated in the raid boss battle!

I didn't think crafters would be able to take on much of

a role, so I passed it up!

376: Charm

That's not what I'm talking about. There's one more event coming up, remember?

377: Tagosack

Right, the commemorative event for the second-wave players.

Even we have a chance of ranking highly in that.

378: Daichi

What do you mean?

379: Terrill

The details about the second-wave player event were sent out not too long ago, but it looks like there'll be a bazaar in a special area into which you can only bring a limited number of items.

Crafters will be able to sell their products at stalls and such.

Fighters can obtain materials in another area and sell them to the crafters.

Various deeds will get you something like contribution points, with players competing to get the most points.

380: Choregi

Plus, I heard second-wave players get a small bonus.

I'm excited for it.

381: Charm

If you do well and rank high in that event, there's a

good chance you'll get bonus points out of it, right?

382: Tagosack

I'm sure lots of other people have the same idea, though.
And I'm sure there are a lot of people excited for it.
This'll be the first official event we've had in a while.

383: Thomas

You think there's going to be too much competition?
It's def going to be impossible.

384: Terrill

I guess getting a title's your only choice after all
l0ool

385: Tsugarun

Just play in some bizarre, totally unexpected way and
you'll get a title by the end of the day lolol

386: Charm

I'm going to join the event too! I want bonus points!
I suck at fighting, but I'll manage.

387: Daichi

In that case, maybe I'll join too.
There's probably something I can do.

388: Thomas

Nooo! The competition's rising!

389: Tagosack

First order of business is deciding on what items to

bring.

390: Tsugarun

Before that, my priority is rice!

I'm heading off to the Cats!

391: Charm

Same here!

Rice rice riiiiice!

392: Terrill

The Quick-Eared Cats' shop was super crowded, though. I don't think things are going to settle down there for a while.

I think I'll start preparing for the event.

I can't copy Silver-Haired, but I do want to aim for a top-ranking spot.

393: Thomas

I'll prepare too.

I can't copy him either, but I want a title.

394: Daichi

Seeing that video made me realize that I could never imitate Silver-Haired.

395: Choregi

Oh right, that...

396: Tagosack

I'm not sure if I can't copy him or don't *want* to...

397: Terrill

Silver-Haired.

I can't believe that's how things ended...

Chapter Four: The Great Battle with Andras

The person who rushed into the great hall was the player who had been overseeing the work of transporting materials. Once they spotted me, they came running over.

“Silver-Haired! We’ve got trouble!”

“Again?! What happened?”

By the way, why was everyone coming to report to *me*?! I knew that what Kokuten said before he left was going to make people think I was the leader—I just knew it! *If you’re coming to me for help, don’t expect anything more than the most basic advice!*

“The birds are back!”

“Are you serious?!”

“I am!”

I can’t believe the birds really did reappear... It’s only ever my bad feelings that end up being right!

“Anyone who’s got a free hand, go up to the defensive wall now!”

“R-Right! Everyone, you heard Silver-Haired, right? Let’s get moving!”

“Got it!” everyone cried in response.

Oh no, doesn’t this basically confirm me as the leader? I take no responsibility for if we fail the event, you hear me?!

However, now was not the time to worry about that. I followed after the mad rush of players and returned to the top of the defensive wall, where I was met with the sight of a swarm of birds flying around the fortress. Just like before, the birds were striking our fort, but this time there were a few things that were different.

The first thing was the color of the birds. While before the birds had all been

black, this time there were some red birds mixed in with the swarm. Probably about twenty percent of them were red, in fact, red threads in a storm of pitch-black. They were a new variety of enemy, but I didn't yet know what was different about them. Wait, were the red birds not attacking us? It looked like they were just flying around high above the fortress. Maybe they were there to heal and buff the other birds.

One other thing that was different was the density of the swarm.

"There are more birds in some spots!"

That must have been because we'd made a good amount of progress in repairing the fortress. The building materials with the bird-repellent effect significantly restricted the birds' movements. That was true for both the red and the black birds. Accordingly, the birds were assembling around the several spots where the bird-repellent effect was weaker. The players near those spots were probably taking a lot of damage.

But couldn't we use this to our advantage? If we sent those with autocounter skills to those areas where more birds were congregating, we should be able to reduce the birds' numbers by a hefty amount. However, since the players who were getting attacked were surrounded by the birds, their fields of vision obstructed, they seemed not to have noticed the difference in the birds' density.

Or maybe they *had* noticed, but they didn't have the leeway to fight back. Particularly those players who were in the zones where the swarm was especially dense. Through the gaps amid the swarming birds, I could see some players' HP getting whittled down even with the tanks' Guard skill active. In that state, they probably couldn't even move properly.

"S-Silver-Haired, what should we do?"

"Uh..."

Using magic would be a bad move, right? In that case, we were limited in our options.

"For now, I think our only choice is to use items to take out as many birds as we can..."

“U-Understood.”

If we could get other people to join in and use items to mitigate some of the damage we were taking, we would be able to manage to hold out. But things did not go as planned.

“Chreep chreep squawk chreep chreep squawk chreep—”

“Shut up already!”

The deafening cries of the birds prevented our voices from reaching the other players. I felt like the noise was even louder than before the boss appeared, but that could have just been my mind playing tricks on me.

I approached some nearby players and managed to tell them the plan, but at best I was able to instruct just a few parties. At this rate, the players in the zones the birds were concentrated in would all be wiped out.

“Wh-What should we...?”

Should I use my magic to attract the birds to us and have Himka counterattack them? No, I doubted we alone could attract all of the birds. Even if we could save the others, we would probably get killed ourselves.

“Hmm... Oh yeah!”

I opened up my inventory. I had submitted this item to the crafting unit when I’d first arrived at the fort, but now it was back in my possession. Maybe because I was the leader, in some sense of the word, and the one who had obtained the item.

Name: Bird-Eating Demon Primate’s Gallstones

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 10★

Effect: Place down to keep away birds. However, depending on the type, there may be a chance they’ll initiate an attack? Disappears at end of event.

“This is it!”

The description stated it would keep away birds. *Wait, that second half sounds a little ominous, doesn't it?* But I figured it would probably keep away the black birds that had been here from the start. That alone should be enough. And if the red birds started attacking us...

“Himka, I might need your help!”

“Hm!”

I almost felt it was a waste to use this item, but we might not be able to complete the event if a bunch of players died before the boss battle. With that in mind, it would be fine for me to use this here.

I raced over to the west side of the defensive wall, where most of the birds were currently gathered. As I got closer, more and more birds started surrounding me and my visibility started to worsen. My HP also started dropping by a lot, but I kept moving forward despite it. Then, the moment I became completely surrounded by birds, I took out the Bird-Eating Demon Primate's Gallstones, which had a dramatic effect.

“Whoa, what? Awesome!”

“Hmm!”

The birds that had been encircling me escaped up into the sky all at once. And that wasn't limited to my vicinity; the same phenomenon affected the entire defensive wall.

“But I guess it wasn't able to drive away all of them after all...”

“*Squawk squawk squawk squawk—*”

Just as I had feared, the red birds alone remained flying around the fort. I realized I was only hearing the red birds' squawking now that the black birds had disappeared, but their voices were very throaty. If the black birds that had been here until now had chirped akin to small birds like sparrows and canaries, then the red birds had deeper, lower voices, sort of like birds in the starling or shrike families.

All of a sudden, those red birds started gathering around us. The Gallstones had already broken apart and turned into trash, but it seemed the effect was

still active.

“Himka!”

“Hm-hm!”

Himka triumphantly activated his Counterattacker skill. The birds seemed abnormally sensitive to the fluctuations of hate, which meant Counterattacker’s provoking effect pulled them in fantastically. Was this the start of yet another moment where Himka mowed down a bunch of enemies? But once again, my expectations were betrayed. To my surprise, the red birds were a bit stronger than the black birds.

The Counterattacker skill manifested as a thin film of magical energy wrapped around the user. That film itself had both defensive and offensive abilities that could be adjusted according to Himka’s will. The black birds, with their low HP, died on their own just touching that film, so Himka hadn’t taken even a single point of damage from them.

The red birds, however, didn’t die after one Counterattack hit, so just charging in allowed them to deal successful blows to Himka. The damage they dealt started stacking up. Although their numbers did start to decrease a little, there were still over a thousand of them. If this kept up, Himka was sure to go down.

“Oh right! I have this too!” I exclaimed, remembering the existence of another item I had.

Name: Bird-Killing Aromatic Wood

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 10★

Effect: Burn to produce smoke that deals damage to birds.
Disappears at end of event.

I had gotten it at the same time as the Bird-Eating Demon Primate’s Gallstones. Maybe I was supposed to use them together? With that thought, I took out the Bird-Killing Aromatic Wood and lit it on fire. It must have been dried out; the flame quickly grew in size and began producing smoke.

“Take this!”

I flung the aromatic wood, which started emanating billowing white clouds like a smoke bomb, in Himka’s direction. When I did, the red birds instantly started falling to the ground. Apparently they didn’t even have to breathe in the smoke; just coming into contact with it dealt them damage. Thanks to the tremendous effects of the aromatic wood, the red wall that had been wrapped around us disappeared in a mere ten seconds.

“Wow, that’s what I call effective!”

“Hmm!”

But then I started to worry about whether it had been a good idea to use that here. After all, an item as effective as that one could have probably been used elsewhere.

“...Well, I’ll think about that if it comes to it. It’s not like I can take back using it.”

“Hm?”

If I hadn’t used it, we would’ve died anyway. I shouldn’t worry about it. Besides, even though I had gotten rid of the red birds, the battle between us players and the birds was still ongoing. There was still a massive number of black birds.

“The birds that cleared out are starting to flock together again. They’re coming back!”

“Hm!”

However, we had fewer players who could use autocounter skills since some of them had set out with Kokuten’s group, so we weren’t able to fight back the way we wanted. No one had died yet, but everyone’s stamina was gradually dwindling. And that wasn’t all: the bird attacks were also whittling down the fort’s durability.

That’s right, we were not the only targets taking damage.

Ishida came running back up to the defensive wall and exclaimed, “Silver-Haired! The crystal’s light is starting to change from blue to yellow!”

The surrounding players and I groaned.

“It must be indicating the fort’s life meter.”

The crystal in the great hall was gradually changing color each time the birds damaged the fort. The one who had noticed the color of the crystal was the same as an HP gauge was Sawyer, who was in front of the crystal supervising the crafting unit. Then, after putting everything together, he predicted that maybe the crystal represented the fort’s life meter. At first he didn’t know if he was right or not, but...now that things had reached this point, it seemed undeniable. That crystal was displaying the fort’s HP level.

It seemed like the time we’d been given before the boss appeared was to allow us to repair the fortress. Even when the birds had attacked us before, the fortress hadn’t been damaged. Without a doubt, the birds’ role had been to get in the way of our repair work. However, now that the boss had appeared, the fortress was taking damage too. Either that, or this breed of birds was simply different. In any case, from now on we had to protect not only ourselves, but the fortress too. I was just repeating what Ishida and Sawyer told me, though.

This meant it was probably necessary for us to annihilate all the birds, even if we had to take some risks.

“To round up all the birds...we’ve gotta use that other thing, right?”

I actually still had quite a lot of the event item called Bird Attractant Feed. I had used virtually none of it since I hadn’t found a good time to make use of it.

This feed was created using a Bird Attractant Stone. My monsters and I had only been able to find what we had in that spring, so it must have meant it was a pretty rare material. The same could be said for other players; besides me, only ten other parties had been able to get their hands on some, each group finding it in a considerably obscure location. I thought we’d had it bad with having to go underwater to find one, but apparently they were also hidden underground and inside rocks. *How’d they even manage to find those?*

Those stones were used to make the Bird Attractant Feed, but using that focused the birds’ hate towards the user by a drastic amount, as much as when using an AoE attack. Because of that, the players who’d used the feed in the beginning had ended up dying, making everyone else hesitant to use it. As a

result, we'd ended up with a surplus.

Wouldn't it be a good idea to use this item to gather the birds together and then hit them simultaneously with items and magic attacks? I consulted with some other players, and most everyone agreed with that plan.

"All right, let's go with that!"

"Well, Silver-Haired came up with it, so I'm sure it'll work out."

"Yeah, the way he took out those red birds was awesome."

"Sakura's so cute..."

I was surprised by how oddly quick to agree they were, but they must have also realized that if things kept going this way, we'd be in trouble. Or maybe at some point I truly had become the leader. *Guys, are you really okay with that?* I tried asking them that in a roundabout way, but everyone just smiled and said, "We'll leave the countdown to you!" and, "If you're going to give directions, you should stand in the middle!" It really seemed like they wanted to foist the role of leader onto me.

"Hmm..."

No use fighting it. We didn't have time before the next bird attack, so if there was any confusion regarding the chain of command, we would definitely fail the event.

"A-All right then. Mages and tanks, form teams! Fighters, take care of the items!"

Everyone got moving according to my orders. From the look of how things were going, we would have a decent battle formation. The plan was simple. We'd use the Bird Attractant Feed to focus the birds' hate and make them gather in one spot, where we would eradicate them with AoE magic spells and autocounter skills.

"Silver-Haired! The birds are on the move!"

"All right! Autocounter squad, get the Bird Attractant Feed ready!"

"Got it!"

“Mages, start chanting!”

“Roger!”

And so, our strategy was put into action.

When we used the Attractant, the birds, which had been densely congregated in different spots, now crowded into a single area. The autocounterattackers, who had used their items and skills to accumulate the birds’ hate, were immediately surrounded by so many birds it almost looked like they were covered by a jet-black dome. In contrast, not a single bird encircled me and the others.

The parties around me all started raining attacks on the birds at once. There were fewer people now unleashing magic attacks, but that wasn’t much of a problem since the birds were all congregated in one spot. The autocounterattackers were also getting caught up in the blasts, but thankfully this game didn’t have friendly fire. That was precisely why we could use this sort of tactic.

As the black birds were turned into polygons, countless pale phosphorescent lights floated up from the jet-black dome, making for an incredibly pretty scene. By the end of the battle, we had successfully defeated eighty percent of the birds.

“We did it!”

“No one died, right?”

“Our plan worked!”

Everyone was rejoicing. Well, I understood how they felt. No one had died, after all.

But we also had a problem.

“We’ve used up most of our items now by doing that...”

We—myself included—had all gotten caught up in the moment. We were able to easily defeat the birds using the items, so we’d ended up unintentionally using up too many of them. Although we had gotten rid of a substantial number of them, some birds still remained. How were we going to handle the next

attack? Could we make it with our autocounters and Mage-tank joint-attack setup?

“Silver-Haired! I brought some extra items!”

“Whoa! Sawyer! Are you a god?!”

“Huh? What?”

“Now we can fight!”

Our rejoicing over that also ended up being short-lived, as another strange change was happening with the birds. They weren’t coming to attack us again. They were actually fleeing north. We turned to look in that direction, where we saw something flying in. It was some massive, red-and black-colored thing floating in midair.

“That’s...a bird, isn’t it?”

Sawyer was right. It was a giant bird with red-and-black plumage. It was still far away from us so it looked small, but it must have actually been pretty big. My guess was it was probably several dozen meters in size. No doubt about it, that *had* to be the boss.

And it was heading straight for us.

“So it’s finally here...”

“Silver-Haired!”

“You came up here too, Sukegawa?”

“Yeah. The crafting unit’s joining the defense now. Let’s all do what we can.”

That was reassuring. It wasn’t like crafters couldn’t fight, after all. But it looked like seeing the boss immediately after making it up to the defensive wall threw them into a confusion. I decided to give some instructions to get everyone settled down. If we got moving, we could restore a level of calm. *Hold up, don’t I sound like a leader right now? My skills as a commander must’ve just leveled up rapidly.*

“For now, let’s form teams with the crafters! All the teams should prioritize defense and include a tank—”

“It’s no good! We can’t form teams!” someone shrieked.

“Huh?”

I hastily checked it out, and it turned out we really couldn’t form teams. In fact, parties themselves had been removed. Instead, we were all incorporated into one raid party. It looked like the setup had changed to be like other raid boss events, where we would be fighting as part of a single party. Even though this was the usual way to do things for a raid event, the sudden change had thrown everyone for a loop. Naturally, we couldn’t fight the boss like this. Sukegawa seemed to think the same way; he came running over to me with panic written on his face.

But I don’t know what to do either!

“Silver-Haired, we need to do something or else!”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What should we do, Sukegawa?! C-C-C-C-Calm down!”

“M-Maybe you should calm down first?”

I’m sorry for getting carried away! I have no ability to command and I have even less idea of how to lead!

“I have an idea,” Sukegawa continued. “Can I ask for your help?”

“I-I’ll do whatever I can!”

Right after I agreed to help, Sukegawa clapped his hands together loudly and raised his voice.

“Everyone! Pay attention! Silver-Haired’s got something to say!”

“Huh? Wait—Sukegawa? What’re you saying?”

I said I’d help you, not make a speech!

“Don’t worry, you just need to say something quick to calm everyone down. C’m on, go.”

“N-No way!”

The players Sukegawa called out to all turned to look at me. *Oh crap, I need to say something!* But nothing was coming to mind. Curse my terrible public-speaking skills! Sukegawa must have been unable to sit by and watch me say

nothing. He whispered in my ear.

“All right, just go along with what I have to say. At the very least, you can just shout something like ‘Yeah!’”

“O-Okay. Got it.”

I can do that much!

“Everyone, this is our chance!”

Our chance? Where was he going with this? But I couldn’t interrupt him at this point. For now, I had to follow his lead.

“Yeah!” I chimed in.

“Silver-Haired agrees too! Got it? I’ll say it again! This is our chance to shine as the fortress’s defense force!”

“Yeah!”

“Hold out until the combat unit returns? I say nay! If we do our best now, we could stand out like superstars! We could even aim for MVP!”

“Yeah!”

I had no idea whether you even *could* become MVP in this event. In fact, I was pretty sure that wasn’t a thing in the last raid boss battle I’d participated in either. But if this was what it took to motivate everyone, then I wasn’t going to say anything.

The other players seemed to be livening up at my and Sukegawa’s speech—though all I was doing was agreeing with whatever Sukegawa said. I was also starting to have fun, so I decided I would try ad-libbing something.

“Don’t push yourselves too hard! But let’s give it our all too!”

“Yeaaah!” everyone shouted in reply.

“Hey, Silver-Haired. You could’ve just said to give it their all, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Heh heh heh. It’s fine if we take that boss down on our own, right?”

“Oh, yeah! Now you’re talking, Sukegawa!”

The other players also cheered and applauded. We were all gamers, after all. Most of them didn't dislike this sort of vibe. The chaos and confusion had completely abated. In fact, they seemed so enthusiastic now that I worried they would get carried away and start showing off. Well, at least that would be better than being trampled by the boss while we were in a state of disorder.

"Let's set up our battle formations for now. We'll focus on defense first and see how things play out!" I instructed, getting caught up in the excitement, and everyone got moving at once.

"That's right! Everyone, do what Silver-Haired said and get in formation!"

"Tanks, stand ready at the front!"

"Mages, all the way in the back!"

"Hurry, hurry, hurry!"

I understood they were all in high spirits, but weren't they following my orders a little *too* well? Well, considering I had been forced to be the leader, maybe it made sense for them to obey.

Then, right after we finished setting up our formations...

"Skraaaaaaaaaaw!"

"Whoa!"

"Mmm!"

...we were suddenly assailed by an unpleasant, piercing shriek. It was the cry of the boss, who was drawing closer to the fortress. The noise wasn't just grating; it also seemed to be some sort of sonic attack. It dealt some slight damage to Olto and the other tanks who were lined up at the front of our formation.

Moreover, some people were inflicted with the Terror status effect, which was a deceptively troublesome ailment that lowered the accuracy and activation speed of magic and other skills directed towards the opponent the target was fearful of. Those inflicted were cured on the spot by the players around them, so it wasn't a problem at the moment, but it would probably pose more of an issue in a close fight.

“You okay, Olto?”

“Mm-mm!”

He seemed fine. With his back still facing me, he gave me a thumbs-up. Was he copying Drimo?



Nevertheless, Terror was more of a threat for NPCs like my monsters. In actuality, even if, as a player, you were inflicted with Terror, it wasn't as if you would actually feel any dread or actual fear. No matter how close this game world was to reality, the technology still wasn't at a point where it could manipulate human emotions and mental states. If that was possible in the first place, then people in the game could be brainwashed from the outside.

When your character was inflicted with status ailments like Terror and Delirium, the game would just recreate pseudo versions of those mental states, like shaky vision or inhibited movement.

However, it was different for NPCs working through AI. They really did seem to fall into those mental states. I mean, they were just made to look like they were experiencing those effects, at least. Properly speaking, they behaved as if they really were delirious from fear.

Their judgment and insight would apparently decline. Another Tamer told me about how, one time, they almost died because one of their monsters became inflicted with Terror and it turned tail and ran away, causing their battle formation to fall apart.

"I've got something that can counteract that, though!"

"Mm?"

"...?"

I sprinkled a magic potion I was carrying that boosted status-ailment resistance onto my monsters. With this, they would receive a small bonus to their resistance to status ailments for ten hours. The potion wouldn't protect them completely, but it would lower their probability of being affected.

While I was taking measures against the sonic attack, I could see that the boss was getting even closer. It seemed to be traveling at a staggering speed and would probably reach the fortress faster than any of us had expected.

"I-It's coming! Focus on defense! We'll counterattack with a simultaneous magic attack to disperse its hate!"

"Yes, sir!" everyone exclaimed in response.

And so, right after we had finished setting up our formation, the boss arrived above the fortress.

“Looks like we managed to make it just in time!”

“Mm!”

Our enemy, however, looked super strong. It was a giant bird covered in red-and-black feathers. Its face was flat like an owl’s, but its body was slender like a swallow’s. Its talons were sharp and fierce like those of a bird of prey.

“Its name is Andras?”

That was the name of a demon, wasn’t it? Just like with Glasya-Labolas whom I’d fought against in the last event, I was sure that Andras was one of Solomon’s seventy-two demons. Did all the event bosses follow that same theme?

Andras looked down on the fortress from its position in the sky and unleashed a high-pitched screech. Then, it started to beat its huge wings.

“Kraaaaaaaw!”

“Whoa?! Th-The wind!”

The gale produced by Andras’s wings buffeted the entire fortress. It wasn’t powerful enough to blow anyone back, but it wasn’t weak enough to ignore. Even while standing, I would have almost lost balance if I hadn’t been firmly planting my feet.

“Ch-Chirp chirp!”

“R-Rick!”

“...!”

The effect was particularly intense on Rick. He was almost blown off my head. If Sakura had been just a little late in saving him with her whip, he would have been sent flying to who knows where.

“Nice, Sakura!”

“...♪”

“Chirp!”

Rick, who was being carried in Sakura's arms with her whip wrapped around him, let out a sigh of relief, his expression saying, "I'm saved!"

"Rick, get inside my robe."

"Chirp!"

While Rick was burrowing into my robe, the wind pressure continued to grow. Every single person had to push their body forward to endure the wind. Then, something came flying in at us.

Clang clang!

"Mm!"

When I looked at what had been repelled by Olto's raised hoe, I saw it was a black feather. The boss must have used some feather-fléchette attack. Apparently it sent out a bunch with the wind, making an area attack possible.

"I-I'm saved. Thanks, Olto."

"Mmm!"

Things would not have ended well if Olto hadn't blocked that. And of course, that wasn't the end of Andras's attack.

"Kraaaaaaaaaw!"

The ground next to me started to glow as if in response to the shriek. Then, a small, black, shining magic circle started to appear—multiple of them, in fact, in about thirty different spots all atop the defensive wall.

"Ugh, what now...? Everyone! Get away from the light!"

"Mmm!"

Was it an attack? If the boss could use a long-distance attack on the fort, we'd have no way to prevent it...

The jet-black, meter-wide magic circles that emerged on the wall were obviously sinister. At least, I doubted they spelled anything good for us. My monsters and I put some distance between ourselves and the magic circles.

"Mmm?"

“...!”

Olto and Sakura raised a warning cry. They were standing at the very front as our tanks with their weapons ready. Immediately after, something started to appear from the circles.

“Grrrrrrr...”

“Ack! A giant wolf!”

The magic circles themselves weren’t direct attacks, but rather a type of summoning magic. A wolf with a coat of jet-black fur leaped out.

So birds aren’t the only enemies this time?!

But we couldn’t just keep standing by in shock. This was our chance to strike first.

“Go, everyone!”

“...!”

“Chirp chirp!”

We all attacked the wolf together. Other people also started attacking the wolves emerging from other magic circles as they were summoned. The enemies’ HP seemed higher than expected, though. None of the black wolves went down after our initial joint attack. In fact, their HP hadn’t even been halved.

“They’re strong!”

“What the heck’s up with these things?!”

“They’re so beefy!”

Everyone grimaced in the face of these new foes. We had just gone through the trouble of setting up our ranks, and now the fight looked like it was going to be a skirmish. Everyone must have realized how rough this situation was. Plus, we had another thing working against us.

“Urgh! This wind—!”

“What the— Feathers incoming!”

Andras wasn't yet finished with generating its annoying gale and sending out more feather fléchettes on the wind.

"Silver-Haired! What do you think we should do?"

"S-Sukegawa? Let's take down the wolves first!"

Only the Mages and Archers could deal with Andras while it was in the air. But our players were already split up between the combat unit and fortress-defense unit. If we took out even more Mages from our formation now, there was no telling how long it would take to defeat the black wolves. So, it was better if we all focused on one thing.

"Got it, Silver-Haired!"

"Let's do what Silver-Haired said!"

"Roger that!"

Maybe because my commands hadn't made us fail spectacularly yet, everyone got moving. But if Andras ended up hitting us with some super powerful wide-range AoE attack and a lot of players died, it would definitely be my fault.

Ugh, my stomach hurts. Must just be my imagination, though, this is just a game!

"Take this! And this!"

"Grrrrrrr!"

"Aaagh!"

The feather fléchettes and the wind kept hindering us, making it really hard to fight. The players on the front line were having it the worst. Despite the situation, however, everyone worked together and persevered through the fight, and somehow we were able to keep it up without letting our formation fall apart. If we had split up our fighting power to deal with the black wolves and Andras separately, things definitely would've gotten to a dangerous point.

"Skraaaaaaw!"

"Urgh! Are you kidding me?!"

Andras unleashed another sonic attack.

This was the worst.

The movement-hindering damage and the Terror status ailment were enough to destroy the balance between the black wolves and the players, who were barely holding on. Chaos started to break out all over once again. No one had died yet, but since we had to spare some time to heal, we couldn't attack as frequently. As a result, we couldn't keep the black wolves in check, unfortunately allowing them to move freely. Their attacks became more ferocious, and everyone started falling behind.

"Mm-mm!"

"Ahhh! Olto!"

Olto just got tackled and thrown back by a wolf! It looked like the wolves had taken advantage of an opening when the tank player who had been coordinating with us briefly withdrew.

"Squeak squeak!"

"Grrr!"

In order to fill the hole left by Olto, Drimo boldly challenged the black wolf. He pierced its torso with his pickax, but the black wolf didn't even flinch.

"Grrrrrrr!"

"Squeak?"

"Drimo too?!"

These guys were way too strong! Not only was the wolf's charge attack powerful enough to push Olto back, but the wolf was sturdy enough not to falter even after taking the blow from Drimo.

After countering Drimo with a punch and sending him flying, the black wolf turned to me and bared its fangs. I must have done too much healing and focused its hate. It seemed that healing, particularly with magic skills, was an easy way to garner their attention. *Getting rid of the healers first? Just how much do the devs want us to die?*

“Raaaawr!”

“Ack!”

The black wolf’s massive jowls grew closer, and I accepted this was the end for me, until—

“...!”

“Rawr!”

“S-Sakura, you saved me!”

Sakura leaped to my rescue with her Tree Nymph’s Buckler, stepping in between me and the black wolf at the very last second. *I really thought I was gonna die!*

It was a miracle I had survived. If I kept up my current strategy without another thought, I’d be bitten to death the next time for sure. Especially if I continued using healing spells.

“Rick, can you do some healing?”

“Chirp chirp!”

I decided Rick could heal along with me using his Nut Bomb skill. Using the fruits was kind of a waste, but it was better than accumulating hate and dying. Instead of using skills and spells, I decided to make active use of potions that wouldn’t focus as much hate to heal in emergencies. It seemed like I would use up a lot of my items before Andras itself came to attack us. This must have been what the devs were aiming for us to do.

I hope we don’t use up all our items before that encounter...

Harboring that anxiety, I fought against the black wolves for five minutes. Once we halved the black wolves’ numbers, there was yet another change.

“The black wolves vanished?”

“Mm?”

The black wolves we hadn’t defeated yet turned into black glowing particles and started swirling around in place. Soon after, those particles that had originally been the black wolves were pulled towards Andras, who then

swallowed them. Apparently those black wolves were part of Andras itself. As proof of that, I noticed that Andras's health had gone down. It must have lost HP equivalent to the black wolves we had defeated.

But we couldn't congratulate ourselves over the small amount of damage we'd dealt. Andras's vibe had clearly changed. Its giant body was trembling and it was glaring right at us, as if telling us things were about to really get serious.

"Kraaaaaw!"

"Yikes! Oh no, this is bad!"

Sure enough, Andras's gigantic form swooped down at us. Seeing a massively bulky boss with a wingspan that easily cleared twenty-five meters diving down from right above was intimidating beyond words.

But Andras wasn't *just* intimidating.

"Urk!"

"Dammit! Heal! Hi-Heal!"

The tanks who had taken the brunt of Andras's rapid dive attack nearly died in that one hit. Although they had been healed just in time by their comrades, that level of attack power, which had brought the tanks to the verge of death, was way too frightening.

"Th-This is our chance to attack—"

"Kraaaaaw!"

But this was our best opportunity to attack. Without needing anyone to say anything, we all tried to encircle Andras, but then—

Andras immediately beat its wings and ascended. Some people had tried to rush over, but the fierce wind impeded them from being able to attack.

Andras's assault wasn't even close to being over.

"Kraaaaaaaw!"

"Here it comes again!"

After changing position slightly, Andras came diving down once more. This time, instead of coming at us players, it used its massive, sicklelike talons to

bore huge holes into the fortress. That attack alone was enough to make part of the defensive wall crumble. No two ways about it, it was a vital blow. I was worried what color the crystal might be now.

“So if we get hit, at best we only *nearly* die. And if we evade its attacks, it’ll damage the wall?”

The fortress was definitely not going to be able to withstand a prolonged encounter at this rate. We also didn’t know what sort of negative consequence there would be if the fort’s life meter dropped to zero and the crystal shattered. It was possible that that would mean we had failed the event. As such, we needed to figure out a way to block Andras’s attacks while also somehow dealing damage to it...

Should we wait for Andras to summon the black wolves again? We could chip away Andras’s HP by defeating those.

“Hmm, that’s no good. That would take way too long.”

Either the event would end first, or the fortress would be destroyed.

“Meaning, our only choice is to hammer it with attacks when it dive-bombs at us.”

This was shaping up to be a very risky fight.

“Olto, the battle’s about to get even dicier. I’ll need you to give it your all.”

“Mm-mm!”

Somehow Olto’s thumbs-up feels less encouraging than usual.

“Incoming!”

“Mmm!”

Andras, you jerk, I’ll show you what’s what! But please, combat unit, come back as fast as you can!

While I was hoping for the others to come to our rescue, I readied myself to attack Andras during its next dive. It was then that it happened.

“Skraaaaaaw!”

“Whoa?”

“Chirp?”

Andras’s eyes seemed to shine a pale blue, and in that instant a mild shock ran through me. Then, I felt my body grow rigid and my vision started to bend and distort.

Huh?

What’s going on?

I can’t move!

I couldn’t move so much as a muscle no matter how hard I tried. My body had solidified—or more likely, was enveloped in some hard substance. And what was up with my vision? It was hard to describe, but it was as if I were looking at the world through glasses with warped lenses.

In a panic, I muttered, “Status window,” and it popped up without any issue. Strangely, even though everything around me was still warped, I could see the window normally. That must have been for the sake of convenience. Viewing the window that appeared before me, I finally understood what was afflicting me. Rick and I had been inflicted with the status ailment Freeze.

I must have been hit with some attack by Andras, and the both of us—Rick being inside my robe at the time—had been frozen in ice. The ice covering our bodies was keeping us from being able to move.

On my status window, I could see a red bar indicating the time until Freeze wore off. At the rate it was decreasing, it was probably going to take around three or four minutes. I doubted I could expect someone to release me from this. The Freeze status ailment had only just been confirmed to exist, so it was highly unlikely that items able to remove it would already be circulating.

I would have had a chance if someone had had a skill or spell that cured all status ailments, but nothing so convenient had made an appearance yet. At least, I hadn’t heard of it, if it had.

Even trapped in ice, I could tell that people were moving around me. It looked like they were trying to figure out a way to release me, but without success.

If this situation were taking place in the real world, just feeling cold might’ve

been the least of my issues. But this was a game. I wouldn't die from the cold, but my body heat was gradually being sapped away, and I could feel my joints stiffening all over my body. If this got any worse, I would become inflicted with Frostbite, but my status ailment would end before that happened.

At any rate, the mysterious freeze attack that'd put me in this state didn't seem to have had that much actual power behind it; more than half of my already-low HP still remained. It must have been a skill whose purpose was primarily to restrict the target's movement.

The gale and feather-fléchette combo, the sonic attack, and now this freeze attack: all of Andras's moves were the types that obstructed movement. Then, after stopping our movements, it would finish us off with its swift dive-bomb attack.

Oh, I just realized. I'm kinda screwed, aren't I?

If I got hit with Andras's diving attack in this state, I'd have no chance of dodging it. I'd probably die instantly. The Freeze duration timer still had half its duration remaining. I frantically tried moving my body to break out of the ice, but it really was futile.

Considering how much time had passed, Andras was due to commence another swoop attack at any moment. I had no idea if I would be targeted, but if I was, it would be over for me.

Wh-What should I do?!

I felt my face twitch. While I was falling into despair over not being able to come up with a way to break out of the ice, I saw the red bar showing the effect's duration suddenly start to decrease faster. The bar was decreasing at twice the speed as before. Flustered, I checked my surroundings, where I saw a flickering red light on my right side. *I see. Someone's using a fire spell or something to melt the ice.*

Then, as I waited, unable to do anything as the flames did their job, my Freeze ailment was finally lifted. Along with a loud, cracking sound effect, the ice covering my body shattered.

"Y-You saved me!"

“Chirp chiiirp!”

“Hmmm!”

“Oh, so it was you who melted the ice, Himka!”

“Hm!”

I’d been fixated on the idea that my elemental monsters couldn’t use their magic in battle, but apparently even if they couldn’t use it to attack they could still use it for other things. With Himka around, breaking out of Freeze would be a piece of cake. *Himka, you really are the star of this battle.*

“Silver-Haired! Are you okay?!”

“Yeah, more or less.”

“Andras is about to come in with another dive attack! Be careful! If you die, our battlefield will collapse!”

That was an exaggeration if I’d ever heard one. Well, fans of my monsters might lose heart, so he wasn’t totally off the mark. But saying it would *collapse* was an overstatement.

That said, being hit with that immobilizing attack had given me an idea.

“Hey, Sukegawa. If we hit Andras with binding spells or skills when it dives in, do you think we could drag it to the ground?”

“Binding spells? I see where you’re going...”

In my group, Sakura and I had tree magic. I could aim for Andras’s legs with my move that let me control vines, and Sakura could also restrain it with her whip. If we had all the players do something similar, couldn’t we manage something?

“Yeah, it definitely seems worth trying. We crafters won’t be able to deal significant damage to it anyway.”

“Right? Should we try it out?”

“Yeah, let’s do it!”

Sukegawa called out to the other players, who immediately shouted in agreement, and we assembled a group of people with skills and spells that

seemed useful. However, there were surprisingly few of us—about twenty people.

Tree magic was obscure in the first place, and not many players fought with a whip. It turned out Sakura was the only one on this server that did. That meant that the only people who would be able to join in this plan were those who could use imprisoning magic, which included advanced water and wind spells.

“Everyone, Andras is poised to attack again!”

“All right! It’s coming this way!”

This strategy would have failed from the start if Andras had dived down too far away from us, since the spells and such we’d prepared wouldn’t have reached it. But it looked like our prayers had reached the game gods—Andras came swooping down right next to us.

Internally thanking the tanks who got blown away in our place, shields and all, the rest of us unleashed our immobilization techniques. Andras repelled almost all of our attempts, rendering them ineffective. As expected, it wasn’t going to be that easy to restrain a boss.

However, one thing *had* worked.

“...!”

“Sakura!”

“...!”

To my shock, it was Sakura’s whip. She had masterfully succeeded in entwining her whip around Andras’s ankles. But this wasn’t the time to celebrate. There was no way Sakura could drag Andras to the ground on her own—instead, she ended up being dragged along by Andras.

Instinctively, I grabbed hold of Sakura, but that didn’t stop what happened next.

I’m also gonna get dragged away!

“Ahhhhh!”

“S-Silver-Haaaired!”

Sakura and I got pulled along in Andras's ascent, soaring up high into the wide-open sky. Rick, being in my robe, got dragged into all this too. My body whirled through the air with tremendous force.

"Aaaagggghhhhh!"

"Chirp chiiirp!"

"...!"

What followed was a sort of reverse bungee jump situation. I grew dizzy from the sharp changes in my field of vision. I could feel myself slicing through the air, so I knew we were rapidly moving away from the ground.

Fwooooooosh!

My silver hair whipped around in the violently blowing wind. The players on the ground watched us as we were carried off into the sky by Andras. They looked like tiny specks, though I was in no mood to deliver a certain line from a well-known film about a flying castle: "Aha ha ha! The people are like garbage!"

"S-Sakura... You hanging in there?"

"...!"

Her whip wrapped around Andras's ankle was our only lifeline. If Sakura were to let go, we'd plunge headfirst to the ground. But Sakura didn't have limitless stamina. She couldn't keep holding on as hard as she was forever. The moment Andras made an extreme movement, we'd immediately be thrown off. I had my arms thrown disgracefully around Sakura's neck, so if she let go of the arm around my waist, that wouldn't bode well for me.

To summarize our situation, Sakura was supporting both my and her own body weight with her right arm, while her left arm was also holding me up against her. We looked just like a gentleman thief running off with a beautiful lady. *But with our roles reversed!*

"Do you think we can make it up to its back?"

If we could make our way onto Andras's back, we'd be in a better position. However, that was easier said than done. First off, we had to climb up the whip all the way to Andras's leg.

“I’ll go first.”

“...!”

“Just try to hold on for a bit.”

Apologizing to Sakura, who gave me a courageous nod, I grasped the whip tightly and pulled myself up. I could feel that my arms and legs were grazing roughly against Sakura. I was trying to be extra careful not to make Sakura fall in the process, but I couldn’t completely avoid the collision. I probably didn’t need to be concerned about that, though. Even though she had the appearance of a young girl, her Strength stat was far above mine. She even had the capacity to push my body up with her left arm.

“Chirp chirp!”

Rick was also a step ahead of me and had reached Andras’s talon, from where he was cheering me on. With their combined support, I managed to climb halfway up the whip.

But then, the absolute worst possible thing happened.

“Kraaaaaaaaaw!”

“Ack!”

“...!”

Andras made a sharp turn, and the resulting centrifugal force swung me and Sakura out wide. I strengthened my grip and held on to the rope, but that only lasted for a few seconds. Sakura and I both let go of the whip, and we were thrown into the sky. I felt a hopeless floating sensation. Was this the end?

But then, right after I had abandoned hope...

“...”

...I felt someone holding me tight from behind.

“S-Sakura!”

“...!”

Sakura hadn’t given up yet. After catching hold of me in midair, she extended a newly produced whip towards Andras. Her persistence paid off—Sakura’s

whip just barely caught hold of something that looked like a spike sticking out of Andras's back. With a jerk, we were once again back to our original position of dangling off Andras.

"Y-You saved me?"

"...♪"

Th-That was scary as hell! That's gotta be one of my top five scariest moments in this game!

After that, we tried climbing up again, relying on the whip, and we successfully made it up on top of Andras's back.

"Chirp!"

"You're okay too, Rick!"

"Chirp chirp!" he responded. He had somehow managed to stay clinging to Andras.

I'd thought it would have attacked us more, but the only impediment had been that one sharp turn. And even then, it seemed like it had only done so to change its position. Evidently it wasn't programmed to target players who were clinging to its body. Or maybe it just ignored them until they attacked it. Well, naturally Andras wouldn't just ignore being attacked. Either way, it was convenient for us.

"Let's hit it with one monumental attack!"

"...!"

"Chirp chirp!"

Ideally, we would hit Andras with an attack powerful enough to knock it down, but honestly, that was a tall order for us. If Drimo were here, I would've gotten him to give Andras the ol' one-two in his dragon form, but he was down on the surface right now. I could only summon another monster one more time, so I couldn't bring him here anyway. In order to be able to do that, I would have to switch him out for someone else and then summon him back in from the farm.

"Should I summon Bear Bear and ask them to attack?"

Would they be able to handle this giant demon, though?

“But— Wait, hold on.”

I remembered an item I had stashed in my inventory.

“Here it is!”

It was the bomb I had bought from Rikyu when we’d challenged the Subterranean Lake boss. I’d bought several as last resort items, and I still had one particularly nasty bomb left over.

“There *is* a risk of blowing myself up...”

The bomb was called Endless Final Blaze. It was a name just overflowing with cringe energy, but its power was no laughing matter. It had a superwide-range fire attack, and on top of the multistage damage it dealt, there was also a slim chance of inflicting instant death.

According to Rikyu, it would “instantly burn up all the air in the vicinity, killing your opponent.” The description of the item said: “Please do not use in enclosed spaces. You will die.” At first, I’d thought it was a joke item meant to get a laugh, but it was far from a joke—it was a truly lethal item with a fully accurate description.

“I’m gonna use this.”

“...!”

Sakura looked worried. She must have understood how frightening an item this was. True, if I used this here, I’d get caught up in the blast. But I had a plan.

“It’ll be fine. Just leave it to me!”

“...?”

“If we jump off Andras’s back right after I use this, we won’t get hit with the blast, right?”

“...?”

Sakura tilted her head, then pointed downwards. She must have wanted to say we’d die if we fell.

“Don’t worry. I don’t plan on dying. I can swap out Rick for Eine.”

But even though Eine was an Air Elemental capable of flight, with her low strength, it would be impossible for her to carry both Sakura and me while flying. However, she *could* catch us and slow down our rate of descent a bit. We might take some damage, but we probably wouldn't die.

"Rick, you've worked hard today. Leave the rest to us."

"Chirp!"

"All right! Return, Rick! Come out, Eine!"

"Tra-la-la!"

Eine was summoned in, taking Rick's place, posing with one hand on her hip and the other raised to the sky. But then, something strange started to happen.

"T-Tra-la?"

"Wait—Eine?!"

The instant Eine replaced Rick, she started drifting away with her back facing towards us. Eine was staying in place, but since Sakura and I were riding on Andras's back, we were moving away from her.

"Traaa-laaa!"

"W-Watch out!"

Eine came barreling towards my chest. Thankfully, Andras was flying at a slow pace. It was almost just hovering right now, since it was in the middle of unleashing its gale attack.

"All right, here's the plan. I'm going to use Rikyu's crazy bomb to force Andras to fall to the ground. Sound good?"

"Tra-la!"

"...!"

"But first, let's hold out a little longer here on Andras's back."

"Tra-la?"

"Yeah, we're not going to do it just yet."

My plan was to do it the second after Andras started swooping down. Andras

would already be propelling itself downwards, so would be closer to the ground. If we were going to bring it down, that would be the best moment to do so.

“Tra-la!”

“...♪”

Eine and Sakura applauded my plan. *I'll take that to mean they agree.*

“I’m going to put it at the base of its wing.”

I doubted one bomb would be able to completely destroy its wing, but if I could deal damage to one of them, I should be able to throw it off-balance.

“This bomb explodes five seconds after pressing the switch to activate it. Usually I’d just throw it, but I don’t think that’s possible here.”

“...?”

If I were to throw it, I’d have to do so after we jumped off Andras’s back. I couldn’t imagine that going well.

“Our opponent’s constantly moving, and there’s a strong wind. I don’t think I’d be able to throw it far enough to reach.”

The strong wind Andras’s wings produced deflected magic spells as well as arrows and other projectiles. Andras would definitely be able to avoid a basic throw from me.

“And that’s where *this* will come in.”

“Tra-la-la?”

“That’s right. Sakura’s whip. Look, there’s another spike at the base of its wing.”

Andras’s back was covered in countless large spikes. I could secure the bomb in place by tying it around one of them.

“All right, first step is setting up the bomb. Let’s go.”

“...!”

“Tra-la!”

The two girls' salutes were great. It was screenshot worthy.

"Oops, scratch that thought. Right now, we need to hurry."

Then, after a few minutes, we successfully set up the bomb. The only thing that was really hindering us was the strong wind, after all. We would have worked it out eventually.

Nevertheless, Sakura's dexterity exceeded my expectations. She fastened the bomb tightly using her whip many times faster than I'd predicted. It was hard tying a whip around a spherical bomb, so I would have been fine with just wrapping it around a few times, even if it turned out a little sloppy. That wasn't good enough for Sakura, though. I let her do as she pleased. She neatly laced up the whip like a soccer net; it almost looked as though it had happened on fast-forward.

The whip, which she had woven to allow the bomb to fit, looked exceptionally stable. It was unlikely to come undone easily this way. Next, all we had to do was tie the remaining length of the whip around the spike, and then our setup was complete. If she could apply this weaving skill to suspend a moss ball from a ceiling, that would look really pretty, I bet. Even a regular spherical lamp would have a cool retro feel.

"A lot of time has passed already. Andras might start diving at any— Whoa?!"

"Kraaaaaaaaaaw!"

"Tra-la!"

"...!"

It's finally diving! Andras's high-pitched shriek reverberated through the air. I could see it start to fold its wings in preparation. Next, it was going to lift its wings up and use that momentum to swoop down.

"This is it! Eine, you're up!"

"Tra-la!"

I pressed the switch to activate the bomb in front of me, then immediately kicked off Andras's back.

"...!"

“Thanks, Sakura.”

After Sakura and I jumped off together, she produced another whip and pulled me in with it.

“Okay, now we just need to— Huh?!”

“...!”

Wh-Why’s this happening?! It feels like we’re being forcefully pulled back towards Andras!

Was it turbulence? No, maybe air was flowing back into the vacuum created by Andras starting its dive? In any case, at this rate we’d be caught in the blast of our own bomb.

“Eiiine!”

“Tra-laaa!” Eine cried in response as she desperately pulled us towards her. She was trying her best to get us away from Andras, but...it was already too late. Behind me, I saw an eruption of flames as the bomb exploded.

KA-BOOOOM!

The thunderous roar shook the air as the overflowing wall of red flames rushed towards us, filling my vision.

“Eine! Sakura!”

“...!”

“Tra-la!”

I quickly pulled both of them close to me and turned my back to the flames. Immediately after, I felt an intense heat assail my back. Okay, the heat was at most like having a hand warmer suddenly thrust against me, but the abrupt rise in temperature made it feel hotter than it actually was. Obviously, with my shabby armor and stats, there was no way I was going to be able to endure this. I was swallowed up by the crimson flames and my HP bar instantly depleted.

My vision went black.

“...Where am I?”

After the blackout, I found myself in a place that looked like a hotel lounge. On the floor was an opulent rug, and a crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling. The room was decorated with stylish ornamental plants and sculptures of mythical creatures. Even the sofa was covered in stately leather. It looked so luxurious that, if this were real life, I would have felt too nervous to sit on it.

Several players were casually hanging out on the sofas and chairs that were placed around the room. The fruit and desserts that lined the tables also looked freely available to eat. This room had everything. What was this place?

“Excuse me, where—”

As I tilted my head in confusion, everyone exploded into applause.

“Silver-Haired! Good job!”

“A suicide bomb! You *would* do that!”

“Way to go, Silver!”

“Blowing yourself up, nice! What a great way to go out!”

“That was seriously insane!”

What’s going on? Just listening to their words, it sounded like they were making fun of me, but I could tell that they weren’t. In fact, it felt like they were praising me.

“Wh-What? Who are you people?”

“This is where us players who died wait until the end of the event. Everyone’s cheering that crazy stunt you just pulled!”

“Oh, I see. The players who died— Wait, Sukegawa?”

If he was here in the waiting room, did that mean he’d died before I had? Listening to his story, it turned out that while I was on Andras’s back, he’d gotten hit square in the head by one of its feather fléchettes and died instantly.

“...There was a girl fighting in a fluttery miniskirt right in front of me!”

“Ah, I see.”

So basically, he was too busy looking at someone wearing a miniskirt and had failed to dodge in time. He was the lewd blacksmith through and through. The

only thing I could do was let out a strained laugh.

“You know, you can’t see up skirts in this game no matter how hard you try.”

“As a man, you get it, don’t you? We’ve got urges!”

“I dunno about that...”

Please drop it. The girls here are staring daggers at us... How can you go on about your own horndog tendencies like that right in front of them? I couldn’t say I respected him for it, but he really was in a league of his own.

“You traitor!” he cried.

“I-I don’t know what you mean. Anyway, what’s the situation?”

“...Well, thanks to you bringing Andras down, it looks like we can win.”

We were able to watch the ongoing raid boss battle from this lounge. We could watch on a large monitor, as well as from our own status windows. More exciting still, we could even switch between multiple perspectives.

“Mmm!”

“Hm!”

“Good, good. You’re all here too.”

My monsters also came flocking to me as I sat on a couch. They were as lively as ever.

“Sorry for dying.”

“Hum.”

“Squeak.”

Reflet and Drimo patted my lower back. I knew they were saying something like “Don’t worry about it.” *My my, I really do have the nicest monsters.*

“Tra-la-la...”

“...”

However, Eine’s and Sakura’s expressions were incredibly dark. They looked dejected.

“Are you brooding over what happened? You couldn’t have done anything. It wasn’t your fault.”

“Tra-la?”

“...?”

“I’m not mad. Besides, at the end there— Wait, hold on a second.”

I was struck with a thought. Right at the end, I had instinctively protected Sakura and Eine, but had that actually done anything? I mean, if I died, they died too as my monsters, right? In fact, if I had instead used Sakura and Eine as a shield—

“Tra-la!”

“S-Sorry, sorry! I’m just kidding.”

I must have unintentionally muttered my thoughts aloud. Eine was angrily pounding her fists against me.

Oh well. Witnessing Eine and Sakura get swallowed up by flames right before my eyes would have been too much of a shock, so I was glad I had protected them. Even if I had survived by using them as a shield, I think I would have been so severely shaken that I would have died anyway.

“L-Look, the fight’s still going on. Let’s cheer them on.”

“Tra-la...”

In order to allow all of us to watch the event easily, I sat down cross-legged on the rug. Olto and Drimo settled themselves down on my left and right, Eine sat on my lap, and peering over my shoulder were Sakura, Reflet, and Himka.

“Oh cool, we can see from a bunch of different angles.”

The easiest angle to see from was probably watching Andras from a diagonal overhead view. The most impressive angle was probably the one that was pointed straight at Andras’s face.

Sukegawa explained what had happened right before I respawned here.

“The bomb you set off brought that bastard down to the defensive wall.”

But instead of it crashing down like I had anticipated, it’d been more of a soft

landing. The people on the wall had even had enough time to run away from its expected landing spot. Now that I thought about it, having Andras crash-land would have caused some terrible harm. Things wouldn't have ended well for any players crushed under its massive form, and the fort would have been damaged too. Considering that, a soft landing was the best possible outcome.

From the image on the screen, I was able to see the fortress from afar, allowing me to notice one part of it was very badly damaged. An entire portion that spanned almost ten meters was completely collapsing. That must have been the result of Andras's crash landing.

How was the fort's HP holding up? Though I supposed if we hadn't failed the event yet, then it was probably still fine. I switched perspectives to see the crystal—it was starting to turn from yellow to red. Around the crystal, Sawyer and the other crafters were frantically making items. They looked like recovery items.

"They're all working hard, huh..."

Damn, why'd I have to die like that?! At this rate, they're going to lose against the boss, and we'll fail the event! Everyone, do your best! For the sake of my reward too! And so I don't get blamed for our loss!

"Mm?"

"Wh-Why're you looking at me?"

"Mmm?"

O-Of course, I'm also genuinely cheering them on! Really!

While Olto's pure gaze cleansed my rotten heart, the violent battle against Andras raged on. Currently, the fight had moved to the fortress courtyard, where Andras had crashed.

It looked like everyone had concentrated their attacks on one of its wings and had managed to destroy it. Andras still hadn't flown back up into the sky. Annoyingly, the massive bird was still unleashing its attacks all the same. The footage showed people being stabbed in the torso by Andras's thick, spear-like talons and dying tragically. *Right, and then they'll be sent to this lounge.*

We watched as the players who'd just died were transported here right before our eyes.

"Anyway, aren't there a lot of players there?"

Weren't we just watching what was going on in the courtyard? There seemed to be an oddly large number of people.

"The combat unit came back when Andras fell."

"That explains it. Oh, I just saw Kokuten!"

"Kokuten took up command in your place."

"That's reassuring."

It was actually a hundred times more reassuring. Plus, it looked like morale was high.

"Ahhh! We won't let Silver-Haired's sacrifice be in vain!"

"This is for Eine!"

"I'll avenge you, Sakura!"

"You'll pay for the trauma you gave us of having to see Olto disappear right before our very eyes!"

"How dare you come back without Rick?! Feel my pain!"

Everyone was exclaiming as they unleashed their attacks. I felt like I heard my own name a few times, but since everyone's voices were overlapping so much, I couldn't hear clearly. I could understand people like Usami or Ishida yelling my name, but why were people who weren't even my friends doing it too? They weren't complaining about how fast I'd died, were they?

As I watched on in dismay, I noticed a female player come into view. Rather, it was more like I couldn't *not* notice her.

"Hey, is that person doing all those crazy moves from the combat unit?"

Among everyone fighting against Andras, her moves were particularly outstanding. She was a beautiful girl with an impassive expression, wearing lightweight clothing with her black hair tied in a bun. She was handling the most dangerous task—attacking Andras head-on—and although she was focusing all

of its hate on herself, she was able to keep up her fighting without dying.

If I had to summarize my impressions of her fighting style in a word, it'd probably be "ninjutsu." I mean, that was the only way I could describe the nimble maneuvers being performed in front of me. In addition to being an agile class, she also seemed to just be good at gaming.

"That's KTK."

"S-Sukegawa, you know her?!"

"Indeed. I shall teach you."

According to Raiden—I mean, Sukegawa—she was a top player whom people called one of the greats.

In games like this, people often talked about whom they thought was the strongest player. But in LJO, it was extremely difficult for that discussion to come to any sort of conclusion. PvP and PK didn't exist, and the only time players had fought against each other was in the last event. But even then, there were many players who hadn't participated. Still, there were a few people whom everyone acknowledged as candidates for being the strongest, based on their usual playstyles and moves during combat.

"She's well-known even among those candidates. There are loads of outrageous accounts of her taking zero damage in raid boss fights and soloing goblin lairs. People only believe those stories are true *because* they're about her."

Apparently she was second place in number of titles after me. *Though unlike me, I'm sure she only has cool titles.*

She had inhuman foresight and a field of vision so wide that people wondered if she was an alien. People had accused her of cheating about a hundred times because of her extraordinary skills, but she was just that good. She inspired many people to try to imitate her, which only led to their own heartbreak. What kind of a heroine was she?!

"Don't copy KTK—it's pointless. That's the Thieves' motto."

"I-Is she that amazing? No, I mean, she obviously is."

Even now, she had just perfectly dodged a slew of feather fléchettes. *Her moves are out of this world.*

The fact that she could kick off the air must have been the work of some skill, but the follow-up acrobatics could only be done by a real gaming pro. Her skills were really amazing. She was full-on doing cartwheels in the sky. I felt like I had seen a mecha use similar moves to dodge a barrage of enemy missiles in an old anime where a war was ended with a song.

“The list of candidates for strongest player are mostly heavy-armored offensive players. She’s the only Assassin-type player on that list. I mean, she’s just so strong that other light-armored, agile players can’t even rise high enough to be candidates.”

Even on the occasion that another Thief or Assassin player entered the limelight, people would just say about them: “Well, they’re no KTK.”

“A-Are you serious?! She’s cool as hell! Damn, I wish I were like her. If only people talked about me that way.”

“...What’re you saying? You’re in the same bracket as her.”

“Huh? What’d you say?”

KTK had just done something so amazing in battle that I didn’t catch what Sukegawa said for a second. *Sorry, man.* After all, she just did a moonsault to dodge the beam of light that Andras shot out of its eyes. I felt like I was watching a movie.

Incidentally, that beam of light just now—apparently that was what its Freeze attack looked like. I saw the spot on the wall that it hit turn white, as if it had frosted over.

“How the heck did she dodge that high-speed laser?”

“Beats me. It’s straight up impossible to analyze a top player’s moves.”

There was no surprise KTK was called one of the greats. She still hadn’t taken a hit. Facing Andras head-on, and still not a scratch on her... Could we beat it at this rate? In just a few minutes...

“Kraaaaaaawww...”

Andras's HP bar shattered, its body turning into polygons. We'd won.

In the end, KTK went the whole battle without taking damage, her face remaining impassive the entire time. *So this is what one of the strongest players is like.*

I was really a fool for thinking I wanted to be called the strongest player when I'd first started playing this game. To become the strongest player, I would have to be as good as her, right? *Nope, no chance. Seriously, what was I thinking?* It was like some lazybones who had never done a single bit of exercise in their life wanting to become a fitness god. In a way, changing course to be a crafter at the start of the game was the greatest play I ever made.

"Sukegawa."

"What's up? What's with that faraway look?"

"I'm going to become the best Tamer."

"...Ah, right. The KTK effect. Well, okay then."

"Mm-hmm."

While we were talking, the results were displayed on my status window. The players who had died during the exploration phase received a small penalty, but it looked like dying during the boss fight didn't lower the reward at all.

However, there actually was an award for MVP. The method for deciding whom it went to was a little unique—it would be put to a vote among the participating players, and the top five candidates would all receive the same MVP award.

"Looks like I can even vote from the video..."

I thought about voting for Kokuten, who had been a reliable mediator, but I ended up voting for KTK. She really blew me away in that final battle.

"I'm exhausted, but that was a fun event."

Online Forum [Event Watch Party] Waiting Room, Part 4

A thread to discuss the raid boss event.

This thread is for Server No. 1.

Respawners, assemble!

669: Masamune

S-Silver-Haaaaaaired!!!

670: Mirage

OMG! He blew himself up!

671: Muraoka

H-He did it!

672: Melel

He really did it!

The waiting room's going wild!

Their screams are hurting my ears!

673: Jupuppiter

Look, Andras is falling!

Makes sense it can't keep itself in the air after taking an explosion like that.

674: Mirage

He brought the boss down all on his own!

That's our Silver-Haired!

675: Masamune

Whoa! The spot Andras crashed is totally caving in!

Hey, this looks bad, doesn't it?

676: Jupuppiter

Looks like that crystal really IS showing the fortress's HP.

See? The color's starting to change.

But it hasn't turned orange yet, so maybe it's still okay?

677: Muraoka

You're right.

Should be fine, as long as the entire fortress doesn't get attacked more.

678: Melel

Oh, it looks like the defense unit is starting to attack Andras!

679: Mirage

Everyone's yelling stuff like "I won't let Silver-Haired's dying wish go to waste!" and "You'll pay for that!" and "Vengeance for Silver-Haired!"

They're all so fired up! I wish I was there!

680: Jupuppiter

I mean jeez, seeing something like that...

If I was there, I'd be screaming with them.

Let's go!

681: Muraoka

Wait, this doesn't look so good.

Everyone's getting too riled up. They're totally getting out of control.

682: Masamune

The lewd blacksmith died a lewd death, so there's no one taking command.

683: Mirage

He was looking right at KTK's skirt.

What a terrible way to go.

684: Melel

He should've taken a page from Silver-Haired on how to die!

685: Muraoka

Oh, everything should be okay.

Look, the main force of the combat unit is back.

686: Melel

Good timing!

687: Muraoka

From the look on the chief's face in the front, they must've rushed back after seeing that explosion.

688: Jupuppiter

I'm sure that was hard to ignore.

But Kokuten got everyone settled down in a heartbeat.
He's not called a top player for nothing.

689: Mirage

We've got this in the bag.

690: Masamune

Don't jinx it!

But yeah, you're probably right.

691: Muraoka

"Don't jinx it," you say, and then you do just that...

But yeah, we're gonna win. KTK's there too.

692: Melel

If we lose now, it's all your guys' fault.

693: Jupuppiter

By the way, wasn't there something weird about the video of Silver-Haired blowing himself up?

He was sort of moving weirdly after he jumped off, wasn't he?

694: Masamune

Hmm... Was he?

You don't mean when he was protecting the Tree Nymph and Air Elemental?

695: Muraoka

I rewatched it—you're right, it was weird. It looked like Silver-Haired was being pulled backwards or something.

If that hadn't happened, he might've been able to escape.
So instead of purposefully blowing himself up, was it actually just an accident?

696: Masamune

It almost looked like he was being sucked backwards.
In that case, he probably wasn't even expecting to die himself, right?

697: Mirage

Ha ha ha! There's no way that— Oh, yeah. He does look kinda panicked there.
Huh? Then he didn't sacrifice himself on purpose, he just failed at getting away?

698: Jupuppiter

B-But, it's thanks to him that it looks like we'll win...
That's good, right?

699: Muraoka

It was a nice try.
Nice explosion too.

700: Melel

That's right!
Plus it really boosted morale.

701: Masamune

In conclusion:
He did it again.

That's all.

[Gather 'Round Tamers] LJO Tamer Megathread,

Part 33

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.

107: Amelia

I've rewatched the video of the raid boss battle like five times already.

Silver-Haired's monsters saluting was the best part!

108: Ivan

Nah, I'd say it was when he used the bomb.

He sacrificed himself for his teammates. What a guy.

109: Eulenspiegel

No no, the best part was where everyone got pumped and started fighting together after Silver-Haired's death.

It was like a scene from a movie!

110: KingOysterMushroom

It looked more like he flubbed his escape and got caught in the explosion instead of sacrificing himself.

People in another server noticed the boss's gimmick of sucking things in towards itself and used it to their advantage. They brought it down by making it swallow a bomb.

Though that method took up a lot of time, and they suffered a lot of damage.

111: Ursula

It was so like him to risk his life to protect his monsters there.

He's the star of the Tamers!

112: KingOysterMushroom

Well, thinking about it rationally, the best solution would have been if he used the Tree Nymph as a shield so he and the Air Elemental could survive.

113: Ursula

That's horrible! You monster!

114: Amelia

How could you say something so cruel?!

Have you no heart?!

115: MorningStarMeow

How could you say that, meow?!

Use sweet Sakura as a shield?!

116: Ivan

Now now, he's just saying that would be the rational, efficient solution.

Right?

117: KingOysterMushroom

Uh, yeah. That's right.

What I meant was, if we suppose that he considered that, but still instantly decided to protect his monsters, it reflected his true feelings, or like he acted genuinely or something.

So what I wanted to say was that he was amazing for doing that!

118: Amelia

Oh you did, did you?

119: Ursula

Protecting your monsters without a thought. That's what a Tamer is. Wouldn't expect less from Silver-Haired.

But KingOysterMushroom, on the other hand...

120: MorningStarMeow

Yeah yeah. No excuses for using a pretty girl as a shield, meow!

Guilty mushroom!

121: Eulenspiegel

Yeah! Silver-Haired used his body to protect those cuties! He did a great job!

I'd like to die in a cool way like that too!

KingOysterMushroom, you could stand to learn a thing or two from Silver-Haired!

122: Ivan

Oh, speaking of, I have some interesting info on Silver-

Haired.

Interested?

123: Amelia

Huh? What is it?

124: Ivan

Apparently, someone witnessed him with a new tamed monster.

And, it looks like an unidentified one.

125: Amelia

A new tamed monster!

126: Ursula

I just *know* it's adorable!

I-Is it a new fluffy monster?

127: Eulenspiegel

No way, this time it's gotta be a cute girl!

Silver-Haired would pull through for me! I know it!

128: Ivan

I think it'll blow your minds.

129: MorningStarMeow

Y-You're just teasing us! At this rate I can go check it out three times faster!

I'm leaving! To the Town of Beginnings!

130: Amelia

Oh, me too! I'm going too!

131: Ursula

Not before me!

132: Eulenspiegel

Wait for me, brand-new pretty girl!

133: Ivan

Are they gone?

134: KingOysterMushroom

Phew...

135: Ivan

All according to plan.

136: KingOysterMushroom

I said it was just the most efficient way, right?

It's not like I thought he really should have used her as a shield!

137: Ivan

You can thank Silver-Haired for supplying new content.

138: KingOysterMushroom

Thank you, Silver-Haired!

But the event *just* ended. He already has a new tamed monster...?

He never changes. So what's this new monster of his, anyway?

139: Ivan

Well...

Chapter Five: The Birth of Perca

“We’re back!”

“Mm-mmm!”

After finishing up the raid boss battle, we returned back to our home base in the Town of Beginnings. I had been able to pick which teleport gate I wanted to be returned to from the respawn lounge.

“Mrow!”

“Arf arf!”

“Oh hey, Dango and Nuts. You came to greet us? You two are just so dang cute!”

I petted the two of them as they looked up at me from my feet adoringly. When I did, they flopped over and showed me their bellies. I reached out for those enticing tummies as if in a trance. I had my right hand on the puppy’s belly, and my left on the kitten’s. Both of them were amazingly soft. Was there anything else that could beat this level of luxury? Ten minutes passed in a blink of an eye as I enjoyed the subtly different textures of Dango’s and Nuts’s fur. *This is the magic of fluff...*

“Mmm...”

“...It just feels so good.”

“Mmm.”

Did Olto just sigh at me? He did, didn’t he?! I gave one last pet to Dango and Nuts, who were panting excitedly, then hastily stood back up.

“All right, we can’t goof off forever. I got some drops from the boss, so maybe I should bring these over to Lewin.”

“Mm.”

“D-Don’t look at me like that! Look, I’m going to check out the items now!”

“Mmm.”

The rewards I’d received from the raid battle were Andras’s Feathers x3, Andras’s Talon, Andras’s Tail Feather, and Andras’s Sturdy Beak. I wondered if I could use both types of feathers for a robe. And maybe the beak for a staff?

Next, our server had apparently won first place in the server rankings, so I received some money as a reward. But since all the servers had been able to defeat Andras in the end, there wasn’t that much difference in the monetary reward across the servers.

While I was sitting on the veranda checking out my spoils, I heard an announcement.

Ding-dong.

“The votes for MVP have been tallied up. You have been chosen as an MVP for Server No. 1, so your reward will be sent to you shortly. You placed first in terms of number of votes.”

I got chosen as an MVP! Wait, really? I actually got first place...

I was shocked. After all, during the battle, I— Wait, actually, I *did* do a lot this time. Even though I did die, there was no debating the fact that I had been the one to bring Andras to the ground. Although it *had* been an accident that I ended up on its back in the first place.

The other players must have rated that highly. It could also have been a way to celebrate the fact that I had triggered the event. There were probably some people who couldn’t decide whom to vote for, so had just decided to vote for the guy who’d kicked off the whole thing. Taking that into account, it wasn’t out of the realm of possibility that I would get first place.

“Well, I get more stuff out of it, so I’ll just accept it as a lucky win.”

My additional rewards were the title “Andras Elimination MVP” plus money and a bonus point. I could also choose an item as a reward. The title was just an honorary one that came with no other effects. Still, I appreciated it.

The problem was the item. I could choose between Andras’s Sturdy Beak and Andras’s Magic Eye. Both were likely rare drops.

“Hmm... The choice is clearly the Magic Eye, right?”

I already had a Sturdy Beak, and the eye seemed more useful to make a staff or a robe. I took out the Magic Eye that got added to my inventory. Although it was an eye, it actually wasn't grotesque looking at all—it had the appearance of a bluish crystal ball, and was extraordinarily beautiful when held up to the sunlight.

“Ya-ya!”

“Oh, Mamori? What's got you all worked up?”

“Ya! Ya-ya!”

Mamori the Zashiki-Warashi came rushing up to me. Obviously, she had something to tell me. She was tugging on my robe as hard as she could.

“Booo!”

“Kapa!”

“Fluff!”

“Tiep!”

“What, what is it?! You guys too?”

My other yokai mascots joined up with the flustered Mamori, and before I knew it, I was completely surrounded by otherworldly creatures. Their frantic behavior was actually pretty cute.

“Ya!”

They started heading towards the transfer gate. The only other place the mascots could go besides here was my farm, after all.

“C'mon, what's going on?”

Guess I'll find out from following them. I walked, guided by Mamori, and it turned out my mascots wanted to bring me to the barn.

“Just what the heck is— Whoa! No way! Is this what you were trying to tell me?”

“Ya-ya!”

A crack had formed on Rick and Fau's egg. It was close to hatching.

...And by that I meant it was hatching *right now*! Before our very eyes, the crack grew bigger, and a blaring light started to pour out from the inside. It was the same production as usual.

"Ack, too bright!"

"Ya-ya!"

Mamori had both hands over her eyes to shield herself from the brightness.

"But whoops, we really dropped the ball. We should have called over Rick and Fau!"

I wasn't sure if monsters felt parental attachment, but it *was* their egg. They might have wanted to be here when it hatched.

"Mamori, can you go call Rick and Fau?"

"Ya-ya!" Mamori responded before leaving the barn.

Then, once the light settled down completely, the new monster—

"Huh? There's no monster? What's this...? A ball of light?"

A white ball of light was floating gently where the egg had just been. I thought it might've been some light elemental like a will-o'-the-wisp, but apparently I was wrong. It had no marker over it. As I tilted my head in confusion, a window popped up.

"Okay, now what's this...? There's a vortex of unspecified power? Please offer an item to decide what course it takes?"

Oh! I've heard of this! Amimin had posted some information about this on her page. There wasn't an explanation on how it was triggered, but it was apparently an incredibly rare event that occurred sometimes when an egg hatched. If you offered up some of your items to the ball of light, an uncommon monster might hatch from the egg. A rare monster wasn't guaranteed, though—sometimes it would result in nothing more than a Gray Squirrel, for example.

"Looks like I can choose three items..."

I could select from a variety of options, from monster items to weapons and

armor. I decided to start by selecting the item at the top of my inventory—Andras’s Magic Eye.

“Hmm, I see... Once I choose an item, it changes up the numbers and types here.”

Three categories appeared on the window: Rank, Potential, and Type.

When I selected Andras’s Magic Eye, the Rank and Potential became 5 and 3 respectively, and under the Type column, there was Bird 7, Demon 4, and Ice 5.

Next, I tried selecting Andras’s Sturdy Beak, but I got a message saying I could only select one item from the same monster. I guessed I couldn’t select all of the drops from Andras to get myself my very own raid boss.

After that, I chose the Tree Spirit’s Sacred Branch, which I got from Olea’s Ingredient Production skill. Rank and Potential increased to 7 and 5, and Bird and Demon remained. Two new types appeared with their corresponding numbers: Tree 4 and Spirit 2.

As a test, I deselected Andras’s Magic Eye. Rank and Potential both dropped to 2, and only Tree and Spirit remained in the Types column.

“Rank and Potential are based on some summed-up values. And I guess Type displays the attributes of the selected items?”

Next, I selected Yellow Wood to add in. When I did, the numbers changed to Rank 3, Potential 3, Tree 5, Spirit 2, and Flower 1. It looked like if the types overlapped, the corresponding numerical value for each one would be added in.

This was just a guess, but I felt like more types didn’t equate to better in this case. After all, what the heck sort of monster would be a bird, demon, tree, spirit, and flower, *plus* also have an ice attribute? Not even a chimera could be like that. In that case, that meant it was likely that the attribute with either the highest number or the number that passed a certain threshold would manifest. I would have to figure out what items would result in high Rank and Potential values, as well as a combination that would give high Type values.

“There’s a time limit? Oh, but I still have over fifty minutes left. I can have some fun with this!”

I loved these sorts of synthesis systems. While I was concentrating on choosing which items to offer, Mamori returned with Rick and Fau.

“Ya-ya!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Aye!”

“Oh, hey! Your egg hatched! And this unspecified power thing appeared.”

“Chirp?”

“Aye?”

“Ya?”

All three of them tilted their heads at me. It was cute, but I supposed they wouldn't get what I meant without an explanation. I went ahead and told them about unspecified power and how if I offered an item, a new monster would be born.

“Chirp!”

“Yuh-aye!”

“Ya!”

I thought it would be hard for them to understand, but they seemed to have grasped it. That probably meant they had some knowledge about it already. Rick and Fau pumped their fists in celebration. Did monsters also see this as something to be happy about?

“Chirp?”

“Aye?”

“Yup, I'm choosing the items right now.”

The two of them climbed up on my shoulders—Rick on my right, and Fau on my left. Naturally, they were interested in what monster was going to hatch from their egg. They were peering intently at the selection screen.

“Are you two partial to anything? Like, want me to use a certain item?”

“Chirp?”

“Aye.”

Both of them just shook their heads at my question. *Guess they have no real preference.*

“In that case, I think I’ll prioritize choosing what’ll give me higher values.”

First, I had to select some items that seemed like good candidates to use. After selecting and deselecting various items, I gradually figured it out. Firstly, items with high rarity and quality ratings brought out higher numerical values for Rank, Potential, and Types. Also, the most Types included in one item was three.

I decided on which items to use based on the numerical values I jotted down. For now, my top pick was one of the items I’d gotten from Andras. Those items seemed particularly rare. Andras’s Magic Eye resulted in Rank 5, Potential 3, Bird 7, Demon 4, and Ice 5. Andras’s Sturdy Beak, meanwhile, resulted in Rank 5, Potential 2, Bird 7, Demon 5, and Piercing 5. No other items had resulted in a 5 for Rank. *Unsurprising, seeing as it’s a raid boss item.*

The item that produced the next best values was the Hanami Vandal’s Wrath, which I’d gotten from fighting that very same yokai. The numbers it turned out were Rank 4, Potential 5, Tree 6, Drunkenness 5, Evil Spirit 5. Rank and Potential were both high, again likely because it was a raid boss item.

Should I go with Andras’s Magic Eye and the Hanami Vandal’s Wrath? Despite that thought, I continued trying things out, which resulted in me finding out something very important. I figured it out while I was choosing various items that had overlapping attributes at the same time, wondering if that would give me some sort of bonus.

“Wait, is this for real?”

When I tried selecting the Hanami Vandal’s Wrath, the Tree Spirit’s Sacred Branch, and the Treant’s Soft Wood together, it triggered a change in the categories listed under Type. Most of the numbers were all normal: Rank 8, Potential 9, Intoxication 5, Ghost 5, Spirit 2, Sleeping 1. But the Tree type alone had a star next to its number 14.

“Is that because Tree went over 10?”

It seemed like I could expect to get some special effect from it. Or maybe the star marking was necessary for the attribute to manifest?

“I knew it! I need to pick items with the same attributes! L-Let me try some more.”

After all that, I hit upon the combination of Andras’s Magic Eye, the Wind Falcon’s Wind Core, and Garuda’s Egg.

Andras’s Magic Eye came out with Rank 5, Potential 3, Bird 7, Demon 4, and Ice 5. The Wind Core came out with Rank 2, Potential 3, Bird 5, Wind 4, and Piercing 3. These two would work. Garuda’s Egg was a little different. Its values of Rank 3, Potential 4, and Bird 5 were normal.

The issue was that a mysterious new category appeared called “Type x2.” When I chose Garuda’s Egg, I was able to pick one Type from another item and double its numerical value. As a restriction, I couldn’t choose to increase Bird, which was the type that already came with Garuda’s Egg, but I was free to choose any of the others. I decided to choose Ice—which would shoot up to 10 if I doubled it—and amazingly, a star marking was placed next to it.

The final result ended up like this: Rank 10, Potential 10, Bird 17 ★★, Demon 4, Ice 10 ★, Wind 4, Piercing 3.

This is so much fun! It reminded me of creating a character in a TTRPG. It looked like Rank and Potential didn’t get a star even when reaching 10, but the attributes under Type got two stars when they reached 15. I bet if I got them up to 20, they’d get three stars. I wavered over getting Tree up to two stars instead, but I decided to make Bird the main type this time.

“I’ve already got tree-type monsters covered with Sakura and Olea, and this way, I should get a monster that can fly *and* fight! That settles it—I’m going with this!”

“Chirp!”

“Yuh-aye!”

Rick and Fau seemed to have no objections. They threw their arms up in excitement.

“I’m going for it.”

With my heart pounding, I pressed the confirm button. The items I had selected disappeared from my inventory, and sure enough, the ball of light began to shine.

“Ha ha ha! Don’t dare think that pretending to be Colonel Muska is my only trick, devs! I already knew it was going to start shining!”

Behind my closed eyes, I imagined what sort of monster would hatch. It would definitely be a bird. Plus, I threw in items I’d gotten from two bosses, Andras and Garuda. I just knew it was going to be a bird of prey with exceptional fighting prowess.

Wait, what if I actually *did* get a Garuda? I’d be sort of disappointed if I ended up with a Wind Falcon, which was just a regular monster that appeared on the playing field.

Is it over? As I waited in heart-pounding anticipation, I suddenly sensed something.

“Honk.”

“Huh?”

What was that weird, ominous noise just now?

Slap slap slap slap slap.

Huh? What’s that? It was like what someone walking around a pool in flip-flops would sound like. Were those the monster’s footsteps?

“Honk?”

“...Um?”

I opened my eyes and saw that the spot where the unspecialized power was floating was now empty. But I knew. Yes, I knew—something was at my feet. At the edge of my vision, I saw something blue moving. I slowly looked down.

“Honk.”

“A-A penguin!”

There, unmistakably, was a penguin. It was blue all the way from its back to

its head, with a white belly. Its face was mostly a dark, almost navy blue, but it had a bit of white above its eyes.



You see, I was very particular about penguins. *Nah, just joking.* I had just recently watched a documentary that showed this type of penguin. This was probably a gentoo penguin. Though the real-life gentoo penguins were black and white, while this one was blue and white.

“W-Well, you *are* a bird...”

“Honk.”

“So you’re my new monster?”

“Honk honk!”

The penguin flapped its right flipper as if to say something like “That’s right!” *Mm-hmm. It’s cute.* I didn’t care if it could fly or fight anymore.

“You’re adorable, so whatever’s fine!”

“Honk?”

That head tilt is cute too!

“Chirp chirp!”

“Aye!”

“Honk honk!”

Rick and Fau threw their arms excitedly around the penguin. Actually, maybe it’d be more accurate to say they were clinging to its belly. They looked content as they buried themselves in its soft feathers. *I’m jealous.* The penguin didn’t seem to mind them doing that, so I decided to let them be.

“Chirp.”

“Aye.”

“Honk.”

A calm atmosphere enveloped our surroundings.

Now that I thought about it, it was the meeting of parents and their child, though there wasn’t a shred of a serious, familial atmosphere here. I guessed they really didn’t feel a parent-child sort of connection. For Rick and Fau, the penguin was just another monster companion.

“Okay then, time to check out your stats— Oh, but before that, I need to name you!”

“Honk!”

“Penguin... Pen Pen... The Suica card’s mascot is a penguin... Suica, Pengca... Is that kind of hard to pronounce, though? Hmm... Oh, I’ve got it! Your name will be Perca!”

“Honk honk!”

“Nice, I’m glad you like it. Now then, on to the stats check!”

“Honk!”

Name: Perca *Race: Highway Penguin* Base Level: Lv. 1

Master: Yuto

HP: 30/30 MP: 1818

Strength: 10 *Endurance: 12* Agility: 8

Dexterity: 4 *Intelligence: 7* Sanity: 5

Skills: Peck, Speed Swim, Collect, Cold Tolerance, Jump, Dash Attack Up, Ice Resistance, Ice Cloak, Penguin Highway, Fall Resistance, Fisherman, Triangle Attack, Fire Lure, Fire Resistance

Equipment: None

This penguin was pretty strong. His starting stats numbers weren’t much different from Drimo’s, and he’d hatched from a prize egg. The incubator I’d used must have given a bonus—he had a whopping fourteen skills. The device in question had been the Battle Skill Incubator with a Fire Attribute. It was supposed to guarantee a monster with combat, fire-elemental, and fire-resistance skills. Those must have manifested as Triangle Attack, Fire Lure, and Fire Resistance.

I wondered if Collect was a Blood Skill inherited from Rick. Collect was a

variation of the Gather skill, and it allowed the user to gather materials over a wide area. I wondered if that meant Perca would be able to pick up a bunch of items underwater.

All his other skills were also very interesting.

Peck: Allows the user to attack with their beak.

Speed Swim: Swim underwater with complete control.

Cold Tolerance: Increases tolerance to cold environments.

Jump: Allows user to jump up high.

Dash Attack Up: Grants damage bonus when using mobility attacks.

Ice Resistance: Resistance to freezing spells and attributes.

Ice Cloak: Temporarily adds freezing attribute to actions.

Fall Resistance: Reduces damage taken when falling from a great height.

Fisherman: Adds bonus to various fishing and crafting actions.

Triangle Attack: User kicks off a wall or other object to propel self into a dash attack.

Fire Lure: A light that won't go out underwater. Attracts certain types of fish.

Fire Resistance: Resistance to fire and fire-based spells.

These skills were all easy to understand just by looking up their descriptions. I found there were others with the same skills by checking the data. I was happy about having Fisherman and Fire Lure—those would help make Fishing go more

smoothly.

The only thing was Penguin Highway—I had no idea what sort of skill that was. It hadn't been talked about on the forums at all, and no one else was listed as having the skill. It was a completely unique skill. The fact that Perca was a Highway Penguin made me think it was a skill specific to his race.

Even appraising it did nothing to demystify its effect.

Penguin Highway: The penguin rides along the railroad, all the livelong day. No one can block its path.

“That tells me literally nothing! Be more descriptive!”

Is it because it's a unique skill? Well, fine. I'll find out by using it.

“Perca, can you use Penguin Highway here?”

“Honk!”

Perca nodded happily, then waddled over to the other end of the room.

What the heck sort of skill was this? I understood the term itself. It was supposed to refer to the path a flock of penguins would use to come and go from the sea to their rookery. So what would a skill with that name be like...?

“Honk honk!”

Now in the corner of the room, Perca turned around to face me. He raised one flipper, then flopped right down on his belly. The next moment, an amazing scene unfolded. To my surprise, Perca's body started to glow faintly, and then a strip of light stretched out in front of him. The strip of light was about fifty centimeters in width, and it reached all the way to me in the shape of an arch.

“Honk honk!”

“Whoa! Perca's flying!”

That strip of light was without a doubt a rail, and Perca slid along the top of that rail at a high speed. Before I knew it, he was in the air and flying towards me.

“Hrk!”

Jeez, watch out! Luckily I was able to catch him, but if I hadn’t, we would have both been sent flying. Perca had a more do-or-die personality than I had expected.

“So that was Penguin Highway?”

“Honk!”

So it was a type of travel skill, huh? Also, instead of Perca just sliding along the ground, the rail stretched into the air, even allowing him to fly somewhat.

Wow, so even though Perca’s a penguin, he can even fly!

“You’re awesome, Perca!”

“Honk honk!”

Perca leaned back casually with a happy look on his face in response to my praise. Even though we hadn’t known each other long, I felt I had a good understanding of him. He was the type who got caught up in the slightest bit of flattery.

“Hmm...”

“Honk?”

The feel of holding Perca in my arms was, simply put, pure bliss. His short back feathers were so velvety smooth I wanted to pet them forever. I’d thought they would be more slippery, but they were surprisingly soft.

Also, the thick and fluffy feathers on his belly were different from those of my other animal-type monsters, giving him a warmth that was characteristic of birds. His subcutaneous fat was also squishy; I could’ve kept on squeezing it forever, like a beanbag. *I’ll say it. Perca’s body is exactly the type that could corrupt someone into a fall from grace.*

“Honk?”

“Ah...! Whoops, I really was still going. I hate to do this, but that’s enough for now.”

Next it was time for Perca to make his debut.

“All right, let me introduce you to everyone else!”

“Honk!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Aye!”

We exited the barn. I wanted to introduce Perca to my monsters on the farm first before going back to the house.

“Hey, everyone! Gather around!”

“Mm?”

“Trrrr?”

Olto, Olea, Drimo, and Bear Bear were at the farm. *They’ve been hard at work, huh?*

“This is Perca, our new companion. Try and get along with him, everyone.”

“Honk honk!”

“Squeak!”

“Growl!”

Nice. They’re quickly getting chummy as usual. Perca went down the line and gave each of my monsters a handshake. Yes, a mole and a penguin were shaking hands. It was a strange yet adorable scene. Seeing Olto and Perca shake hands just made me think of a scene from a certain children’s story.

Then, I suddenly remembered something.

“Oh, yeah. Olto, you think you can propagate and grow this seaweed?”

I pulled out the dried seaweed I had received from Tagosack.

“Mm-mm!”

“So you can! We still have some space in the Hydroponic Pool, right? You know, the spot where I failed when experimenting to see what would happen if I mixed some potion into the water while the rice was growing. Can you plant the seaweed there? You’ll have to use salt water. You think you can do it?”

“Mmm!”

Olto pounded on his chest. *As dependable as ever!* Now we'd be able to eat seaweed in just a few days' time.

"Okay, next I'll introduce you to everyone at the house."

"Honk!"

I turned to go back to the barn with that plan in mind, but before that, I was stopped by the sound of someone calling out to me.

"Silver-Haired!"

"Explain yourself!"

"Heh... They're outraged."

The three girls who were scowling in my direction from outside the farm were Kurumi, Filma, and Rikyu. *Wait, they look super mad. Well, maybe not Rikyu.* What were they so angry about? It didn't seem like they had noticed Perca and were surprised by his presence.

"Uh, can I help you...?"

"Grrr! You don't even know!"

"How awful!"

"Heh heh... Resentment over food is a terrifying thing..."

Kurumi looked pissed, and Filma was glaring at me intensely. Their anger was definitely directed at me. It really seemed like I wouldn't be able to talk my way out of this. *But what are they even mad about?*

"We read the forums! Onigiri!"

"Didn't you tell us you'd let us be the first to try it?!"

"Heh heh... Promise left unfulfilled."

"O-Oh!"

That's right, I think I remember saying something like that I'd let them try the rice first in exchange for the paddy they gave me! Crap, I totally forgot! It completely slipped my mind!

"...Um... Right, about that. Those were just test products! I-I wanted you guys

to experience the out-of-this-world delicious, finalized product!”

“Oh, *really?*”

“I find that hard to believe...”

“Heh heh... Your face earlier definitely said, ‘Crap, I totally forgot.’”

Is Rikyu some sort of esper?! She read my mind word for word!

“R-Really, I really mean it. I swear I’m not lying, not one bit!”

“...”

“...”

“Heh heh...”

“I’m sorryyy! I completely forgot!”

All I can do now is apologize! I’ll keep bowing my head with honest-to-goodness sincerity! Let’s see if they can withstand the power of an office worker in full apology mode!

I decided on the most extreme form of bowing—jumping up and landing with my knees on the ground in a bow—when I heard exasperated voices above me.

“...Knew it.”

“I figured that was what happened.”

“We’ve come to collect... Heh.”

Their voices—they’re so cold! Even Filma, who’s always so sweet! Gaaaah! Roar, my prostration powers!

After a profuse apology, they forgave me on the condition that I gave each of them five of their favorite rice dishes free of charge. *Phew, I’m glad that’s all it took...* I was cultivating rice now, so that honestly wouldn’t cost me much.

And so, I showed the girls a list of the rice dishes I had in my inventory. I figured they could just choose what they wanted. While they were deciding, I felt something tug at my robe.

“Honk?”

“S-Sorry, Perca. I know you just hatched, and now you have to watch your

own master be shamed...”

“Honk honk.”

“Ngh... Are you consoling me? How sweet of you!”

“Honk!”

Perca gently wrapped his flipper-like wings around my leg in a hug. His round penguin eyes peering up at me and the warmth of his body had a healing effect on me. His almost realistic appearance along with his cartoony “Honk!” had great synergy. I never knew penguins were such cute creatures!

While I could barely contain myself from that cuteness, there was someone else gushing even more than I was.

“Huh? Hey, i-is that...a p-penguin? It’s a penguin, isn’t it?”

Filma was trembling, her eyes and mouth open as wide as they could go in astonishment. Her face was flushed and she was breathing heavily. She must have been so distracted by my extreme bow earlier that she hadn’t noticed Perca.

“I-It is a penguin! There’s a penguin here! Kurumi, Rikyu!”

“Heh heh... We know. Calm down, Filma.”

“How can I calm down?! It’s a *penguin*!”

“There there, we know. We know just how much you love sea creatures like penguins and sea otters, Filma.”

In a rare turn of events, Kurumi and Rikyu were calming down the overexcited Filma. Apparently, Filma loved penguins. But was that enough to get her so excited at seeing Perca? Judging from Filma’s reaction, penguins must have still been an otherwise-undiscovered monster.

But wait, wasn’t this my chance to rectify my earlier mistake? It was true I had apologized and they had forgiven me, but I wanted our friendly relationship to continue.

“Hey, Perca. Do you wanna play with those three?” I asked him stealthily. Perca nodded happily.

“Honk!”

He had no objections to playing with Filma and the others. In fact, it seemed like he really wanted to. Just like how there were monsters who only acted friendly towards me, like Drimo, there were also monsters who were more open to others, like Perca.

But anyway, this took care of my problem.

“S-So, this penguin... His name is Perca, and I want to introduce him to my other monsters. So if you’re okay with waiting, you all can play with him afterwards.”

“Really?!” Filma responded before I was even finished speaking. She zoomed up close to my face, breathing heavily in and out of her nose. Seeing her like that, I kind of wanted to say something like “Just kiddiing!” to see what happened, but I decided not to. Even I knew when it was the right time for a joke.

“Y-Yeah. So how about we move to my home base for now?”

“Okay! Let’s go!”

“Y-You’re not gonna ask Kurumi and Rikyu what they want to do?”

“Heh heh... Not like we can refuse in this situation.”

“If we say no, we’ll have to face Filma’s wrath later. Besides, I want to see your house too!”

And so, that was how I ended up inviting the three girls to my home base. Well, I called it “inviting” them, but I was just going to give them permission to enter my home base and use the transfer gate in my barn.

“Okay, right this way.”

“Let’s get a move on! Hurry!”

“Heh heh... The rumored Silver-Haired estate.”

“Let’s go!”

We passed through the transfer gate, and once on the other side, Kurumi and Rikyu gazed around at their surroundings. *I guess Japanese houses really are*

rare.

“Ooh, so this is your home base?”

“Heh heh... Nice veranda you’ve got here.”

“Never mind all that! Come on! Please let me play with Mr. Penguin!”

Once I managed to calm down Filma, who was still excitable as ever, I had my tamed monsters, mascots, and yokai that were at the house gather at the veranda.

“This is Perca, our new companion. Look after him, ’kay?”

“Honk!”

“...!”

“Chirp chirp!”

Sakura stooped down to give Perca a handshake while Rick ran circles around them. All my other creatures also had favorable reactions. Reflet seemed especially happy.

“Hum!”

“Honk?”

“Hummm!”

“Honk honk!”

Reflet lifted Perca up high in her arms, then started spinning around on the spot. Perca looked happy as he flapped his flippers and feet. The two of them, both being water-type monsters, must have felt some connection with each other.

“Omigosh, what is this place...? Wowee. I wanna live here.”

“Heh heh... You could charge an admission fee.”

Kurumi and Rikyu’s eyes were sparkling at the cuteness of my monsters, but no one beat Filma’s level of excitement.

“Can I *pleeease* play with Perca now?! Hey! I can, right?!”

“O-Oh, yeah. Go for it.”

“Yippee!”

Filma smiled more widely than I’d ever seen her smile, then went rushing towards Perca and the others.

“How about you two?” I asked Kurumi and Rikyu.

“I wanna play too! I don’t know when I’ll get a chance to come back here!”

“Heh heh... I wouldn’t mind either.”

I could probably just leave them to their own devices. Filma and them weren’t the types to mistreat my monsters or anything, after all.

Leaving the task of entertaining the girls to the others, I decided to head inside to do some cooking. Incidentally, while I was last logged out I had watched some TV, where I’d gotten an idea for a certain dish.

“I’ll need some white fish, sugar, and some wine to act as food coloring.”

First, I needed to boil the fish.

“Next, I’ll mince the boiled fish and add in some sugar...”

Oh right, sugar was the latest ingredient discovered just the other day in a town by frontline players. It was now in mass circulation thanks to the many front liners bringing it around to various areas. It wasn’t super cheap or anything, but compared to when it was first discovered, it was easy to get your hands on.

“Then after it’s all mixed up...”

The dish I was making was a traditional rice accompaniment called *sakura denbu*, aka sweet, pink fish flakes.

I had been trying and failing to make a sweet fish and rice dish, so I was shocked after seeing it on a cooking show. I couldn’t believe there was such a sweet dish that used fish and was so familiar to me. And it even went with rice!

“Now, I cook it in a frying pan...”

Personally, I liked my sakura denbu to be a little moist, so I took it off the heat right before it started drying up. Thankfully, I ended up succeeding in creating a dish. What I had created was an item called Fish Furikake. *Oh yeah, it is kind of*

like furikake.

“Let’s see how it tastes... Hmm? I feel like it’s missing something, but...it’s definitely sakura denbu. The color is a little more red than I was expecting too.”

The wine worked better than I had imagined, so the entire dish was a light pink color. It was lighter in color than the sakura denbu that I saw at the market, but it was an acceptable result for a novice like me.

“Now if I put it together with the finished peas and rice and form it... Done! A green pea and rice onigiri with sakura denbu inside!”

Doesn’t look too bad, if I do say so myself. Okay, now how’s the taste?
Wasting no time, I stuffed the onigiri in my mouth.

“Mm! It’s good!”

The peas mixed with the rice had a good texture, and the sakura denbu inside was delicious. It had come out a bit sweet, but I preferred a richer flavor when mixing it with rice.

“Hold on, I have seaweed now, so I can even make a sushi roll.”

I had vinegared sushi rice and dried seaweed, plus almost all the main ingredients, including the sakura denbu, Red Cucumber, Sirishroom, rolled omelet, and boiled prawn. The only thing missing was dried gourd, but that hadn’t been discovered yet.

“All right, let’s make this sushi roll!”

I didn’t have a sushi-rolling mat, but I figured I could make do without it. I could just carefully roll it using my hands. And if I failed at that, I’d ask Sakura to make me a mat with her Woodworking skill. But since seaweed was still a valuable item, I wanted to do my best not to mess this up. I only had the few sheets of seaweed that I’d gotten from Tagosack, after all.

First step was preparing the ingredients.

“I want to use rice vinegar for the sushi rice, but I don’t have that yet. I’ll just use wine vinegar instead.”

I planned to make the ingredients on the sweet side so Olto and the others could eat it too. I simmered the Sirishrooms to be salty-sweet, and I even added

a good bit of sugar to the egg.

Wait, hold up. What if I make a sweet rolled omelet? That's also an omelet dish made with minced fish! Eggs were still a valuable commodity, since you could only get them as drops from bird-type monsters. Right, I had already used Garuda's Egg for Perca. I would have to get some more.

I experimented with making the omelet with minced fish, sugar, and other seasonings, and I really did end up with an item called Sweet Rolled Omelet. *Nice, let's go with this.*

"Right, now I'll simmer the shrimp and cut the Red Cucumber into thin strips..."

And with that, all my preparations were complete. *Now on to making the thick roll of sushi!* I spread out a layer of rice on top of the seaweed, then placed down the ingredients I had prepared. I added a good amount of the sakura denbu.

"Now to roll it up..."

Urgh, this is pretty tough. It was limp and mushy, and I couldn't roll it straight at all. Nevertheless, little by little, I was able to roll it up in the seaweed and managed to make something that resembled a thick sushi roll.

"I'm definitely going to ask Sakura to make me a sushi mat."

Nonetheless, the dish I created was properly named Thick-Rolled Sushi. It was a success. It only had a one-star quality, but I would just take it as a charming flaw.

Chew chew. "Mm, tastes good."

It didn't live up to real-world sushi rolls, but the flavor was passable. I was sure my monsters would like this too. Were they still playing outside? I wanted to have them taste it. I went back to the veranda to check, where I saw the three girls playing Red Light, Green Light with the others.

"Green light..." Kurumi started, taking a long pause before quickly saying, "Red light!"

"Tra-la?"

“Aroo?”

“You moved, Eine! You too, Nuts!”

Eine and Nuts trudged over to the out zone after falling for Kurumi’s fake out. It looked like Filma and Perca had also already gotten out. Filma was focusing all her attention on cuddling Perca where all the other “out” players were.

“Percaaaa!”

“Honk.”

They both seemed happy, so it was fine.

“Rikyu and Mamori are the only ones still in!”

“Heh... I’ll win the next one too.”

“Ya!”

These two were the ones to beat, apparently. Not only was Rikyu holding Kettle, but Dango was also sitting on top of her head. *That’s some balancing act!*

“It looks like they’re almost done, so I’ll just wait.”

So I thought. However...

“Ah! It’s Silver-Haired! Hey, come play with us!”

“Ya-ya!”

“Arf arf!”

“Booo!”

“Pom!”

I became surrounded by cute critters. Monsters and mascots were clinging to my sides, looking up at me with hopeful eyes. *Who could say no in a situation like this?*

In the end, I joined everyone in playing tag and hide-and-seek. *Ahh, I’ve been transported back to my youth.*

The mascots were oddly good at playing hide-and-seek. They must have known all the good hiding spots since they played in this house every day.

Then, after everything was over, the three girls accepted my rice dishes and left with pleased smiles on their faces.

“Bye-bye!”

“Thank you for having us.”

“Heh heh... I’m satisfied.”

“See ya!”

Halfway through our play session I gave out onigiri and sushi rolls as a snack, and they seemed to have a generally favorable reception. The only negative reaction was Kurumi grimacing at the sakura denbu—she wasn’t a huge fan of it. All my creatures ate up the snacks happily though, so I could probably make a bigger batch next time. They were foods they could all enjoy eating together. Also, it seemed Perca liked seafood. He gladly ate the sashimi in addition to the sakura denbu.

“All right then, should we head to the Cats now?”

“Honk!”

I had actually planned to leave for the Cats’ earlier, but I’d ended up joining in and playing with everyone. Coming with me were Perca, whom I was going to introduce to Alyssa, as well as the tiny ones, Rick, Fau, and Eine, who wanted to come along.

“Hello.”

“Welcome to—”

Hm? What’s going on? Alyssa just stopped talking.

It happened the moment she saw my face, as I entered the Quick-Eared Cats at the front of our group. She froze in place so quickly I swore I could hear a cracking sound.

“A-Alyssa?”

“Hah! I-I’m sorry. I just froze for a sec.”

“Um, are you okay?”

“I’m fine! I’m totally prepared this time! Lewin told me! You’re here to sell

information on your Botany skill, right?”

For some reason, Alyssa was rattling on with an expression that looked like she was backed into a corner, or like she was in a hurry.

“Oh! And I’m sure you’re also going to tell me some rice dish recipes and report on the event!”

I *did* want to sell the information she’d just listed too, but that wasn’t the main reason I was here. Right before I was about to open my mouth to say so, Alyssa lowered her gaze.

“Wha—?”

“Honk?”

Alyssa met eyes with Perca, and still keeping eye contact, she stopped moving once again. Just as I thought I saw her begin to tremble, she abruptly let out a war cry.

“WAAAH! A PENGUIIN!”

Wh-What’s wrong? Now that I thought about it, something similar happened last time.

“E-Everything okay?”

“...S-Sorry about that. I just felt like screaming.”

“I-I see... Well, be careful?”

“Aha ha ha... Really, I’m sorry.”

Did she really like penguins or something? Maybe she was stressed out about something going on in real life. I decided not to prod her too much about her scream and got right down to business.

“Right, so, first I’d like to sell information about this guy.”

“Honk!”

“*Pheew...*”

Alyssa let out a deep breath as if she was mentally concentrating. There was tension in the air, like right before the start of a martial arts demonstration.

Wait, she's not gonna punch me, is she?

Alyssa raised her face suddenly—seeing her serious expression, I took a half step backwards.

“All right! Bring it on! Yeah! Start by telling me his name!” she exclaimed, looking oddly fired up. Well, if it got the conversation moving, that was fine. I started off by introducing Perca.

“His name is Perca. He's a Highway Penguin.”

“Honk honk!”



As I held him in my arms, Perca flapped his right flipper in greeting. *Ain't he cute?!* Alyssa wasn't even fawning over him despite witnessing that. She was a true professional.

"These are his stats. It looks like he'll be good at fighting underwater too."

"What's this skill here? The one with the weird name."

"Well, you see..."

I answered Alyssa's questions one after another. In addition to Penguin Highway, Fire Lure and some others were also apparently pretty unusual skills.

"This is...crazy, in many ways."

"He's cute, right?"

"Yeah. Plus he's specialized for underwater activities, has the ability to pseudofly, and he can even have a hand in crafting...? This is definitely going to spur on some penguin search teams."

That was certainly possible. There were probably players who liked penguins enough that they'd do anything to have one. At least, I knew if I had heard that penguins had been discovered, I'd have wanted one for sure. Obviously I'd start by gathering info and then head to where I thought I could possibly find them.

"And you got it from an unspecified power... Things might get out of hand."

"Should I be worried?"

Envy among players was terrifying. I got a little scared as I remembered the uproar that happened when I had first obtained a title. I was sure people would be talking trash about some random player like me getting rare items and monsters. *Maybe I'll stay off the forums for a bit.*

I wasn't going to get chased down again, was I? Honestly, that had been a little traumatizing. But I guessed it was thanks to that time that I was now automatically able to evade other players' gazes and comments. I didn't want to garner any negative attention anymore. Alyssa, however, shook her head with a wry smile.

"I doubt anything bad will happen to you directly. Rumors of the Defenders

have spread even through the ranks of the second-wave players.”

“Come again?”

She trailed off at the end so I didn’t catch what she said.

“Oh, I’m just saying, you don’t have to worry. When I said things might get out of hand, I meant on the forums. I’m sure people will be voicing their resentment towards the devs when they’re unable to get their hands on a penguin, so the forums will get a little crazy.”

“Ah, so that’s what you meant.”

I could understand why people would want to complain to the devs about something like this. There had been times where I myself had subconsciously cursed the devs for something or other.

“Since it’s a monster that’s impossible to obtain immediately, this’ll probably cause a huge fuss. I wonder if this will make Garuda’s Egg popular among Tamers?”

If someone really wanted a penguin, they would need to have a Garuda’s Egg, Andras’s Magic Eye, and a Wind Falcon’s Wind Core, and also wait for an unspecified power event to occur when hatching an egg. For now, Tamers were the only ones who had even a very slight chance of getting one.

“It’s a cute new variety of monster. And the way to get it is known. Once again, this type of information will be hard to handle...”

“So, what do you think? Will you buy it for much?”

“Yes, of course...”

“Okay then, next is what you’ve been eagerly waiting for—Botany!”

“Ah, aha ha ha... R-Right. I was also really looking forward to that. I even strangled Lewin over it without thinking.”

“Huh?”

Did she just say she strangled Lewin? Was she upset that he hadn’t gotten the information out of me during the event? *I knew she was fierce.*

“Aha ha, don’t worry about it. It’s nothing. So? Can you tell me how you

obtained it and what it can do?”

“It started off right after my fight with Garuda...”

I gave Alyssa the rundown of the info I had on Botany from start to finish. The fact that I’d continued a quest chain, that Botany was acquired as a sort of reward for that quest, and also its uses. I told her everything I could.

“Wow, so there are still hidden materials out there... And you even found a special item during the event? If that’s true, then considering what happened in Server No. 4, I wonder if there was a player there who had Mineralogy or something like that?”

“Mineralogy? Are there players who have that skill?”

“I don’t know. But there was a player who used a strange item during the fight with Andras, and it’s unclear how they got it. Now, hearing what you told me, I’ve got a guess as to how.”

So I really wasn’t the only person who had an -ology skill. But apparently those players hadn’t made their information public yet. Keeping valuable information under wraps was its own type of playstyle, after all. Not everyone was as open with their secrets as me.

After that, I gave Alyssa information on the raid boss event, showed her some rice recipes, and then left the Cats. I had to scold myself for almost breaking into a skip.

“I really wasn’t expecting to get five million from that.”

After all, just having information on Botany and Perca didn’t guarantee being able to obtain them right away. They required time and perseverance. Despite how unusual the information was, I hadn’t been expecting to sell it for a high price... It must have been the information about Perca that boosted the price. That was probably priced higher than the info on Botany.

“She did ask if she could pay me in installments again, though.”

She had never been late in paying me before anyway, so I had no problem with it.

The day after Perca joined the team and I sold my information to the Quick-Eared Cats, I was walking around surveying my farm.

“Whoa, looks like the seaweed farming is coming along nicely!”

“Mm-mm!”

“...!”

Sakura was also helping out Olto with the seaweed farm. The fence-like object the seaweed was sticking to was Sakura’s handiwork.

Changing the water into salt water was extremely easy—all I had to do was select fresh or seawater on the farm’s setting screen. However, in order to increase the quality of the salt water, which was currently at the lowest level, I would have to personally collect seawater and pour it into the pool. Fresh water at least could be obtained in various areas, so I was able to get some of high quality. However, since I had no access to seawater yet, I could only use the default seawater.

“What else—”

“Mm-mm!”

“Oh? What’s up? Is there something else you want to show me besides the pool?”

“Mm!”

Olto dragged me to a spot where a plant I’d never seen before was growing. It looked like a big clover—with five leaves.

“What’ve we got here...? Ah! Oh right! That mystery seed we planted before finally grew?!”

“Mm-mm!”

It was a new variety of seed I’d made a week ago using Selective Breeding. When I appraised it, I saw its name was “Unlucky Clover.”

If someone were to ingest it, they would be randomly afflicted with the Poison, Paralysis, Sleep, Deadweight/Intoxicated, or Blind status ailments. The reason Deadweight/Intoxicated was listed like that was because those of legal

age would be inflicted with Intoxicated, while minors would be inflicted with Deadweight.

Apparently each abnormality had its own probability of occurring, so it was possible to be inflicted with more than one. Some people had already grown this clover so it was circulating around a bit, but since it was difficult to cultivate, it was being bought and sold for a fairly high price. If I could mass-produce these, I should be able to make a pretty good profit.

“Awesome! Olto, can you grow this?”

“Mm!”

“Very nice. We’ll grow a bunch and use them to make potions.”

They were good for both selling and using.

“All right, my schedule’s already jam-packed today!”

Tomorrow was the start of the commemorative event for the second-wave players. I needed to get my preparations in order for that too.

“I can only bring a limited number of items to this event.”

The details of the event had already been announced.

First off, players wouldn’t be separated into servers this time. The devs had apparently prepared a huge map that would allow tens of thousands of players to play together at once. Time would be sped up, so even though it would only last four real-world hours, it would actually span seven days in the game. You could log out during that time, but even just running some errands would eat up a lot of the event’s runtime.

Another important aspect was the limit on what you could bring into the event. Other than what we already had equipped, we could only bring ten items.

Since I didn’t know how large the towns and villages would be, my item setup would be very important.

My plan was to act as a rear guard focused on crafting. First, I would need my Concoct, Cooking, and Alchemy sets. Each of these crafting tools qualified as one item, so altogether they would only fill up three slots. Next, I also wanted

to bring a farming hoe, a logging ax, a mining pickax, a fishing pole, and fishing bait. I would have to gather materials too, after all.

That already brought me up to eight slots. For the remaining two, I had my eye on an Escape Orb and a Flee Orb. It seemed like crafters should be able to get away with not doing much fighting during the event, but I didn't know what would be there. Items that would let me escape in an emergency were probably essential to have.

"I also need to upgrade my equipment..."

Since I couldn't bring all my monsters with me, Tamed Monster's Orbs would also become important during the event. Currently, I had four orbs in my possession, but due to my equipment's capabilities, I could only equip three. So before anything, I would have to do something about that.

Another problem was what to do with Perca. Should I bring him with me so he could level up during the event?

"Hmm, maybe I'll decide after checking out his abilities in the water."

"Honk?"

In any case, first I had to take care of my equipment. I headed for Lewin's shop with Bear Bear, Rick, and Perca in tow, all of whom I needed to buy equipment for.

"Heya."

"Yuto, eh? Thanks for all ya did durin' the event."

"That's my line. Anyway, I'm here to check out some accessories."

"What sort of effects are ya lookin' for 'em to have?"

"The more slots, the better. I want to be able to equip Tamed Monster's Orbs."

"I hear ya. If that's the case, how 'bout somethin' like this?"

Lewin took out several accessories and laid them out on a tray for me to see.

"Earrings?"

"That one gives a slight bonus to magic skills overall, and it's got three open

slots. How about it?”

“That’s great! I’ll take them!”

Their effect wasn’t that impressive, but being able to equip three summoning beads was huge. This was a must-buy.

“I’d also like some equipment for my monsters.”

“Sure thing.”

After that, Lewin showed me a few options of equipment for my monsters, and I got everything I needed. They were a bit more premium priced than I was expecting, but I had the cash to burn! I even ended up purchasing other pieces of armor at Lewin’s recommendation, such as a scarf for Rick.

Bear Bear’s equipment was especially expensive.

“A white shirt, a black jacket, and a red ascot tie. Very stylish.”

“Growl!”

Bear Bear crossed their arms, their face smug. *They still look cute, though.* Their new getup looked similar to their starting equipment, and that wasn’t just a coincidence. Ever since Bear Bear’s cute appearance became popular, equipment for Honey Bears now defaulted to this sort of fashionable style. Even though there might be some slight differences, it always consisted of a three-piece set of a shirt, jacket, and necktie. That was why even Lewin’s shop was always stocked with those types of equipment.

Bear Bear’s White Snow Shirt had Heat Tolerance and Fire Resistance. Their Black Terracotta jacket had Earth Resistance and Strength Up. Their Thermal Ascot Tie had Cold Tolerance and Ice Resistance. Each piece of equipment was as good as the last.

“You look great, Bear Bear! You’re a fashion icon!”

“Growl!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Oh, of course. You look good too, Rick!”

“Chirp!”

He was wearing a red scarf as usual, so he actually looked exactly the same. However, his new scarf was also a quality piece of gear—in addition to Paralysis and Poison Resistance, it even had resistance to fire. The unfortunate thing was that there wasn't anything that suited Perca, although Lewin looked more disappointed than I did. It was hard to keep myself from laughing seeing Lewin, with his stern dwarven face, petting Rick and Perca simultaneously. I had previously noticed that he had a fondness for small animals, but it seemed he actually liked cute animals in general. *I'll have to bring Perca back here again.*

"What should we do about your equipment, Perca...?"

"Honk?"

He was still low level, so I wanted to make sure he was equipped with decent armor.

"If we can't find anything here, how about we check out the other store?"

I decided to head for Shuella's shop in Zone Five. She would probably have more clothing and small accessories rather than armor.

"Oh, well if it isn't Silver-Haired! And you have your penguin with you too!"

"You're as energetic as ever today, Shuella."

"Tee hee. Being energetic and cute and youthful is sorta my gimmick, y'know!"

The young girl gave a twirl, her pink pigtails fluttering. She punctuated her turn with a head tilt and a wink as she looked up at me. *Laying it on thick as always.* That was my usual thought, but strangely, her level of coquettishness this time was exactly the right amount to reel me in.

"Honk?"

"Squeee! I've heard about you, little penguin! Omigod! You've done it again, Silver-Haired! He's adorbs!"

"I guess people *have* been talking about it, huh?"

"Well, duh."

Should've guessed. Well, a lot of players did see me on the way here, so there

was no avoiding it. No one actually came up to talk to me, so I didn't mind them just looking.

"Have the forums been blowing up?"

"No one's been saying anything bad about you, for the most part. If you're scared, why don't you take a look for yourself?"

"Heck no."

I couldn't bring myself to go egosurfing; that was way too embarrassing. Even if no one was saying anything directly bad about me, reading people's comments on the forums was mentally exhausting. Plus, the fact that Shuella tacked on "for the most part" meant that there *were* some people who were bad-mouthing me.

I'd decided to make it so any mentions of me were hidden for a while when I used the forums. It was really helpful and convenient that the game's online forums allowed you to make such detailed adjustments to search terms and display settings.

"Anyway, I was wondering if you could upgrade my armor, and if you had anything for Perca."

"So his name is Perca! Nice to meetcha."

"Honk!"

Right after Perca waved a flipper in greeting, Shuella suddenly clutched her chest and doubled over.

"O-Oh no... My vitals—!"

"Wh-What's wrong, Shuella?"

"I'm okay. My vital signs monitor just started beeping."

"Wait a minute, are you seriously okay?"

The vital signs monitor was a device that could be worn outside the VR game world. It was a device that alerted you in the case that some unexpected situation or change to your body were to occur. It also had the ability to forcibly log you out if it sensed that your life was in danger. People who were middle-

aged and older or had health problems and played VR games were recommended to wear them. Though there were some younger folk who used them too.

It also worked as an external monitoring device, serving the convenient function of alerting you to a fire or other emergency occurring while you were in the game. Once a player was inside the VR game, they entered a sleep state, so they couldn't react to any incidents happening around them.

I'd heard of stories of burglars entering people's houses while they were playing, so there were probably a certain number of people who were anxious about not knowing what was going on around them while they were in the game.

"My blood pressure just rose a bit too much. It's no problemo."

"No, wait, your blood pressure...?"

"Don't you worry about it. Perca's just too cute; I got a bit overexcited. Let's move on to more important things. What sort of armor can he equip?"

"He can equip headgear and two accessories."

"In that case, how about this?"

Shuella brought out a yellow scarf.

"Rick has a red scarf, right? So how about we make them match?"

"Oh, good idea."

"It's a bit pricey, but it's got high defense and even Cold Protection. And it's an accessory."

"Hmm. Perca already has Cold Tolerance, though."

"Tsk tsk tsk! Cold Tolerance and Cold Protection are two *very* different skills! You see, Cold Protection is a skill that transfers half of the wearer's Cold Tolerance effect to their teammates! So basically, it only makes sense for those with Cold Tolerance to equip it!"

"It can do that?! That's awesome!"

"Right?"

It was fairly expensive, but I went ahead and purchased the Coldproof Yellow Scarf.

Next was the Shoulder Bag accessory. At first glance, it was just a plain leather shoulder bag. However, in contrast to its appearance, it boasted high defense and even had a simple inventory that allowed storage of ten items.

“And lastly: this.”

Shuella placed another piece of equipment on Perca’s head—it was a smallish brimmed hat, shaped similarly to a newsboy or mariner cap. It was black and had a chic feel. Its name was also very plain—it was called the Black Uniform Hat.

“It looks a little small on him, but isn’t it cute?!”

“It *is* cute, but won’t it fall off?”

“That won’t be a problem! The game’s mysterious powers are at work!”

“Guess that’s fine, then.”

Although it didn’t have any special effects, it had excellent defense. This was another must-buy.

“What do you think, Perca?”

“Honk honk!”

Perca looked very cute in his hat, yellow scarf, and shoulder bag. He sort of looked like a penguin mailman. However, I had one question.

“Can you swim with those on?”

“Honk?”

I guess I can just confirm that later. In order to do a test run of Perca’s abilities, I brought him, Rick, Fau, Bear Bear, Reflet, and Himka to the Water Elementals’ dungeon. Even we would be able to hold our own in the beginning areas here. It was perfect for testing out Perca’s skills.

Incidentally, the final boss that was said to be in the innermost reaches of the dungeon still hadn’t been discovered. Apparently, the gates wouldn’t open. People speculated on the forums that maybe it hadn’t been implemented yet. It

was often the case in online games that'd just started service that if you couldn't find the path to the boss, that meant it hadn't been added in yet. But I highly doubted that a dungeon in this game wouldn't have a boss in it already. I actually thought it was more likely that some piece of the puzzle was still missing.

"Perca, can you swim here?"

"Honk!"

"Hum!"

After we took care of all the minor enemies in the room, Perca dived into the water, with Reflet following in after him. She must have gone in to protect him, just in case. I also dived into the water to check out Perca's movements.

"Honk honk!"

"Humm!"

Perca was swimming at a remarkable speed. I had seen penguins swim before at aquariums and such, and that was exactly how fast they swam. Every time I thought I was right by him, in mere seconds he was off somewhere far away. He wasn't even outshone by Reflet, who was over ten levels higher than him. Maybe that was the work of his Speed Swim skill. Reflet had Aquamotion (Advanced), but since Speed Swim was specialized for swimming, its effect seemed to be on par with an advanced skill.

"It doesn't look like having that hat, scarf, and bag equipped is holding him back in any way, so he should be reliable underwater."

"Honk honk!"

"Hum-humm!"

Perca and Reflet both replied from my side with a nod, then they seemingly transformed into torpedoes and sped past me. Reflet was in total play mode. It seemed like she just really wanted to play with Perca underwater.

"Perca! Use Fire Lure next!"

"Honk!"

After Perca gave his response, he abruptly did a somersault underwater, then raised both his flippers up and let out a cheerful cry. Then, an orange ball of flame appeared right in front of Perca. It was strange to see a ball of fire floating in the water. *I see. It really doesn't go out underwater.* I wasn't able to touch it, but Perca could even make it move. I'd been relying on tools to be a source of light underwater, but with this skill, low-cost underwater exploration seemed possible.

I was also able to confirm the skill's ability to gather fish to us. I allowed the fish-type monsters called Fanged Groupers to respawn again and again as they came gathering around the Fire Lure, losing all track of time. It looked like the ball of fire was focusing their hate, so they weren't even taking any notice of us. They didn't even attack us when we tried to resurface. This skill seemed like it'd be useful in battle—it was much better than I'd been expecting.

Oh yeah, after I reeled in a Fanged Grouper, I used it as a guinea pig to test out Perca's fighting abilities. He didn't do that much damage when he attacked with his beak, but his use of Speed Swim to launch himself into a dash attack was pretty powerful. After he gained a few levels, he would become a reliable asset in underwater battles.

"All right then, now that I've got a good understanding of your abilities, Perca, the next step is to level you up!"

Since there was a possibility the event would take place where there was a lot of water, I wanted to gain a few levels so that he'd be prepared in case we found ourselves in a pinch. Then, as we moved about the dungeon...

"La-di-daaa!♪"

"Huh? Fau?"

"Laaa!♪"

Right after we took a break, Fau, who had been strumming a lively tune on her lute and singing, suddenly began to glow.

"Aye!"

"I knew it—a Tamed Monster's Heart!"

Once the light settled down, Fau was cradling a pretty jewel. When I appraised it, I saw it was called Tamed Monster's Heart (Fau). Apparently I'd maxed out my favorability with her. *Maybe it's a good thing I always let her sing as much as she wants?* Whenever we weren't exploring, she was either playing or singing all day long. That must've done it.

"Aye!"

I extended my palm, and Fau placed her own Tamed Monster's Heart there. It glittered like a jewel. When I thought about how this was proof of Fau's affection for me, I was overcome with happiness.

"Now I've got one more card in my hand for the event. Thanks, Fau!"

"Yuh-aye!"

I can't wait for tomorrow's event to start!

Online Forum [I Wanna Pet All the Monsters!]

Tamed Monster Appreciation Thread for Non-Tamers and Non-Summoners, Part 8

Are you a nonmainstream command-class player or a non-command-class player who wants to express their admiration of monsters? Do monsters make you lose your breath and mind? Then this is the thread for you!

We're looking for any information on the usability of tame or summon skills by other classes.

Feel free to just talk about cute monsters.

This includes mascots too.

Please obtain permission before posting screenshots of other players' monsters.

187: Raspu

Up north?

188: LordApple

Probably north.

189: Ruach

It's north.

190: Requiem

Hey, did something happen?

A whole bunch of people just teleported to the square in the northern part of Zone Five.

191: Longneck

Maybe there was some significant discovery up north?

Considering the state of this thread, it must be related to a tamed monster, right?

192: Requiem

I kind of doubt that.

Information on a rare tamed monster wouldn't spur *that* many people to go there, would it?

I wouldn't say it's on the level of what happened with the rice, but this is a pretty big migration of people.

193: Raspu

I think it's less so that there's been a discovery in the north, but that there's a *clue* for a big discovery there.

194: LordApple

Penguin!

I want one!

195: Longneck

So people heard about there being penguin monsters, and now they're looking for one?

196: Ruach

That's right!

I want a penguin!

197: Raspu

Well, to put it simply, the penguin that's been witnessed with Silver-Haired has stolen people's hearts, and now they're heading to the same place en masse.

The Cats have the information on how to get one on sale now, but even just knowing the method doesn't help.

As a result, search parties are now flooding the northern area since there seems to be the slightest possibility you can get one there.

198: LordApple

I never used to like penguins.

But after seeing that one...!

I want a penguin!

199: Ruach

A waddling penguin...

Aaaaahhhh!

I want one!

200: Raspu

So yeah. That's the situation.

201: Requiem

Wasn't there an uproar like this once before?

202: Longneck

I wouldn't say "once." This sort of thing happens all the time because of Silver-Haired.

203: Raspu

A while ago, it was the Gnome and the Tree Nymph.

In more recent memory, there was the Mole and the Fairy.

204: Longneck

All the people who have fallen victim to the penguin's cuteness are just ambling around in search of one.

I get it.

I've also been walking around in search of yokai.

205: Requiem

I bet Silver-Haired has information about yokai too.

206: Longneck

You're right. Maybe Silver-Haired would...

Still, I can't just go up and talk to him.

I don't want to be reported!

207: Requiem

Ah. The Defenders, right?

208: Ruach

Yeah, that's right!

I want to go ask him about his penguin, but the Defenders are too scary!

209: LordApple

There's so much I wish I could ask, like how it feels to cuddle his penguin!

And if things went well, I'd want to pet it!

210: Requiem

If they're protecting Silver-Haired from people like you, then I think it's a good thing that people are scared of them.

211: LordApple

Urgh, I guess I can't refute that...

212: Ruach

Thank you for stopping us from doing anything drastic, O Defenders!

It was just a passing thought, so please don't punish us!

213: Raspu

I don't think they're actually that extreme of an organization.

214: Longneck

Yeah, I know that. Just going up to talk to Silver-Haired isn't enough to get reported.

But still, I'm not brave enough to test that out!

After all, there's a small chance I *will* be reported!

215: Ruach

That's true. If I could just watch from up close...

216: LordApple

I wouldn't think twice about reporting someone like me approaching Silver-Haired!

Yes, Silver-Haired! No touch!

That's the Silver-Haired Defenders!

217: Requiem

That's some enthusiasm!

The Defenders are scary...

218: Raspu

W-Well, it's good that he has people watching out for him, right?

219: Requiem

It is. By the way, aside from it being cute and all, I'm interested in information on the penguin.

Right now, doesn't it seem like even just information about where they're found could be sold for a high price?

220: Raspu

Of course. There are probably lots of people doing that.

Penguin lovers + people looking to buy and sell info + people who want to do what Silver-Haired does.

Those types of people are the ones who rushed north.

221: LordApple

Buying and selling info?!

How obscene!

222: Ruach

Yeah, it's impure!

Those people don't love penguins enough!

223: Requiem

Well, I don't have any interest outside of the Undead...

224: LordApple

You Necromancers are all the same!

225: Raspu

But still, sometimes it's easier for people who distance themselves from something to hit on a clue than it is for the ones who *really* want it.

226: Longneck

You're right.

I suspect this game has implemented the world's first sensor that detects what you want.

227: Requiem

So success is tied to not being selfish?

Maybe that's the reason why Silver-Haired has made so many huge discoveries one after another.

228: Ruach

It can't be!

We want that penguin with such pure hearts!

I would do *anything* to get my hands on a penguin!

229: LordApple

God, devs, Silver-Haired!

Bestow upon us a penguin!

230: Ruach

I'm sure our prayers will be answered!

231: Raspu

Are you?

Though I do understand why you would want what Silver-Haired has.

232: Requiem

So he's finally being worshipped, huh...

There's no underestimating Silver-Haired.

233: Longneck

Maybe I'll pray to him too?

Please let me find a new yokai!

234: Requiem

So vague! But I'll pray too.

Please let me get a good Undead monster!

235: Ruach

Me too!

A penguin for me too, please!

Also, let me find a new elemental! Please!

236: Raspu

You're putting all your faith in others lololol

But maybe he really will answer your tamed monster prayers.

[Don't Mess With Birds] Thread for Discussing the Raid Boss Event, Part 4

A thread to discuss the battle against the demon Andras in the raid event that occurred at South Gate.

332: YanakaGinzo

I burst out laughing at that official video from the event.

333: Eustia

Silver-Haired?

334: Yoshiida

You're talking about Silver-Haired, right?

335: YanakaGinzo

I mean, he blew himself up.

Server No. 1 was so dramatic.

336: Eustia

Things turned into a battle for revenge after he blew himself up.

Everyone got super pumped up. All the monsters were cute too.

337: Yoshiida

But in the end all the servers defeated the boss, so everyone got the same rewards.

338: YanakaGinzo

Oh, they were all the same?

339: Yoshiida

Seems like it. My friend said that on their server, their crystal turned red and things looked really bad for them.

At the end, the power of the crystal put up a barrier around the fortress, and they managed to win.

But we got the same rewards.

I'm thinking the people in the highest ranking servers got something a little extra.

340: Eustia

Also, it looks like the color of your crystal at the end of the battle changed the number of MVPs that could be chosen.

The most was five, and the fewest three.

341: Yoshiida

I don't really care about MVP, since it doesn't apply to nobodies like us.

The reward wasn't bad, and a defensive battle felt fresh.

There were some moments that were a little traumatic, but I thought it was a good event.

342: YanakaGinzo

What do you mean "a little"?! That trauma wasn't "little" at all!

What the hell was that?!

I wasn't expecting to start having mixed feelings about

sparrows IRL!

343: Eustia

Oh yeah, those birds sure were scary.

344: YanakaGinzo

It wasn't just *scary*!

The shrill caws of those birds surrounding me on all sides, getting my HP pecked away!

It was a horror! A horror, I say!

345: Yoshiida

Oh, did you use magic against them?

That was a scary sight even just watching from the outside, so I guess I'd be traumatized too if I were killed by those birds.

346: YanakaGinzo

If you were suddenly thrown into a Hitchcock world, you'd be slinging magic too, right?!

347: Eustia

Yeah, for sure.

If I hadn't been warned beforehand, I think I would have done the same.

348: Yoshiida

Yeah, same.

And that's when you get murdered by a murder!

349: YanakaGinzo

I worked so hard to gather a lot of items.

I dove underwater, climbed trees, and dug holes.

I really worked hard, you know?

All those materials and items I gathered went to waste five minutes after I arrived at the fortress.

350: Eustia

Yikes... My condolences.

You didn't leave it with the crafters?

In my server, the fighters and the crafters divided up the work.

351: Yoshiida

Huh? No one's commenting on "murdered by a murder"?

I thought that was pretty clever.

352: YanakaGinzo

My server didn't coordinate very well...

Everyone just sorta fought how they wanted to.

353: Eustia

That's what happens when you don't have someone unifying everyone else.

We had Siegfried on our server, so we were totally fine.

Strangely, everyone listened to him.

I suppose that's the work of charisma?

354: Yoshiida

Hello? Are you guys ignoring me?

Wait, are my messages not displaying?

355: YanakaGinzo

Come to think of it, my friend said they had Ruby Red on their server.

She got everyone to work together and they were able to subdue the boss in no time flat.

356: Yoshiida

Oh, that was my server!

I'm serious!

357: Eustia

Really? So did Ruby Red really have that big of an impact?

358: YanakaGinzo

Were there any other famous players?

359: Yoshiida

Oh, my message went through.

Y-Yeah, that's right!

She stood at the front line and gave out orders even during the fight against Andras.

Even the rebellious types listen to the Ruby Red Explorer, after all.

360: Eustia

I get it.

There's something about people with three titles.

She's not just any ordinary top player.

361: Yoshiida

Silver-Haired's at the top of that list!

And he's got a track record of achievements.

I'd probably listen to what he had to say too.

362: YanakaGinzo

Well, I can understand to some extent.

If Silver-Haired had been on our server, I bet I wouldn't have died...

363: Yoshiida

Silver-Haired himself died.

364: YanakaGinzo

Oh, yeah!

365: Eustia

Oh, but I heard Silver-Haired got MVP. And he got in first place.

366: YanakaGinzo

M-My man!

He makes any failure into a success!

367: Eustia

He really is Silver MVP!

368: YanakaGinzo

Silver MVP!

369: Yoshiida

Doesn't it just feel like everything'll turn out okay
when you say those words?

Well, I'll say it too.

Silver MVP!

Epilogue

“The official event video reached some spectacular view counts this time too. All thanks to our gracious Silver-Haired.”

“Ha ha ha. We really must be grateful to Silver-Haired for always creating these climactic scenes.”

“He was great this time around too, wasn’t he? I wasn’t expecting him to actually jump on its back.”

“It’s a good thing we made the necessary adjustments just in case that happened.”

“It really was. And the following bomb completely exceeded my expectations.”

“That gave me a good laugh.”

“But I am glad everything ended without any major issues.”

“Well, we did make it so it would be possible to clear as long as a server wasn’t filled with self-centered players.”

“There were some servers in danger of failing, though.”

“I was really surprised to see that there were some servers who still thought they’d be able to clear a raid by brute forcing it. No matter what your normal approach is, you could at least cooperate during a raid event. Weren’t there even some people who tried to occupy the fortress? There’s no way just one party could manage an entire fortress.”

“There was never going to be zero chance of those types of players appearing. Even now, there are still many players petitioning for us to implement PK and plundering. Haven’t they realized that we never planned on implementing that, ever? I wish they’d figure out that the direction of the game and their own playstyles don’t align.”

“Well, once *that* is announced, I’m sure those people will head that way.”

“Huh? By *that*, do you mean *that* ‘*that*’? Company A’s new title—wasn’t that coming out next month?”

“That is what I mean. It seems after seeing how well our game was received, they’ve decided to accelerate their release.”

“Wow. I’m sure the higher-ups are fine with that, but I feel bad for the development team.”

“They’re probably in hell right now...”

“Good luck, guys!”

“The closed beta testing is just finishing up, so if they can implement at least the starting areas, they might just do it.”

“Ah, so they’re planning to start by just implementing the first and second areas, then they’ll release a bunch of updates after launch?”

“They’ll have to do pretty frequent maintenance, but I guess they consider starting service of the game early to be more beneficial to them nevertheless. If they do it now, they can piggyback off us. If their first batch goes out to 100,000, it’ll just be madness... But I doubt they’d be that reckless.”

“Will they be implementing obviously violent PK and PvP?”

“If their plan is to distinguish themselves from us, they have no choice but to go in that direction, don’t they? It looks like they’re strongly promoting an incredibly ruthless world that not only has PK but also friendly fire and the ability to kill NPCs. It seems like they’re trying to apply for an R-15 rating, but I’m wondering if it’ll be an R-18 game. I hear it’s going to have just *buckets* of blood.”

“Urk. I’ll pass. Realistic blood is too scary for me.”

“More than that, it seems like you’ll even see internal organs and such.”

“Now that’s just a waste of resources. Though I do think the groups who think LJO is too mild will move to playing that game instead.”

“Being differentiated from them isn’t all bad.”

“All those players making a fuss about us adding PK will go there, right?”

“I certainly think so.”

“Honestly, that’ll be a huge help to us. Why don’t we start a campaign saying that if people want PK, they can pick up Company A’s game?”

“If only we could. But we still don’t know exactly when they’ll start service.”

“Can’t they hurry it up?”

“They’re going to be our rivals, won’t they? Don’t look so happy about it in front of the higher-ups.”

“Aha ha ha...”

“More importantly, I trust everything is ready for the second-wave event?”

“Of course. All the final adjustments are also complete!”

“We made it so players will have to follow an established route, in order to make it enjoyable for second-wave players too. There are several spots that seem breachable with a bit of force, though.”

“Those have also been taken care of. We’ve made it so any objects we’ve placed are impossible to destroy! No problemo!”

“Then there’s players like Silver-Haired who always surpass our expectations. No matter how much we prepare, it’s never enough.”

“Even Silver-Haired himself can’t get past those areas.”

“Let’s hope so. The development team really went above and beyond this time around.”

“This event is chock-full of things that appeal to men too. They made the graphics quite realistic.”

“That’s what I’m saying, they did too much with it. They’ve made more work for themselves.”

“That’s how good games are made, though, so isn’t that a good thing?”

“I just hope they’re not all sleep-deprived and making mistakes.”

“Ah, that may be possible.”

“Anyway, they’re being thorough with the final checks, right?”

“Y-Yes! But...”

“But *what?*”

“Earlier, I know I said even Silver-Haired wouldn’t be able to surpass those areas, but he may very well do something we haven’t anticipated...”

“Well, some part of me is looking forward to that a little.”

“I understand. Moreover, considering how popular that official video got, I have a feeling it’d be better if he did do something to stand out a bit.”

“Yeah. Maybe he can stand out a little, but not in an area we’re not expecting. That’d be perfect.”

“...Isn’t that impossible?”

“I suppose it is. This is Silver-Haired we’re talking about, after all.”



A Late-Start Tamer's
Laid-Back Life

A
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TAMER'S LAID-BACK LIFE

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by Yuu Tanaka

Translated by A.M. Cola Edited by Diana Taylor

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