

Skills

Nether Nexus / Catai

Wings / Field

Bofuri

★ I Don't ★
Want to Get
Hurt, so I'll
Max Out My
Defense.

SALLY'S

Sally

LV

HP 32

EXP 99

[

[DEX 45]

[INT 60]

Skills

Eval

Attack

Attack

Attack

Attack

Attack

Attack

Attack

Attack

Attack

Attack

Attack

Attack

Attack

Attack

Attack

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Attack

Attack

Attack

Attack

Attack

Welcome to
NewWorld Online.

Skills

Combo Boost (L)

10

YUUMIKAN

Illustration by KOIN

Bofuri

I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so
I'll Max Out Defense.

SALLY

Sally's STATS

Lv64
HP 32/32
MP 130/130
[STR 125]
[VIT 0]
[AGI 180]
[DEX 45]
[INT 60]





LILY

Rapid Fire's guild master. Dresses like a maid and excels at support and command.

WILBERT

An unflappable archer. Can hit every target without using skills.

HINATA

A girl who carries a doll everywhere she goes. Limits her foe's actions. Velvet's partner.

VELVET

She fights wreathed in lightning. Guild master of one of the top guilds, Thunder Storm.

Meeting new rivals

The seventh stratum's
secret area

“You can
touch
them?!”

“Hmm, it’s
like we’re in
a miniature
universe.”





Skills

Gale Slash / Defense Break / Inspire / Down Attack
Power Attack / Switch Attack / Pinpoint Attack / Combo Blade V
Martial Arts VIII / Fire Magic III / Water Magic III / Wind Magic III
Earth Magic III / Dark Magic III / Light Magic III / Strength Boost (L)
Combo Boost (L) / MP Boost (M) / MP Cost Down (M)
MP Recovery Speed Boost (M) / Poison Resist (S)
Gathering Speed Boost (S) / Dagger Mastery X / Dagger Secrets I
Magic Mastery III / Affliction VIII / Presence Block III
Presence Detect II / Sneaky Steps I / Leap V / Quick Change
Cooking I / Fishing / Swimming X / Diving X / Shearing
Superspeed / Ancient Ocean / Chaser Blade / Jack of All Trades
Sword Dance / Shed Skin / Web Spinner / Ice Pillar
Subzero Domain / Nether Nexus / Cataclysmic Eruption
Water Wielding V

Bofuri
★ I Don't ★
Want to Get
Hurt, so I'll
Max Out My
Defense.

YUUMIKAN
Illustration by **KOIN**

SALLY'S STATS

Sally		
Lv64	HP 32/32	MP 130/130
[STR 125]	[VIT 0]	
[AGI 180]	[DEX 45]	[INT 60]



Welcome to
NewWorld Online.

Copyright

Bofuri I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense., Vol. 10

YUUMIKAN

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ITAINO WA IYA NANODE BOGYORYOKU NI KYOKUFURI SHITAITO OMOIMASU. Vol. 10

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so I'll Max Out My Defense.

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✦ Afterword

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NewWorld Online Status

GUILD Maple Tree

NAME
Maple

HP 200/200
MP 22/22

LV
62

PROFILE

The Tankiest Great Shielder

She was a gaming noob, but by putting all her points in defense, she grew so tanky that all attacks just bounce right off. The kind of girl who finds fun in everything, her imaginative leaps astound those around her. When she fights, she negates all incoming attacks while unleashing a barrage of counter-skills.

STATUS

STR 000
VIT 16170
AGI 000

DEX 000
INT 000

EQUIPMENT

New Moon: Hydra
Bonding Bridge

Night's Facsimile: Devour/Lure of the Deep

Black Rose Armor: Saturating Chaos

Toughness Ring
Life Ring

SKILLS

Shield Attack
Sidestep
Deflect
Meditation
Taunt
Inspire
HP Boost (S)
MP Boost (S)
Heavy Body

Green's Grace
Great Shield Mastery VIII
Cover Move IV
Cover
Pierce Guard
Counter
Quick Change

Absolute Defense
Moral Turpitude
Sheep Eater
Hydra Eater
Bomb Eater
Indomitable Guardian

Giant Killing
Psychokinesis
Fortress
Martyr's Devotion
Machine God
Bug Urn Curse
Zone Freeze

Pandemonium I
Heaven's Throne
Nether Nexus
Crystallization
Cataclysmic Eruption
Unbreakable Shield

TAMED MONSTER

Name
Syrup
A turtle with high defense

Giganticize
Spirit Cannon
Mother Nature
etc.



I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense.
Welcome to NewWorld Online.

NewWorld Online Status

GUILD Maple Tree

NAME **Sally** LV **64**
 HP 32/32 MP 130/130

PROFILE

The Unhittable Assassin

Maple's friend and partner, she's got a good head on her shoulders. Her top priority is to ensure she and Maple enjoy the game together. Light armor and twin daggers are the core of her combat style; her raw gaming talent and astonishing focus allow her to evade all attacks.

STATUS

STR 125 VIT 000 AGI 180

DEX 045 INT 060

EQUIPMENT

Deep Sea Dagger Seabed Dagger
 Surface Scarf: Mirage Oceanic Coat: Oceanic
 Oceanic Clothes Bonding Bridge
 Charnel Boots: One Step in the Grave



SKILLS

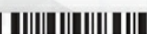
Gale Slash Defense Break Inspire Down Attack Power Attack Switch Attack Pinpoint Attack
 Combo Blade V Martial Arts VIII Fire Magic III Water Magic III Wind Magic III Earth Magic III
 Dark Magic III Light Magic III Strength Boost (L) Combo Boost (L) MP Boost (M) MP Cost Down (M)
 MP Recovery Speed Boost (M) Poison Resist (S) Gathering Speed Boost (S) Dagger Mastery X
 Magic Mastery III Dagger Secrets I Affliction VIII Presence Block III Presence Detect II
 Sneaky Steps I Leap V Quick Change Cooking I Fishing Swimming X Diving X Shearing
 Superspeed Ancient Ocean Chaser Blade Jack of All Trades Sword Dance Shed Skin
 Web Spinner VII Ice Pillar Subzero Domain Nether Nexus Cataclysmic Eruption Water Wielding V

TAMED MONSTER

Name **Oboro** A fox with skills that bewilder foes

Fleeting Shadow Shadow Clone Binding Barrier etc.

I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense.
 Welcome to NewWorld Online.



NewWorld Online Status

GUILD Maple Tree

NAME

Chrome

HP

940/940

MP

52/52

LV

82

PROFILE

The Unstoppable, Unyielding Zombie Tank

Known as a top player since the early days of *NewWorld Online*. Reliable, looks after people, everyone's big brother. Like Maple, he's a Great Shielder. His unique gear gives him a 50 percent chance of surviving any hit with 1 HP, and he has a ton of healing skills that make him extremely tenacious.

STATUS

STR

135

VIT

180

AGI

040

DEX

030

INT

020

EQUIPMENT

- Headhunter: Life Eater
- Wrath Wraith Wall: Soul Syphon
- Bloodstained Skull: Soul Eater
- Bloodstained Bone Armor: Dead or Alive
- Robust Ring
- Impregnable Ring
- Bonding Bridge

SKILLS

Thrust

Elemental Blade

Shield Attack

Sidestep

Deflect

Great Defense

Taunt

Bulwark

Impregnable Stance

Iron Body

Heavy Body

HP Boost (L)

HP Recovery Speed Boost (L)

MP Boost (L)

Green's Grace

Great Shield Mastery X

Defense Mastery X

Cover Move X

Cover

Pierce Guard

Counter

Guard Aura

Defensive Formation

Guardian Power

Great Shield Secrets VIII

Defense Secrets VI

Burn Resist (L)

Stun Nullification

Paralyze Nullification

Poison Nullification

Sleep Nullification

Freeze Nullification

Mining IV

Gathering VII

Shearing

Spirit Light

Indomitable Guardian

Battle Healing

Reaper's Mire

Crystallization

Stimulation

TAMED MONSTER

Name

Necro

An armor monster that really shines when worn

Polterguard

Impact Reflection

etc.



I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense.
Welcome to NewWorld Online.

NewWorld Online Status

GUILD Maple Tree

NAME Iz

Lv 68

HP 100/100 MP 100/100

PROFILE

The Ultimate Crafter

A specialized crafter, she's proud of her work and particular about the results. Her gaming style is all about making clothes, weapons, armor, and items. Originally, she wasn't that active in combat, but her stock of attack and support items now makes a huge difference.

STATUS

STR 045 VIT 020 AGI 080

DEX 210 INT 085

EQUIPMENT

Blacksmith Hammer X

Alchemist Goggles: Faustian Alchemy

Alchemist Long Coat: Magic Workshop

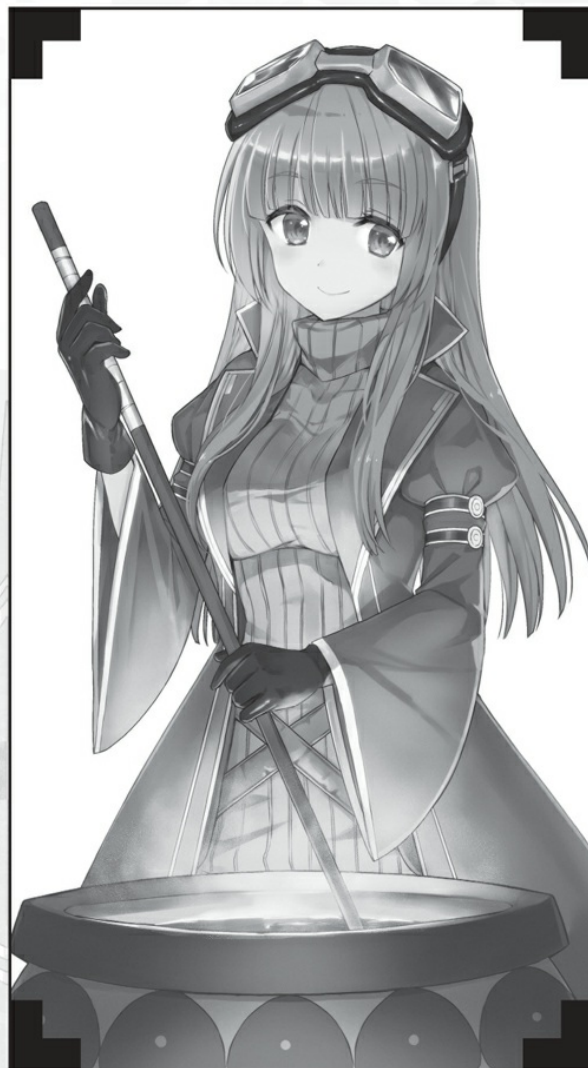
Blacksmith Leggings X

Alchemist Boots: New Frontier

Potion Pouch

Item Pouch

Bonding Bridge



SKILLS

Strike Crafting Mastery X Crafting Secrets X Enhance Success Rate Boost (L) Gathering Speed Boost (L)
 Mining Speed Boost (L) Crafting Quantity Boost (L) Crafting Speed Boost (L) Affliction III Sneaky Steps V
 Keen Sight Smithing X Sewing X Horticulture X Synthesizing X Augmentation X Cooking X Mining X
 Gathering X Swimming VII Diving VIII Shearing Godsmith's Grace X Observer's Eye Attribute Endowment IV
 Botany Mineralogy

TAMED MONSTER

Name Fey A spirit that helps with item creation

Item Boost Recycle etc.

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 Welcome to NewWorld Online.

NewWorld Online Status

GUILD Maple Tree

NAME **Kasumi**LV **79**

HP 435/435 MP 70/70

PROFILE

The Solitary Sword Dancer

A katana-wielding female player with a strong knack for solo play. Always calm, she's good at assessing the big picture. Yet she's frequently left reeling by Maple's and Sally's outlandish antics. Has a range of katana skills that let her contribute to almost any combat situation.

STATUS

STR 205 VIT 080 AGI 095

DEX 030 INT 030

EQUIPMENT

Yukari, the All-Consuming Blight

Cherry Blossom Barrette

Cherry Blossom Vestments

Edo Purple Hakama

Samurai Greaves

Samurai Gauntlets

Gold Obi Fastener

Cherry Blossom Crest

Bonding Bridge

SKILLS

Gleam Helmsplitter Guard Break Sweep Slice Eye for Attack Inspire Attack Stance
 Katana Arts X Cleave Throw Power Aura Armor Slicer HP Boost (L) MP Boost (M)
 Attack Boost (L) Poison Nullification Paralyze Nullification Stun Resist (L) Sleep Resist (L)
 Freeze Resist (M) Burn Resist (L) Longsword Mastery X Katana Mastery X Longsword Secrets VI
 Katana Secrets VII Mining IV Gathering VI Diving V Swimming VI Leap VII Shearing Keen Sight
 Indomitable Sword Spirit Dauntless Sinew Superspeed Ever Vigilant Mind's Eye

TAMED MONSTER

Name **Haku**

A white snake that ambushes foes from the mist

Supergiant Paralytoxin etc.



I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense.
 Welcome to NewWorld Online.

NewWorld Online Status

GUILD Maple Tree

NAME Kanade

LV 55

HP 335/335 MP 250/250

PROFILE

The Whimsical Genius Mage

A certifiable genius with an androgynous look and a memory beyond compare. His mind once left him avoiding human contact, but Maple's innocent cheer broke through that shell. He can store all manner of spells in the grimoires on his book stacks, ready for use in combat.

STATUS

STR 015 VIT 010 AGI 090

DEX 050 INT 115

EQUIPMENT

Divine Wisdom: Akashic Records

Diamond Newsboy Cap VIII

Smart Coat VI

Smart Leggings VIII

Smart Boots VI

Spade Earrings

Mage Gloves

Bonding Bridge



SKILLS

Magic Mastery VIII Fast Chant MP Boost (L) MP Cost Down (L) MP Recovery Speed Boost (L)
 Magic Boost (M) Green's Grace Fire Magic VII Water Magic V Wind Magic VII Earth Magic V
 Dark Magic III Light Magic VII Sorcerer's Stacks Reaper's Mire Magic Meld

TAMED MONSTER

Name Sou A slime that can copy a player's abilities

Mimic Divide etc.

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 Welcome to NewWorld Online.

NewWorld Online Status

GUILD Maple Tree

NAME **Mai** LV **50**
 HP 35/35 MP 20/20

PROFILE

Conqueror Twin

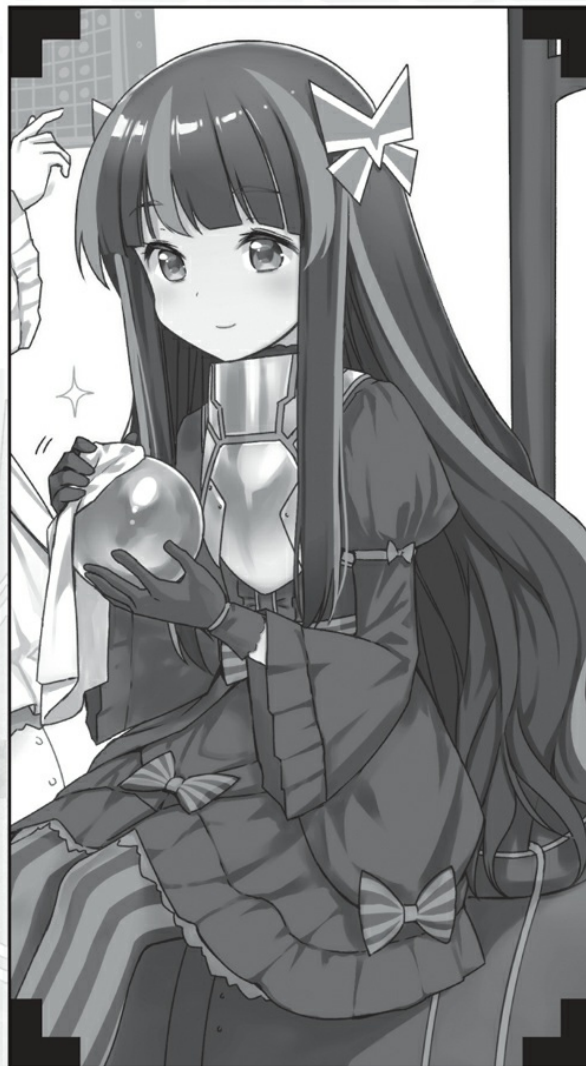
A beginner player with an extreme attack build, she and her younger twin sister, Yui, were scouted by Maple. She does her best to help everyone out. The twins have the highest DPS in the game, and their dual-wielding hammers vaporize anything that gets close.

STATUS

STR 500 VIT 000 AGI 000
 DEX 000 INT 000

EQUIPMENT

Black Annihilammer X Black Doll Dress X
 Black Doll Tights X Black Doll Shoes X
 Little Ribbon Silk Gloves
 Bonding Bridge



SKILLS

Double Stamp Double Impact Double Strike Attack Boost (L) Hammer Mastery X
 Throw Farshot Conqueror Annihilator Giant Killing Destroy Mode

TAMED MONSTER

Name **Tsukimi** A bear monster with distinctive black fur

Power Share Bright Star etc.

I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense.
 Welcome to NewWorld Online.

NewWorld Online Status

GUILD Maple Tree

NAME Yui

LV 50

HP 35/35

MP 20/20

PROFILE

Annihilator Twin

A beginner player with an extreme attack build, she and her older twin sister, Mai, were scouted by Maple. She's more positive than Mai and quicker to recover. The twins have the highest DPS in the game. Throwing Iz's custom-made iron balls lets them take out enemies at range.

STATUS

STR 500 VIT 000 AGI 000

DEX 000 INT 000

EQUIPMENT

White Annihilammer X White Doll Dress X

White Doll Tights X White Doll Shoes X

Little Ribbon Silk Gloves

Bonding Bridge



SKILLS

Double Stamp Double Impact Double Strike Attack Boost (L) Hammer Mastery X
 Throw Farshot Conqueror Annihilator Giant Killing Destroy Mode

TAMED MONSTER

Name Yukimi A bear monster with distinctive white fur

Power Share Bright Star etc.

I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense.
 Welcome to NewWorld Online.



Prologue

As they'd hoped, the eight members of Maple Tree qualified for the eighth event's highest difficulty. They spent three (time accelerated) days gathering medals on the event map.

The longer they survived, the more medals they would earn, so staying alive was vital. But there were also medals hidden in dungeons around the map. Braving those dangers and emerging intact would improve their results.

To that end, they spent the first day in two parties—making full use of their tamed monsters' strength—and took down the dungeon bosses without much difficulty.

Death in the event meant elimination, but with Maple providing defense and the solo survival skills of other players, few things posed any real threat.

They wrapped things up early that night, not wanting to press their luck.

But the second day brought a big surprise: All eight members were separated, flung to the far corners of the map.

The in-game message function was disabled, and their maps no longer showed each other's locations. As if that wasn't bad enough, new, particularly dangerous monsters began spawning everywhere. Only the strong survived—and Maple Tree's best course of action was to team up with players from The Order of the Holy Sword and Flame Empire.

All three guilds converged on Maple's signal—she was blowing herself up like a firework. Together, they fortified a cave—Maple Tree's old base—and weathered the waves of incoming monsters.

That gave them a good idea of the threat level, and the sixteen survivors decided to head out in search of dungeons once more. Balancing for compatibility, they made teams with members of all three guilds—and each managed to clear a dungeon and bring a medal home. Only the third day remained.

And that final day brought a boss so large it was visible from every corner of the map. Nowhere was safe from its attacks, but with help from Pain and Mii, they conquered this threat. The event ended with everyone earning enough medals to buy a new skill.



Defense Build and a First Stratum Tour

The eighth event had come and gone, and Maple Tree had achieved everything they set out to do. Now they just had to decide how to spend their medals. The natural choice would be to exchange them for rare skills and items.

Maple and Sally were both satisfied with their equipment, so they were eyeing the available skills.

On the way home from school, Kaede and Risa were talking about just that.

“You made up your mind yet, Kaede?”

“Nooo. The time limit’s pretty generous, so I’m gonna let it simmer until the last minute.”

“That’s what everyone else is doing, too.”

“What about you?”

“Same. No new events on the horizon, and no skills I super want right now.”

Like Risa said, they’d just finished a combat-heavy event, and there was no immediate need to make their guild stronger. The seventh layer was quite large, and it didn’t sound like the eighth was coming anytime soon, so they didn’t have any urgent goals.

“Which means we can kick back for a while!”

“Yeah. Grind some levels, hunt for new skills, slowly get ready for whatever’s coming next.”

This gave Kaede an idea, and she turned to Risa, beaming.

“Ooh! If we’re hunting for skills, do you wanna hit up some old floors with me? There’s lots of places I’ve never been.”

“True. *NWO* maps are crazy huge. You got Absolute Defense on the first stratum, so I bet there’s still good stuff out there.”

Risa was down for exploring untouched corners of the world. Kaede herself had proven that all sorts of things were hidden out there. But judging from the gleam in her eyes, secret skills and items weren't her primary goal.

"Heh-heh, fair. The skill hunt can take a back seat to sightseeing."

"Ah-ha-ha, am I that obvious?"

"Yeah? But that's okay—let's find some cool stuff. Don't need to plan, right?"

"Nope! Let's just head out in search of secret splendors!"

Combat was one way to enjoy a game, but simply wandering the world was another.

They'd just wrapped up the fast and furious combat of a big event and were totally in the mood for a leisurely lower floor walkabout.

"But not the sixth floor!"

That stratum was horror themed, which Sally could not deal with—and it wasn't great for tourism, anyway. Nobody would head there to relax.

"Yeah...thanks... See you later—in-game."

"Mm-hm!"

They waved and went their separate ways. Eager to explore, Kaede was light on her feet, and Risa couldn't help but smile.

Risa headed home, looking back on the adventures they'd had.

Kaede had never played another game this long but was clearly still having a blast. That was all Risa could ask for, but part of her worried someday it would come to an end.

"...Gotta enjoy it while it lasts! She's never been this addicted before."

Kaede was having fun now, and so was Risa.

That's all that mattered. She hurried home to boot up the game.



Risa rushed into her house, changed out of her uniform, and logged in. As Sally, she waited for Maple's arrival.

“Argh, sorry, that took forever!”

“It’s all good, I just got here myself. And it’s not like we have actual plans!”

She glanced over at Maple to make sure that was okay, and her friend’s brilliant smile made it crystal clear they really were just going to walk around for fun.

“Then let’s head out. Nothing on the older maps really poses a threat, so we don’t need to prep.”

“Okay! Move out!”

They teleported to the first stratum and started poking around town.

There were lots more places to be now, so this starter town was much less crowded than it had once been, but it was still bustling with a fair amount of activity.

“It’s been ages!”

“We do tend to get caught up in exploring the new maps.”

“Any preferences?”

“Anywhere you wanna go is fine with me.”

“Then let’s start in the town center!”

“Sure.”

They began walking around. They’d spent a lot of time here early on, but the players and buildings had changed quite a bit since.

This mostly meant new player-run shops. Since crowds tended to gather at the first and latest floors, this town still got plenty of foot traffic.

“I’m not seeing many people in starter gear.”

“Well, with this many options for equipment and outfits, it’s easier to find decent stuff that fits your style.”

“Makes sense.”

“Some vibes you can only savor early on.”

“True!”

Maple and Sally went in and out of the new shops. There were accessories, clothes, furniture for people who'd already found guilds—every bit as much variety as the seventh stratum offered.

“Wow, this is really something.”

“There are limits to what you can make without leveling your skills, so there must be front-line crafters like Iz who still keep shops down here.”

“Dress-up is fun, too!”

Maple dashed off toward the back of a shop, so Sally followed her in.

“Thinking about buying anything?”

“I just might, yeah.”

“You were getting lots of attention out there.”

“Urgh, that's happened before. It's so weird!”

Maple was extremely recognizable in and out of human form. In her distinctive customary armor, she tended to draw stares. Same went for Sally.

“But it's hard to kick back and see the sights when everyone's looking at you. New threads might help with that.”

“We could just use the stuff we bought before! See?”

Maple changed up her equipment, switching to a white dress and giving herself long hair.

“You've got some, too, right?”

“Urgh, well...I do, but they're, you know...”

Sally swore they were too cutesy, but Maple insisted they were perfect.

“At least let me change the hair! That'll make it bearable.”

“Hmm...I'll allow it.”

“Heh-heh, thanks.”

Maple's permission secured, Sally changed her outfit. It was still mostly blue, but significantly frillier, and involved a skirt—which she normally never wore. The last time she'd worn this, Maple had given her pigtails, but this time, she

just let her standard ponytail down.

“Hmm, it’s missing some whimsy,” Maple said, stroking her chin.

Sally considered that for a second, then had a bright idea. “But look—we match!”

Both Maple and Sally had their hair down. A smile spread across Maple’s lips.

“Eh-heh-heh, that works.”

“Cool. So wanna check out some trinkets and knickknacks? That was sort of the goal, right?”

“True! Anything you’re after, Sally?”

They looked around the furniture stores, thinking about their rooms in the guild home. Asking Iz to make stuff was always an option, but it never hurt to shop for more.

“Hmm, if I’m at the guild, I’m usually in the living room.”

“I furnished *my* room properly! I just never get to see it cause I’m always out grinding and stuff.”

“Yeah? Can I pop in and see sometime?”

“Of course! Can’t guarantee it’ll provide inspiration, though. Oh, this might be good for you, Sally.”

Maple pointed out a few basic but striking pieces, and Sally took a closer look—and must have approved, because she bought them all.

“Wow, deep pockets!”

“Money comes with the levels. These days, I’m making bank.”

“Nice! I never have any.”

“You do, you just spend it.”

“Guess I gotta grind some more...”

“I’ll help.”

“Thanks! Hngg, gotta flag all the stuff I’ve got my eye on.”

Once they'd seen everything in the store, they hit the streets again.

As they'd hoped, in new outfits and hairdos, most people didn't recognize them. Pleased to be free of all those eyes, they grinned at each other and stepped into another shop.

This was where they'd eaten cake together shortly after starting the game.

Once again, they sat down and ordered.

"Have you been back since, Maple?"

"No, too much to do on the new floors."

"It's hard keeping up with everything they add."

"Yeah, it's nice to get a chance to take our time."

"True. What floor did you like best?"

"Hard to choose... They're all fun!"

"You would say that."

Maple's grin was the picture of innocence. She looked like she was enjoying everything the game had to offer—because she was.

"What about you, Sally?"

"Hmm, basically any place I'm with you."

"Eh-heh-heh, really?"

"You know it. That's why I invited you here."

"I'm glad I wasn't useless in fights! I was pretty bad at those in other games we tried."

"Yeah... This time you kinda went the other way. *Way* the other way."

"Ah-ha-ha, maybe."

Sally played way more games than Maple. Normally it was tough for them to play together, but for once, they'd both wound up ridiculously strong and could fight on equal footing.

They chatted over their cakes awhile.

Then Sally said, “Someday we’ll have to try—” The words *another game* hung on her lips.

“?” Maple looked up, waiting for her to finish.

But Sally smiled evasively, and then opened the menu. “Why wait? Let’s try more cakes today!”

“O-okay! Don’t mind if I do. As long as you’ll eat some with me.”

“It was my idea! But last time we overdid it a bit. Better not repeat that. We’ve only just started this tour!”

“True. Gotta show restraint!”

Their forks went for the cake, neither in a rush to leave.

When they were done stuffing themselves, they left the shop, looked around town for a while, and decided to head out into the field.

“You’ll be fine without armor down here, right?”

“You betcha! Even without gear, my VIT is four digits!”

Just in case, she did equip her short sword—the least obvious part of her set. She left her Great Shield and armor in storage.

The design of that shield was a dead giveaway; everyone would know she was Maple.

“Leave fighting to me. No first layer monster’s gonna bother me.”

“They’re all yours!”

Outside town, they had to pick a direction.

“Where to?”

“We could let your feet guide us, Maple. Or...”

Sally opened her map, and Maple peered over her shoulder.

“Last time we explored the layer, we went here and here. And this is the underground lake, right?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I doubt cool stuff and secret areas are gonna be clustered together.”

“Good point!”

“So let’s go somewhere we haven’t been...like here? That way!”

“Sounds like a plan!”

“That settles it. It’s been a bit, but want a ride?”

“I’d love one!”

Syrup flights and Atrocity runs were iconic Maple maneuvers, so they didn’t want to bust them out here. That left them with only one option.

Maple climbed up on Sally’s back, took a firm grip on her shoulders, and off they went.

“You used to be so slow!”

“Solved that problem!”

“Now we usually ride *you*.”

“Now I’m paying it back.”

“Well, I’m gonna try and avoid running into monsters.”

Sally had boosted her AGI, so she was going much faster than the last time they were here.

“Heh-heh, won’t be long till we’re there!”

“Woo!”



It wasn’t long before they arrived at their destination. At the entrance to a forest filled with dappled sunlight and birdsong, Sally put Maple down, and double-checked the map.

“This is the place! It’s a big forest, so there might be something hidden within.”

“There’s nobody here. Even though it’s so pretty!”

“It’s far from town, and the monsters are strong for this stratum.”

“Are they? Well, if it’s just us, I could use Martyr’s Devotion.”

She didn’t think Sally would get hit that easily, but her HP and VIT had never changed, so even with all her extra levels, one hit would still kill her instantly.

“Yeah, the goal is relaxation, so...please.”

“On it!”

Maple activated her skill, and Sally stayed within range. Like she’d said, it was a big forest, and they had to keep an eye on their maps to avoid going in circles.

“Oh, Sally! A chipmunk!”

“It jumped right at you!”

Most woodland creatures here were actually monsters. A rather oversized chipmunk came dashing out of the shrubbery and leapt at Maple, but she just held out her hands and caught it. It was super fluffy. Were it not for the constant clawing, it would be pretty cute.

“Gotcha!”

“Watch your clothing durability.”

“Oh, right. Then...you go up here!”



Maple put the chipmunk on her head and let go. It scurried around, attacking her head and neck, but ineffectively.

“There are so many bug monsters around town. This place is much easier on the eyes.”

“Yep! Anything else gonna jump on me—aw!”

The chipmunk must have realized it couldn’t hurt Maple, so it bounded down and raced off into the brush.

“Aww, they run away now.”

“Well, didn’t seem like a particularly rare type, so you’ll probably catch another one soon.”

“Ha-ha! I’m ready and waiting!”

Maple set off into the woods again, calling out to unseen monsters.

“This place seems pretty normal. Only the size seems suspicious.”

“But it is relaxing! Like a nice hike.”

“Yeah? Then good. Wanna snack as we walk?” Sally suggested, taking out some sandwiches.

“Thanks! Don’t mind if I do,” Maple said, taking one. “Oh, Sally! Look!”

“Mm? Oh, a butterfly?”

A pair of blue sparkling wings was fluttering through the trees.

“Is it a rare monster? It was all woodland creatures before.”

“It’s flying off! Let’s go after it!”

“Why not?”

Maple climbed on Sally’s back, and she started threading her way through the trees after the blue butterfly. She was not closing the gap.

“It’s weirdly fast. It’s a first stratum monster! No way I can’t catch up!”

“Hang in there, Sally!”

“I’ve got this! Just can’t lose sight of it...”

They ran a bit longer. The light through the trees grew brighter—and they emerged into a clearing.

A large tree stood at the center, surrounded by wildflowers of all shapes and colors, and plenty of blue butterflies like the one they'd followed.

"Ooh!"

"Doesn't...seem like anything's gonna happen, really."

Sally put Maple down, and they stepped out into the flowers. Maple spun happily around, then bent down to take a closer look.

"Argh, doesn't seem like we can pick them."

"Ah...then wanna take a pic, at least?"

"Sure! Sally, get in the shot!"

She took a photo of them together, with the tree and the flower beds in the background. Sally checked it over, then sent a copy to Maple—who suddenly collapsed.

"Maple?"

"....."

Sally checked her for status ailments and found that Maple had Sleep on her. Sally looked around for the cause.

"The butterflies?"

Looking closer, she noticed they were scattering a dust that glittered in the sunlight. Sally figured that was the culprit.

"They weren't messing around, even early on. I'm sure Maple's fine, but..."

There might be other afflictions here, but nothing that could budge Maple's HP—even if something attacked, it wouldn't do damage. Sally herself was safe, as long as she stayed in range of Martyr's Devotion.

"But with monsters like this around, they should be guarding...something..."

She leaned Maple against the tree, saw something gleaming at the top, and started climbing—making sure she stayed in range.

“An apple...I guess?”

It was the same shade of blue as the butterflies, which wasn't terribly appetizing. But it was pretty, like a gemstone.

“Slumber Fruit... Is it a crafting material? Well, worth grabbing anyway.”

Sally took two and climbed down. Maple had just woken up.

“Sally, are you okay?”

“Thanks to you, yeah. I brought you a present.”

“Wow! That's really pretty.”

“I got one for each of us, figured they'd make a good keepsake.”

“Cool! Then for our adventure today, we've gotta find a good keepsake everywhere we go!”

“Sounds good. Wanna enjoy the flowers a little longer?”

Sally pulled out a Sleep Resistance Potion. Maple took it, nodding.

The status effects could be tricky, but these *were* first stratum monsters, and nothing that could hurt Maple showed up. They enjoyed the flower bed to their heart's content before finally leaving the forest.

“That was nice. I knew there were places we hadn't found yet!”

“We've been heading up the second they added new maps. Those are fun to break in, but...”

“What next?”

“Hmm, we really didn't have a concrete plan. Anything you'd like to scope out? Feeling like mountains, oceans...?”

“What about a flying castle?”

“.....! Ah-ha. Okay, we did promise to go there someday.”

“Eh-heh-heh. Gotta allow time for detours!”

They'd spotted the flying castle from the sunflower field, but with all the new layers and dungeons and themes, odds were high it was now an actual dungeon.

“Then let’s pause our aimless wandering for a minute. First, let’s check if anyone’s figured it out. Then see if we need supplies.”

“Hokay!”

“Want me to give you a lift back?”

“Yes, please!”

“We might spot something on the way!”

“Let’s hope it’s nothing bad!”

“...Agreed.”

They grinned, as if each other’s company was all they needed—and headed back to town.



CHAPTER 2

Defense Build and the Flying Castle

Back in town, they hit up the info boards, hoping the list of known dungeons would mention the flying castle.

“Oh, Maple! Found it.”

“Awesome! You’re sure?”

“Yeah, it’s standard fare, really. But it’s actually on the fifth stratum. And it’s definitely a legit dungeon, not just a pretty view. We’ll have to be ready.”

“Hngg, putting on my game face.”

That high up, there’d be significantly more monsters these two would have to look out for. And unlike the flower-filled clearing, dungeons always had a boss.

“Guide doesn’t mention the view at all, but sounds like it’s pretty high up even by fifth stratum standards, so I’m sure it’ll be worth it.”

“Mm! Can’t wait.”

“Should we head on over?”

“Sure!”

They checked their gear durability, topped up on Iz’s potions, and headed off to conquer the flying castle.



“When we the last time we hit the fifth layer?”

“It’s still all white and super bright.”

The fifth stratum’s walls and floors were entirely made of clouds; like Sally said, it was downright blinding. The flying castle dungeon here was a recent discovery and took a while to get to. They dropped their first stratum disguises, switching back to their combat gear, and Sally briefed Maple as they headed to their destination.

“We have to take a magic circle eventually, so we can’t just fly Syrup straight

there.”

“Uh-huh.”

“The road in isn’t considered all that tricky; it’s just easy to overlook and hard to find, which is why word only just got out.”

“Ah-ha! Ooh, I bet whoever first stumbled on it was super pumped.”

“Yeah. But I think you’ve done that plenty yourself.”

Maple was *prone* to finding secrets—otherwise, she wouldn’t have ended up with such a crazy skillset.

“Well, I wanna keep exploring like that! If I find any gear that seems right for you, Sally, it’s all yours.”

“Same goes for you, Maple. Ah, here we are.”

“Really?”

They were in a dead end surrounded by tall cloud walls. It looked like any other part of the fifth layer. The sheer homogeneity of it had likely delayed the entrance’s discovery.

“It sure doesn’t *look* like anything...but if the guide’s right...”

Sally went over to the wall and pushed her hands into it. She tried that at a number of spots until her hands sank into the cloud.

“Found it! We can walk through here.”

“Huh... Wow... How did *anyone* find that?”

“Pure chance, I bet. Like you always do.”

“That *is* convincing.”

They pushed their way through the clouds, following the path. Everything around them was white, and they had to feel their way through the hidden passage, parting the clouds ahead.

“Ugh, it’s pretty, but...I don’t even know where I’m going.”

“This is a very hidden dungeon. At least someone already figured it out for us!”

“Yeah!”

Sally led the way, checking against the guide, turning right and left through the maze-like cloud path. There were no monsters, so despite the windy path, they made good progress.

A solid ten minutes later—

“Whew, this is quite a hike...I think?”

“These clouds make it hard to tell, yeah. But if I’m following this right, we should be almost...here!”

Parting the last clouds, Sally let out a triumphant shout. Maple quickly pushed forward and saw a building before them, a shrine made of a material every bit as white as the clouds around them. At the center of it was the glow of a magic circle.

“Is that it, Sally?”

“Yep. And that’s where the real dungeon begins.”

“If it’s way up high, I’m sure it’s pretty!”

“We’ll have to take photos.”

“Ha-ha, I’ve been taking loads today!”

“But careful—this place has monsters.”

“I know!”

They moved to the magic circle, counted down, jumped on, and were swept away to the flying castle.

When the light of the transport faded, they opened their eyes—and saw lush vegetation the likes of which the fifth stratum never offered. This was common enough on other floors, but surprising here.

“Ooh! Photo time!”

“Didn’t see any deets on what happens from here, so we’ll have to fumble thr— Maple!”

Sally had turned toward her and saw her backing away to get a better camera

angle. Problem was, this was a flying castle—and there was nothing but empty air behind them.

“Huh? Yikes!”

“Whoa! Careful, please. I’m betting a fall from here won’t just do *damage*.”

Sally got her arms around Maple just in time and pulled her away from the cliff’s edge. Maple’s high defense wouldn’t do squat if that drop was meant to instakill.

“Thanks! I didn’t even see that edge coming.”

“Yeah, seems like this dungeon is the castle *and* everything around it.”

They looked around more carefully and saw a sea of clouds stretching away from the drop behind them. Before them stood a forest, with sheer rocky cliffs rising from it to the castle above.

“A castle built right into a mountain...and a forest in the way. This could take a while! Should we take a Syrup ride?”

Syrup flights could likely let them avoid all the traps in the way. Sally gave it some thought, but she shook her head.

“Hmm, not this time.”

“Yeah?”

“Mm. It’ll feel better if we clear the whole thing by ourselves!”

“I get that.”

“And we’ve been saying we’d come here for ages, so we don’t wanna just blow through it like it’s nothing.”

“Fair. Then let’s take the long way and head for the heart of the castle!”

“Woo!”

They took their first step toward the castle looming above.

They hadn’t walked far into the woods when a roar went up from the distant castle.

“!”

“Predators!”

Sally raised her weapons and Maple summoned her demons, bracing for whatever was headed their way.

A moment later, lizards with tiny wings shot out from between the trees, aiming fiery breath their way.

“It’s all good!”

Maple still had Martyr’s Devotion active, so Sally didn’t need to dodge like hell. These seemed to be the castle’s initial trash mobs. Confirming the fire didn’t work on Maple, Sally relaxed and got to work slicing them all down.

“Whoa, they’re pretty zippy!”

The lizards were darting around, avoiding the Predators’ mouths, and leaving Maple as helpless as they were.

“Sally, it’s all yours!”

“Got it! Martyr’s Devotion is plenty!”

Having Maple around nerfed any monsters that tried to swarm you. The lizards proved to have no tricks beyond the fire breath and could only wait for their turn to die.

“Good work, Sally.”

“Thanks, decent warm-up.”

Sally turned to the castle, peering up at it through the trees.

“That roar, though—that wasn’t these lizards.”

“We thinkin’ the boss?”

“Could be. We might be fighting another dragon, here.”

Maple and Sally had fought several beasts like that. And that powerful roar sure sounded like one.

“I’m assuming it’s a doozy...”

“Yeah, it’s probably pretty tough. But that’s what makes it fun!”

“Eh-heh-heh. I think I’m starting to see why you say that. It lets you strut your

stuff!”

“Exactly!”

Still, they were a good way off from the castle where that boss awaited. If they lingered here too long, the sun would go down.

“Okay, let’s get through this forest!”

“You’ve got the hang of this terrain by now, right?”

“You betcha!”

Martyr’s Devotion handled any ambushes and gave them the leeway to enjoy the scenery. Looking closer, they saw nonhostile woodland creatures scurrying around and colorful mushrooms growing at the bases of the trees. Maple’s eyes sparkled.

“You can find fun in everything new,” Sally said. “I admire that.”

Half her attention was on monster detection.

“Do I?”

“Yeah, I mean...I’m always thinking about fighting and skills instead.”

“Well, I’m new to this gamer thing!”

“Are you? We’ve been playing a while now.”

“I am compared to you!”

There was no arguing with that.

“Then I’ve gotta do what veterans do.”

“I’ve got faith in you.”

“Then let’s go fight some things!”

No sooner had the words left Sally’s mouth than a snake longer than the two of them combined slithered out. Sally spotted it first, and swiftly dodged its bite, slashing at its sides.

“Okay! Taunt!”

Reacting to the skill, the snake turned toward Maple. She had a pretty good

idea what sort of attacks it would use. Poison and paralysis posed no threat, and if it tried to bite her or coil around her, she just had to raise her shield.

“Taste my Devour!”

By the time the snake’s head snapped at her, her shield was already waiting to swallow it up. Like that, it was gone.

“Yes! It worked!”

“Noice. Mm-hmm, I think you’ve gotten better at predicting how monsters move.”

“Heh-heh, I’ve fought all kinds by now.”

“You done being a noob yet?”

“Ah-ha-ha, let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

Chatting happily, they made short work of every mob encountered and reached the base of the mountain without any injuries sustained.

“W-wow.”

“Yeah. There’s gotta be a way in *somewhere*...”

The base of the mountain was a sheer rock face, nigh perpendicular to the ground, reaching for the sky.

It did not look like they could scale it as is—Maple especially.

“They can’t assume we’ve got Syrup flights available, so there’s gotta be a standard way to reach the castle.”

“That makes sense.”

Syrup wasn’t their only option. Maple could make her shields float with Helping Hands, and Sally could use her Web Spinner skill to climb any cliff. But those were definitely not tricks available to the majority of players.

“We said we were going to tackle this one the right way...”

“Yeah, so let’s follow the cliff face and see if we find anything.”

Fortunately, the forest creatures posed no threat, so the search itself was easy. Batting away monster waves, they kept the cliff on one side, following it

until they spied a break in the rocky expanse.

The mountain soared skyward on either side, but here alone there was a valley. A natural path wound through it, as if the grass had died from feet treading on it. And at the back of the valley—distant but clearly visible—was a pure-white gate made of that pure-white material.

“The mountain already looks like a natural fortress.”

“This has got to be the way in!”

“Yeah. Ready to sack this castle?”

“You bet! Ready and willing!”

Weapons in hand, they advanced toward the gate. As they drew close enough to get a good look at it, that welcoming roar echoed once more. The gate itself slid open, and out flew some dragonewts: humanoid dragons with wings.

“Maple, incoming!”

“I see ’em! Full Deploy! Commence Assault!”

Maple started firing, figuring if enemies took to the air, her barrage would intercept them. But the dragonewts proved nimble, twisting themselves to evade the shells and close in.

“Argh, I can’t hit them!”

“Doesn’t seem like a problem with your aim. We’re gonna have to fight ’em up close!”

“Okay, then!”

Neither of them exactly struggled at short range. In fact, that just made it easier for them to lay down some real damage.

The lead dragonewt swooped up above her artillery fire, then plunged down directly at Maple, who failed to dodge. It took a big bite of her shoulder—and then blasted fire breath at ultra-close range, shattering her weapons.

“Maple!”

“Th-that shook me up a bit, but I’m okay! Get ’em, Sally!”

Maple's body was much sturdier than her weapons. No mere dragon jaws could harm her. As payback, Maple stuck a cannon right in its face, and the Predators hit it from both sides.

"Zone Freeze!"

"Quintuple Slash!"

The dragonewt tried to fly away, but the ground froze—and its feet got stuck. It could no longer dodge, so Maple's artillery and Sally's combo move both slammed home.

That was too much for it, and its body burst into light.

It was over in an instant. There were more dragonewts inbound, but unlike players, monsters never backed off—and that made them easier to dispatch.

"You're best when they come to you."

"Yeah, feels like that makes it easier."

Maple needed to merely wait for them to attack.

Sally could just hang back and wait for a chance to carve 'em up.

The moment the dragonewts scored a clean hit without doing damage, their fate was sealed. They were no more successful than the lizards or snakes had been.

"Whew, that takes care of them."

"Yup! Glad they didn't have piercing damage."

With the dragonewt swarm cleared out, they headed through the open gates into the castle proper. Parts of the castle were hollowed out of the mountain, and others were built along the cliff face, taking full advantage of the natural terrain. Currently they were walking down a corridor somewhere within.

The walls and floor were made of the same white material as the gate—not clouds, but definitely a reminder they were on the fifth layer.

"Where do you think the goal is, Maple?"

"Um... The very top?"

“Same.”

There’d been rooms to either side, but the main passage hadn’t forked. No guarantee it wouldn’t eventually, though.

They figured the boss would be waiting as far from the entrance as possible, and from what they’d seen on their arrival, that was likely near the mountain’s peak.

They walked a while longer, and the path *did* begin to fork—and more dragonewts appeared around the corner.

“Ah! These things again.”

“Not quite the same. Careful!”

Sally had a point—these dragonewts were wearing armor over their already tough scales. Even their fists were covered in metal—clearly a powered-up variant.

Spotting the girls, the dragonewts bent their legs, spreading their wings.

“You got Devours, Maple?”

“I used some on the last group, so only five left!”

“Save ’em for now.”

If they could handle these variants without Devour, it was best to save that skill for the boss. It was Maple’s hardest hitting skill, and the uses she had remaining directly affected the damage they could do. Best not to waste it.

“Speed and attack patterns are identical...hah!”

As the dragonewts swooped in, Sally darted out to intercept. They responded by opening their jaws and blanketing the corridor in flames. Even Sally didn’t have enough space to dodge that—her only option was to back off before it hit.

“You’re good! Get ’em, Sally!”

“Will do!”

Certain this breath was no worse than what they faced at the gates, they knew exactly what to do. Sally weathered the flames in range of Martyr’s Devotion, then before the dragonewts recovered from the attack, Sally used

Leap to get above them.

“Power Attack!”

Sally’s body spun, and her daggers slammed down at their heads. Their armor took a piece of the damage, but that wasn’t her goal. The previous fight had made it clear that any hits taken in the air would force them to the ground.

As they’d hoped, the dragonewts fell to the ground, armor clanking.

“Syrup! Mother Nature!”

And before they started moving again, Syrup’s vines locked them all down. Now all Sally had to do was carve ’em up.

“Whew, nice work, Maple!”

“The armor looked cool, but it didn’t really change much.”

“Yeah, but if a new type’s showing up, we’ve made some progress.”

“Wonder if the side rooms will be different?”

“Maybe. Gotta check for treasure chests, at least.”

They started opening door after door. If they found expensive-looking couches within, they posed and took photos on those; if they found stairs that headed up, they climbed them.

Soon they found themselves in a section built right up against the mountain itself. From the windows they could see the forest they’d come in through, and beyond that, the sea of clouds. Clearly, they were getting pretty high up.

“Oh, Sally! There really are dragons flying around!”

“I think those are just for show, like, part of the background? Or maybe a defense against anyone who has some weird way of getting here, like Syrup.”

“When they added this layer, nobody else had monsters yet.”

These days flight was becoming more common, but that hadn’t been true when this castle was first implemented. It made sense they’d have measures in place against the few ways of bypassing the entire dungeon contents from the sky.

“Come on, we’re almost at the top.”

“Yeah! Whew, I can’t wait!”

Slaying monsters as they went round and round the castle halls, they’d reached the base of a tower. This had a spiral staircase on the outside and was clearly the castle’s pinnacle.

“Up there, then?”

“Oooh, about time!”

The tower was about twenty yards in diameter. This was a solid indicator of how big the boss waiting up top would be.

“Welp, won’t know till we get up there.”

“Climb on!”

Maple and Sally raced up the spiral stairs. At the top, they found a door leading to the tower interior. They glanced quickly at each other—making sure the other was ready—and they pushed the door open.

The windowless room was quite dark, lit only by the glow of Martyr’s Devotion.

When they were fully inside and the doors closed behind them, a roar from the darkness shook the very air.

“!”

“Whoa, that’s so loud!”

They braced themselves, and flames so bright they looked *white* surged out of the dark. And the source was revealed—in the last way they’d expected.

The floor shook. Another roar. A burst of wind. Something huge moved—and the tower’s ceiling collapsed.

“Sally!”

“Maple!”

They braced against the winds to avoid being blown away. Walls and ceiling were swept aside as the cause of this destruction loomed above.

Hovering on outstretched wings was a dragon, covered in red scales like its very body was on fire. Flames gleamed in its maw, every flap of its wings threatened to lift them off the ground, and if it swung that tail it could easily reach every part of the combat zone.

Even as the wings unfurled, its eyes were fixed on them. Clearly, there was no backing out of this fight.

“It must have been *super* uncomfortable!”

“Th-this looks crazy strong!”

“I bet it is. Make sure you don’t fall off!”

“Yeah! Let’s slay this thing!”

They readied their weapons as the fight against the flying red dragon began.

“Full Deploy! Commence Assault!”

Maple got things started with her artillery, firing a barrage at the dragon. If it dodged the way the dragonewts had, she could come up with another plan then.

But the dragon made no attempt to evade. Taking minor damage from the bombardment, it started building flames in that massive maw, and a moment later, an inferno gushed forth, lighting up the tower top—and heading Maple’s way.

“Maple!”

“C-Cover Move!”

Sensing something bad coming, Sally bounded away—and Maple took the hint, warping herself to her.

A moment later, her vacated position was ablaze, a veritable wall of flame splitting the tower top in two.

This limited their movement range—and the flames themselves were clearly very powerful.

“It might not kill *you*...but it feels dangerous. Careful.”

“Yup, thanks.”

“We’re definitely doing damage. I’ll predict its big moves, so you focus on shooting.”

“Got it!”

“Cyclone Cutter!”

“Saturating Chaos! Commence Assault!”

Maple’s gunfire and Sally’s spells did noticeable amounts of damage, and the dragon responded. This time, it flapped its wings hard, producing a flurry of wind blades.

“Maple!”

“Pierce Guard!”

Instead of relying on her raw defense, Maple got her anti-piercing skill active just in case, hiding her shield behind her to conserve Devour. Her weapons were stripped away, but Maple was unharmed. This approach could nullify any attacks that looked unlikely to have DOT effects—which meant the terrain-changing flames were the thing she needed to be most worried about.

“Sally, that wind blew out the wall of fire!”

“Not just that, it’s landing!”

Wreathed in wind and flame, the dragon charged—right at the two of them.

“Superspeed!”

“Cover Move!”

Sally slipped just out of its path, glancing back at Maple—who followed her.

“Whoa, if that hit, we’d go right off the edge!”

“Yup. But while it’s on the ground, we’ve got a chance to put the hurt on! Oboro, Whet Wisp, Shadow Clone!”

Sally and her clones closed in. Even on the ground this dragon’s flames were fierce; now it was spitting fireballs at them.

“In that case...hmph!”

A clone couldn’t quite dodge and was swallowed up, but the real Sally read

the trajectories right and reached the dragon's feet.

"Ha!"

Figuring skill attacks were risky, she slashed the dragon's feet manually. Between her Sword Dance buff and Chaser Blade, this alone did visible damage. She could use magic as well, but Sally's daggers were still her primary source of DPS.

But being this close to a giant dragon put her in range of those claws. All her clones were soon downed, and it swung a forelimb at Sally herself. She could have easily jumped back out of the way but didn't—because she knew Maple would warp to her.

"Cover Move! Lure of the Deep! Saturating Chaos! Predators!"

Skill effects flashed around the dragon's feet. Three monsters and heinous-looking tentacles appeared around Maple. All avoided the dragon's claws, attacking head-on.

"Hahhh!"

Maple's five tentacles used up all her Devour counts but did incredible burst damage, chomping off one of the dragon's legs entirely. The monsters biting it from both sides and the front only added to the pain.

Abandoning defense to pummel the dragon's legs got Maple knocked away—but she took no damage. Missing a huge chunk of HP now, the dragon spread its wings, trying to fly away again. Sally ignored that, snapping around to face Maple.

"Got...cha!"

Sally's webs snatched Maple mid-knockback, dragging her back to safety. She hit the ground with a clang, and Sally pulled her up, glancing over her shoulder.

The dragon had leapt backward into flight. There were signs of flames in its mouth and wind around its wings.

Sally caught both in an instant, and yelled, "Hang on, Maple! Don't worry, I can dodge this!"

Maple looked surprised, but—then she remembered who was talking. She

quickly did as Sally asked and held on tight.

“Waterway! Subzero Domain!”

The moment her water path appeared, Sally wreathed herself in chill, freezing it, and ran up the side. Then she made a midair platform and jumped to that—ascending as fast as the dragon itself.

“Ice Pillar! Leap!”

She was high above the dragon, easily clearing both gales and raging infernos.

“Wowww! That was so fast!”

“I’m nothing if not quick on my feet!”

Sally landed on the far side of the fire wall, and checked the dragon’s HP.

“We’re halfway!”

“Cool! We’ve got this!”

The dragon had taken to the skies when its health dipped below 50 percent, and once more its roar shook the air. In answer to the call, dragonewts flew to its aid.

“There’s a *lot* of them, Sally!”

“I’m gonna be extra reliant on Martyr’s Devotion, now!”

One step outside its range and she could get overwhelmed by focus fire, nowhere to run. But they knew the dragonewts specs by now. They had no way of harming Maple herself, so what might have been a major problem was of no concern to the duo.

“Let’s get it grounded again.”

“Yeah, and finish it while it’s down!”

They had a strategy to win this, so neither of them needed to conserve skills. Maple’s Machine God weapons were blown off as soon as she created them, so she ignored the flames buffeting her from all directions and aimed her short sword at the dragon—who was about to meet one of its cousins.

“Hydra!”

A dragon made of poison gushed forth from the tip of her blade, swallowing the red dragon—every bit as powerful as the boss’s flames. But the poison itself proved ineffective; the skill alone did damage, but the boss retaliated by using its breath once again.

“! It’s got more range than before! Maple!”

“Yikes!”

Sally sheathed her blades, grabbed Maple, and used her Martial Arts skill to throw the other girl. Sally had feared they could not get outside the expanded breath range in time; this way, she could get Maple and Martyr’s Devotion away from the dragon’s attack and avoid them *both* getting caught up in it.

“Oboro, Spirited Away!”

But it was still just mitigating the risk. Sally herself ran at full speed. For a moment, the flames caught her, but Oboro’s skill hid her, and she escaped their reach. The fiery breath coated a good 70 percent of the tower top. Sally came tumbling out of that inferno and found Maple safe and sound.

“Thanks, Sally. You really saved me there.”

“I have emergency evac options, and if this stuff does terrain damage, you’d probably burn up before you made it out of the fire.”

Maple may have had no agility, but she had a bag of tricks to make herself mobile. Machine God’s explosions were especially good for rocketing out of trouble. But with the dragonewts breath shattering her weapons, she couldn’t use those options; in the wrong location, she’d end up soaking all the terrain damage from Sally, her Predators, Oboro, *and* Syrup. With her low HP, the cumulative damage would not take long to finish her off.

“Guess we’ve gotta chip away with magic, and for the finale—”

“What?”

“Race in and bring the pain!”

A slower approach might get them burned by these stronger flames. Sally filled in Maple on the new plan—they’d fought together enough that Maple got it easily.

“Then first, we’ve gotta get its HP low enough! Syrup, Giganticize! Spirit Cannon!”

Even with the ground on fire, they had ranged options. Spirit Cannon was one of those, but the dragon countered with another breath, and the two attacks cancelled each other out.

“Saturating Chaos!”

Like Maple’s big guns, the dragon could not use its breath twice in a row. In the gap between, they just had to slam in other ranged skills and keep that up until they ran out, racking up the damage.

“Water Spear! Cyclone Cutter! Urgh, I’m not maining magic, and that’s really starting to hurt my damage potential.”

The magic Sally knew was all stuff anyone could learn—great for opening up her options in combat, which was why she’d learned it, but not really a game changer.

“I’ve got this! I’m hitting fine, as planned.”

“Yeah, glad I can rely on you.”

Since they didn’t need to deal with the dragonewts, they could focus on the dragon flying above. Standing still and pulling out the big guns was Maple’s forte.

She alternated between Hydra and Saturating Chaos, and that brought the dragon’s HP down. It was almost time for the big finish.

“Now, Maple!”

“Quick Change! Aegis!”

The first skill swapped Maple’s gear, which gave her a larger HP pool. She topped that up with a potion in one hand and Sally’s Heal, then deployed her weapons before Aegis wore out. While that skill was active, the dragonewts’ fire couldn’t harm her artillery.

“Go, Sally!”

“Okay!”

Her weapons exploded, kicking up flames every bit as intense as the dragon's breath. It rocketed them both right to the dragon, closing in before it could start its attack. Its glare was intense, but they just grinned—their plan was a success.

Sally bounded off Maple onto a midair platform and landed on the dragon's head, swinging her daggers.

“Quintuple Slash!”

Chaser Blade's effect on both hands made this combo do twenty hits. Whet Wisp added flames that did some crucial extra damage.

“And the main dish is all yours!”

“Quick Change!”

Maple swapped her gear back to the black set, set her sights on the dragon's flank, and roared her skill's name.

“Atrocity!”

Maple transformed into a monster, her six limbs clutching the dragon, her jaws closing around its throat. She breathed fire, severing its wings with her mighty claws.

The dragon tried to peel her off. Its breath *did* do damage over time, burning her hide—but that no longer mattered.

Maple breathed fire of her own, her attacks relentless.

Flames billowed between the two titans, each attempting to devour the other. To the untrained eye, it would be impossible to know that one was a player.

After several bursts of flame and damage sparks, the dragon let out one last howl—and burst into light.

“R-Release!”

She'd been clinging to the dragon, so with its demise, Maple dropped like a stone and there was nothing besides open air below her. But webs shot down from the sky above, wrapping around her, and stopping her descent.

“Whew, thanks, Sally!”

“You pulled that off without a hitch, Maple. Nice work.”

“Eh-heh-heh! Glad it worked out!”

Sally used her midair platforms to haul Maple back to the tower top. With the battle over, the dragonewts had vanished, leaving scorch marks and a few materials the dragon had dropped—plus a treasure chest at the center. They swiftly scooped up the drops and moved to open the chest.

“Ready on three?”

“You know it!”

““One, two, three... Open sesame!””

They peered down at the items within.

Four Dragon Treasures.

Each was a glittering cluster of jewels and precious metals. Your classic “sell this for cash” items.

“Hmm, bummer. Supposedly you *can* get accessories, too. But these are at least worth a lot.”

“Oh? How much?”

“These four would cover the cost of two guild homes our size.”

“No way! That’s a lot! And that’s the bad drop? We really did get just these treasures, huh?”

“Honestly, these might be better for us than the gear. I mean, you’re pretty much all set with that loadout, Maple.”

This would likely be considered the boss’s worst drop. There were a number of potential rewards, and you weren’t guaranteed the best of them. But which drop was most useful depended on the player receiving it.

“True...and they’re pretty! Might be a good keepsake.”

“.....Uh, sure? I mean, we weren’t doing this for the accessories anyway. *And* these will help fund future sightseeing.”

“Yup, yup!”

They took a seat on the edge of the tower, admiring the view. This was the highest point on the flying castle, and this was their chance to soak in the rolling clouds below and the breeze on their faces.

“What’d you think?”

“That was fun! Dragons sure are gonna dragon.”

“Yeah. Pretty tough for a fifth stratum boss.”

“And we got treasure! A job well done.”

“Mm, that’s the flying castle off our bucket list. Good work on the dragon fight, too!”

“Same to you, Sally. But I’m not done admiring this view.”

“Same. Wanna grab a photo?”

“Yeah! If I’d been better with this tool earlier, I’d have taken a lot more photos. Oh, I’ll send you a copy.”

“Yes, please.”

Maple got a good shot of the view, and the two of them left the flying castle behind.





Defense Build and a Thunderstorm

A few days after their flying castle adventure, Maple was drawing up a list of places to go next when they both had a solid block of time. Wandering spontaneously in the hopes of finding something cool was fun, but so was having a destination picked out—this way, they could decide which they were in the mood for when the day arrived.

While drawing up this list, Maple found herself high up on a cloud on the fifth stratum, wearing a white dress, lying back and basking in the sunlight.

She could gather materials or grind levels anywhere, but places like this had the advantage of lower foot traffic.

“That flying castle sure was fun...”

Maple was trying to plan their next trip, but all these clouds just brought her mind back to the last one. She was high enough that the views looked similar, and she could see way out across the map.

“Mm? Since when is there a lightning area over there?”

Maple spent a fair amount of time enjoying views, so she was actually good at spotting differences. She put a hand to her brow, narrowing her eyes, making sure that distant flash had not been her imagination.

“I don’t think I’m seeing things... Okay, I’ll go check it out.”

She didn’t have anything better to do, so she decided to head toward the lightning.

“I think this is the place?”

Maple took another look around. She was surrounded by clouds, and it was hard to see exactly where the lightning was.

She wondered if a Syrup flight would help but then heard a roar of thunder. There must have been a lightning strike as well.

“That way!”

Maple began using the rolling thunder to navigate. Maple’s flight process was hardly typical, so if she searched from above, she might easily miss quest triggers or dungeon entrances.

“Mm-hmm, I’ve never seen lightning here, so it must be something!”

Maple made her way a good deal closer, waiting for the next strike.

“Hmm, if there’s no thunder, I’m lost... Yikes?!”

She’d leaned against a cloud wall to rest, but it failed to support her weight, swallowing her up: a secret entrance, like the flying castle’s.

Maple went tumbling down the slope beyond and fell through the cloud wall’s exit headfirst. She faceplanted on the ground beyond, and when she picked herself up, she found a female player looking very surprised.

“Yo... Er, hello. Are you okay?”

“.....? Ah-ha-ha, sorry; I’m fine!”

Maple straightened out her dress, and closed her eyes a moment, waiting for the world to stop spinning. This girl’s tone of voice had changed quite a bit mid-line, which was odd, but Maple was too busy trying to settle herself to remember that for long. She opened her eyes and took another look. The girl had long blond hair bound in a bun at the back, red eyes, and like Maple, seemed dressed for tourism—a white blouse, a long skirt, and a parasol. No visible weapons. Her aura screamed “rich girl” so loud, Maple found herself instinctively standing straight.

“I heard thunder over this way, and it’s usually quiet here, so I thought there might be something going on,” Maple explained.

The girl looked her over, took a breath, and then smiled. “Hmm, I see! That explains it. I didn’t notice anything like that myself, I’m afraid. This might sound strange coming from me, but you don’t seem to be wearing any armor. Isn’t that dum—dangerous?”

Given what Maple was searching for, there was a real risk of encountering a dangerous monster.

“Not for me! Given my build, I don’t need to worry about defense.”

“.....Meaning...”

The girl seemed to have thoughts on that subject, but Maple was busy taking stock of her surroundings. There definitely didn’t seem to be anything going on here.

“Hngg, did I get lost?”

“Um, I come here all the time, so rest assured, that lightning wasn’t quest related.”

“Oh? It wasn’t?”

“Yes, well, it’s up to you if you buy tha—believe me, of course.”

“Okay, I trust you!”

“Y-You do?”

“Yup!”

Realizing Maple meant it, the girl looked surprised.

“.....Okay. Since we’ve run into each other, would you like to talk a bit?”

“.....? Sure! Of course!”

“This is hardly the place for a discussion, Maple. Shall we head out?”

“Okay— Huh?”

Maple hadn’t introduced herself, so she looked surprised. The girl looked amused.

“Looks like I got it right, then?”

“Er, uh, huh? Ohh... Well, it startled me!”

Belatedly, Maple realized this wasn’t some mind-reading skill, just a good guess.

“You might not be in your iconic gear, but once I looked closely, it wasn’t hard to tell.”

She could change hair, clothes, and the color of her eyes—but height and

vibes remained the same. And once she mentioned defense—most *NWO* players would probably take the hint.

“I was out sightseeing,” Maple explained. “Um...”

“Hmm? Oh, I’m Velvet.”

“Velvet! Were you playing tourist, too?”

Neither of them had weapons or anything that looked like armor. Their goals might well align.

“More or less, yes. I was planning on meeting some friends and grind some levels later, but our Great Shielder couldn’t make it.”

“Ah-ha.”

“I know we just met, but...could I ask you to join us?”

This must be what she’d wanted to talk about. Velvet was clearly hanging on Maple’s answer.

“I’d be happy to!” Maple nodded.

She didn’t have any other plans and was excited by the prospect of new friends.

“Sw— Then that settles it! We’re meeting up on the seventh stratum.”

“Works for me!”

Maple and Velvet made it to their destination and headed to the edge of town to wait for Velvet’s friend. On the way through town, Velvet witnessed Maple’s walking speed firsthand and was reminded how slow she really was.

“The gulf between us is bigger than I thought.”

“Urgh, but I’ve got several tricks to make up for it!”

“Heh-heh, I’ve heard. Oh, Hinata! Over here.”

Velvet started waving; she must have spotted her friend. Curious, Maple looked around—and saw a girl trotting over to them. She had dark purple hair—almost black—braided at the back and was clutching a mildly creepy doll in her hands. Her outfit was a bit like Mai and Yui’s, but with less frills.

“I-I’m last? Sorry!”

“Nah, no prob. Right on time! Er, ahem. Like I said, Maple here has agreed to help us grind levels.”

“Hi!”

“Hello. I’ll...do my best.”

Her eyes were hidden behind long bangs, and it was a bit hard to read her emotions, but the way Hinata clutched her doll looked motivated.

Curious about the doll, Maple asked, “Is that your weapon?”

“Er, um... Y-yes. Essentially.”

“I see... This game has all sorts of weapons! Wait, Velvet, what’s yours?”

“That would spoil things.”

This evasive response left Maple looking slightly disappointed, but they soon set out. Maple had spent her time on the seventh floor either riding horseback behind Sally or doing her usual Syrup flights. If she was treating everything like a fight, she could blow herself up to fly, or use Atrocity, but those had use limits and weren’t best for normal travel. As she wondered what to do, Hinata poked her arm.

“Um, Maple...you don’t have a horse?”

“Ugh, I don’t have enough DEX to ride one.”

“Th-then sit behind me.”

“Oh! Thank you!”

She would have had to use Atrocity to keep up otherwise.

“Velvet’s riding is...a bit rough and tumble.”

“Hinata, I can hear you.”

“Whoops, sorry.”

Maple could fall off a horse or be run over by one without losing any HP. And Velvet’s rich-girl vibe had suggested she knew her way around horses, so this comment was surprising.

“Huh, I didn’t expect that,” she said.

“Yes... You wouldn’t.”

Either way, Maple wound up seated behind Hinata, and they led the way, with Velvet following behind.

The seventh stratum was the highest layer available and featured a huge variety of terrain. Since the primary goal was to find the pet monster right for you, it didn’t have a themed focus like the cloud-based or horror stratums. Instead, it had a bit of everything. The leveling zone Hinata led them to was a wasteland, featuring dried-up trees and rocky outcrops.

“Don’t think I’ve been here much.”

“This is the place. Here’s where we grind.”

“I’ve got defense handled!”

Maple dropped off the horse and immediately fired up Martyr’s Devotion. Red damage sparks sprayed off her, and the ground began to glow in a circle around her.

“As long as you’re in this light, no attacks will matter!”

“Okay. Got it.”

“Then... Taunt!”

Maple used another skill, and hawks plunged from the sky while golems shuffled out from between the rocks.

““Water Lance!””

As a golem drew near Maple, voices echoed behind her, and two water lances shot overhead, doing considerable damage to the golem.

“Let me help! Predators!”

Hoping they’d add to the damage done, Maple summoned a pair of monsters. Their gaping maws soon bit down on the golem’s torso and shoulder. This did damage, but the golem wasn’t done yet; it swung both arms, hitting Maple. Devour activated, swallowing the golem, but the swings had set off an earthquake that made all three girls stumble.

“Ugh...! Hng?”

“I’d seen the videos, but it’s still hard to believe.”

The earthquake should have hit all three of them, but Martyr’s Devotion redirected all of it at Maple, whose defense nullified it entirely.

“See? I’ve got defense handled. Unless there’s piercing damage! Hydra!”

Waiting until the incoming hawk was right on top of them, Maple fired a poison dragon at it. With no resistance to that affliction, it took massive damage and flew away, unsteady.

“T-Tornado!”

Hinata’s spell hit the injured hawk before it had a chance to get away. Taunt was still pulling more monsters their way. They’d ordinarily have to stay on their toes or risk being overwhelmed by sheer numbers of enemies, but Maple made that a nonissue.

“Whew, okay! This should be fine.”

Maple was best against monsters that attacked head-on.

Like she thought, nothing here had an attack that worked on her, and their farming proceeded smoothly. In time, they took a short break.

“Machine God, Predators, Saturating Chaos, Hydra, Martyr’s Devotion, and Pandemonium. Quite the spectacle!”

“Um, it made a big difference. Seeing them in person...they’re intense.”

Predators were still active, and Hinata’s fearful gaze was trained on them. Since Martyr’s Devotion was also going strong, they could relax anywhere, and had taken a seat on a rock to chat.

“Wil— I’d heard the stories, but you are very impressive.”

“Eh-heh-heh, thanks.”

If they could just solve her mobility issue, bringing Maple along made grinding very efficient. They need only think about attacking.

Having experienced the benefits of Maple’s defense firsthand, they decided to change areas, targeting stronger monsters that gave more XP.

The cracked ground transitioned to a desert, and though stronger, the monsters here were still hawks and golems.

“They hit harder, but that won’t bother you, Maple.”

“Nope!”

Maple not being able to defend against things just didn’t happen. Minor boosts to damage or AOE attacks were not about to break through her protection.

“Okay, let’s do this!”

Once more, Maple took the lead, using Taunt to lure in the foes.

“Oh! M-Maple, don’t go that way!”

“Huh? Augh!”

“Sh— Too late, huh?”

Maple had felt that sinking feeling before. She was yanked into the ground, and Velvet and Hinata were pulled through the sand after her.



Down below, they found walls and floors of sandstone with lights at regular intervals. Clearly, an underground structure.

“I should have warned you.”

“Ugh, sorry. I dragged everyone down with me! I’ve fallen into dungeons like this before; I should’ve known better.”

During the second event, she’d been swallowed by the sands, and forced to explore a dungeon filled with patrolling snails. And it was hardly unheard of for gimmicks and bosses to get reused in other areas. Since the second event map was no longer available, it made sense that they’d have a sand trap dungeon entrance here.

“I knew it was there, but we haven’t actually been inside.”

“If we can beat the boss, it’ll certainly be dam—good experience. What say we give it a try?”

“Okay!”

Velvet and Hinata had intel on the dungeon monsters, so this wasn't nearly as stressful as the snail pit.

"From here to the boss room is all golems, so let's make swift work of them."

Supposedly the boss room was at the lowest point, and they made a beeline for it. The dungeon itself was practically an ant farm, made of thin passages and open rooms.

Maple kept Martyr's Devotion going, and if they spotted any monsters, her weapons and their magic chewed through them.

In the first open room, they found three golems made of sand—different from the ones above.

"Commence Assault!"

Maple moved closer and tried firing shells and lasers at the sand giants, but they all just went right through, doing no damage.

"Hngg, no use!"

"I imagine we have to use the right element."

That meant Velvet and Hinata got spells ready—but before they could cast, the giants crumbled like sand, vanishing into the ground—and reformed right in front of the party.

They all attacked, but surprise attacks did nothing against Maple's AOE protection. A sand fist scored a direct hit on Maple's head, and it just made a dull *thunk*.

Well aware she was safe, Hinata made no attempt to dodge and simply finished her spell, doing wind and water damage.

"!Water Spear."

Velvet had reflexively stepped aside, realizing that was unnecessary a moment later; she soon drew up short and started casting herself. But the momentary distraction meant her spell didn't score a clean hit.

"We're good! Just focus on attacking!"

With that reminder, Maple kept her shield down—avoiding unwanted Devour

uses—and kept Taunt active, standing perfectly still.

Fists bigger than she was pounded mercilessly away.

“Whew, if the ground wasn’t so hard, I’d have been buried in it!”

Naturally, this did no damage. She sat down and waited for the other two to finish the fight.

The golems made sand rocket out of the ground, summoned sandy minions, and tried to pin them down with sand—they tried every trick in the book on Maple, but burying her in the sand achieved no tangible results, and the spell barrage eventually finished them off.

“I-is she okay? She’s completely engulfed...”

“But her HP hasn’t budged...”

Only a single strand of Maple’s hair was still above the mountain of sand. With no other threats around, they got to work excavating her.

“Thanks! Are the monsters...?”

“Hinata and I took care of them.”

“Thanks for keeping them, uh...busy.”

The spawn rates were much higher down here, and each monster gave a lot more XP, so this suited their original purpose.

“There are other types of monsters further down.”

“Like what?”

“Mummies? Um... They have bandages wrapped around them, at least.”

“We don’t know all of their attacks, so be careful.”

“Got it!”

They headed down, taking out several more sand golems. True to Velvet’s word, in time the local wildlife started changing, as sand golems gave way to humanoid monsters covered entirely in ancient bandages. Only their red eyes gleamed ominously through the gaps—clearly not power hitters like the previous enemies.

“Foes like this call for...Heaven’s Throne!”

Maple called out a pure white throne she’d just acquired on a lower stratum. This added a new glowing zone to the ground. Velvet looked shocked that Maple had yet another unconventional skill.

“This tends to seal skills zombies and ghosts use!”

“Oh. That does sound useful.”

They’d expected these foes to use some nasty attacks—but instead, all they did was scrabble uselessly at Maple.

“Normally, I can move the throne with me, but these halls are too narrow.”

Once she put it away, they had to do without for a while, so it was hard to keep it active if Syrup’s back wasn’t an option.

“Um, I’m not sure if it’ll be effective, but...could you use that during the boss fight?”

The boss here was a giant mummy that summoned all the monsters they’d seen on the way in. If Maple could nerf the golems and the mummy adds, they could make short work of it and get back above ground.

Maple tried to use a skill on the mummies around her. “Predators... Oh, right, I can’t. Full Deploy!”

Maple spawned her artillery and used the barrels to trip them up. They were pretty clumsy, and by knocking them down, she could easily focus her fire.

“Hmm, they’ve got a lot of HP.”

Ultimately, her attacks were up close and personal, so even a sturdy mummy burst into light before too long.

“They move real slow, so we can back away while firing... Yeah, that works.”

The three of them stuck to ranged attacks the rest of the way to the boss room. The throne might still be on cooldown, but Martyr’s Devotion made things easy.

They reached the boss room without anyone taking damage, and waited outside until Heaven’s Throne was ready again. Then they charged in.

They were met by a mummy three times their height, wrapped in pale purple bandages.

Like those on the way in, red eyes glowed beneath the wrappings; even from this distance, it was a sinister light.

“Okay, let’s do this!”

Maple dashed off ahead, made sure the boss was in range of the girls’ spells, and plopped Heaven’s Throne down in the center of the room. She sat down on it, looking up at the boss.

The mummy let out a creepy groan, and a horde of mummies and golems appeared all around. But the mummies had a new black aura around them, and several golems were carrying rocky spears.

“Urgh, spears?! Velvet! Target the spear golems first!”

Velvet realized Maple was worried about piercing damage and nodded.

A number of Maple’s biggest skills were sealed while she was on the throne, so she changed tactics.

“Taunt! Syrup, Red Garden, White Garden, Sinking Ground.”

Red and white flowers bloomed in the glowing area around the throne. As the monsters approaching her stepped into the flower beds, they were hit with debuffs—and sank into the floor.

“Hydra!”

The poison did not wilt flowers created by her skill. Their blooms held high even as the purple garnish began ravishing the monsters’ HP. An unapproachable garden, a true no-man’s land. And the monsters’ biggest weakness—their inability to recognize that truth.

While Maple had the monsters around her locked down, Velvet and Hinata were free to sling spells at the boss and golems.

“Rock on! That’s more like it!”

Monsters had a limited move set. If none of those moves could hurt Maple, then this was a one-sided beatdown—at least until a new phase added more

actions. The boss mummy seemed like it was sharing a buff to its minions' attack, but it proved inadequate; and the throne was preventing it using any debuffs.

"T-Tornado!"

"Come and get me!"

Hinata's swirling winds swept up several minions and damaged the boss. Maple's guns added to that—and the boss's health hit the halfway mark.

All three braced for the phase shift. The boss let out a moan that shook the room—and a frigid white wind emerged from it, sweeping the chamber. It hit Maple first, then the two behind her—and cancelled every active skill and buff.

"Whoa, not fair!"

Maple's skills were all powerful—which meant they had lengthy cooldowns. It was impossible for her to create that death zone again on short notice.

And they hadn't just lost their buffs—the throne had been keeping the boss's debuffs at bay, but now, every one of them hit home. Without Martyr's Devotion to protect them, their stats all dropped like a stone.

That didn't affect Maple much, but it really hurt the other two.

"Taunt! Atrocity!"

Trying to buy time until the debuff ran out, Maple used her aggro-pulling skill, and then hid within her monster form, rampaging through the boss's minions. The debuffs meant her attacks weren't doing much of anything, but it wasn't like they could kill her quick—well worth the attempt.

The spear golems were definitely doing piercing damage, which she avoided as best she could, and when the boss tried to attack the others, she placed herself in the way. Without the throne to seal its moves, the boss put its hands on the ground, drawing out something sinister—a sort of black mist or bog—that got under Maple's feet but didn't actually do anything to her. The other girls were busy handling monsters that got past, biding their chance to turn the tables.

"Urgh, what do I do...huh?"

The mist had filled the entire room—and it felt like the floor dropped out from beneath Maple’s feet. She was swallowed up in it—and a moment later, her vision cleared. She was now nowhere near the boss, forcibly moved behind the other girls.

“Whoa! We’ve swapped places?!”

Velvet and Hinata were right in the thick of the mob, while Maple was on the backline. The boss had summoned a ton of adds, cast a debuff, then messed up their formation. Quite a sinister strategy.

“Cover Move...argh, out of range...!”

The debuff was making her extra slow. Running toward them in Atrocity form or releasing it and rocketing toward them—neither would get her there in time. She ran anyway.

But even as the hordes bore down on the others, the boss itself raised a fist, wreathed in an inky black aura—and swung it down toward them. Before they could take stock of their new surroundings, they were being hit from all sides.

But Velvet stepped out in front of Hinata, tossing her parasol aside and raising her fists.

“Ha! When hell freezes over!” Velvet roared. “Thunder God Advent!”

A bright, massive bolt of lightning shot out of her, raking the monster horde and scorching the boss as well—and sealing their movement.

As the crackling electric faded, Velvet shot Hinata a guilty look.

“Let’s, like...bail?”

“.....Fair.”

Velvet grabbed Hinata and leapt away in another bolt. They easily cleared the ring of monsters, landing right in front of Maple, whose jaw was hanging all the way open.

“Huh? Huh?!”

“Save talking for later!”

“Our guild...will call you too honest for your own good again.”

“Maple, like, showed us tons of crap? And kept us all safe. My turn to strut some stuff!”

“Um... Good luck?” Maple managed, still reeling.

As she watched, Velvet’s gear changed—she was still wearing what looked like normal clothing, but now it was clear what her weapon of choice was. She had massive gauntlets covering her hands. Iron fists several times the size of her bare knuckles, crackling with lightning. Her grin was indomitable.

“Hinata, give us some support.”

“O-okay! Hahh... Here goes.”

Hinata summoned her courage, clutched her doll tight, and fired her skills at the incoming monsters.

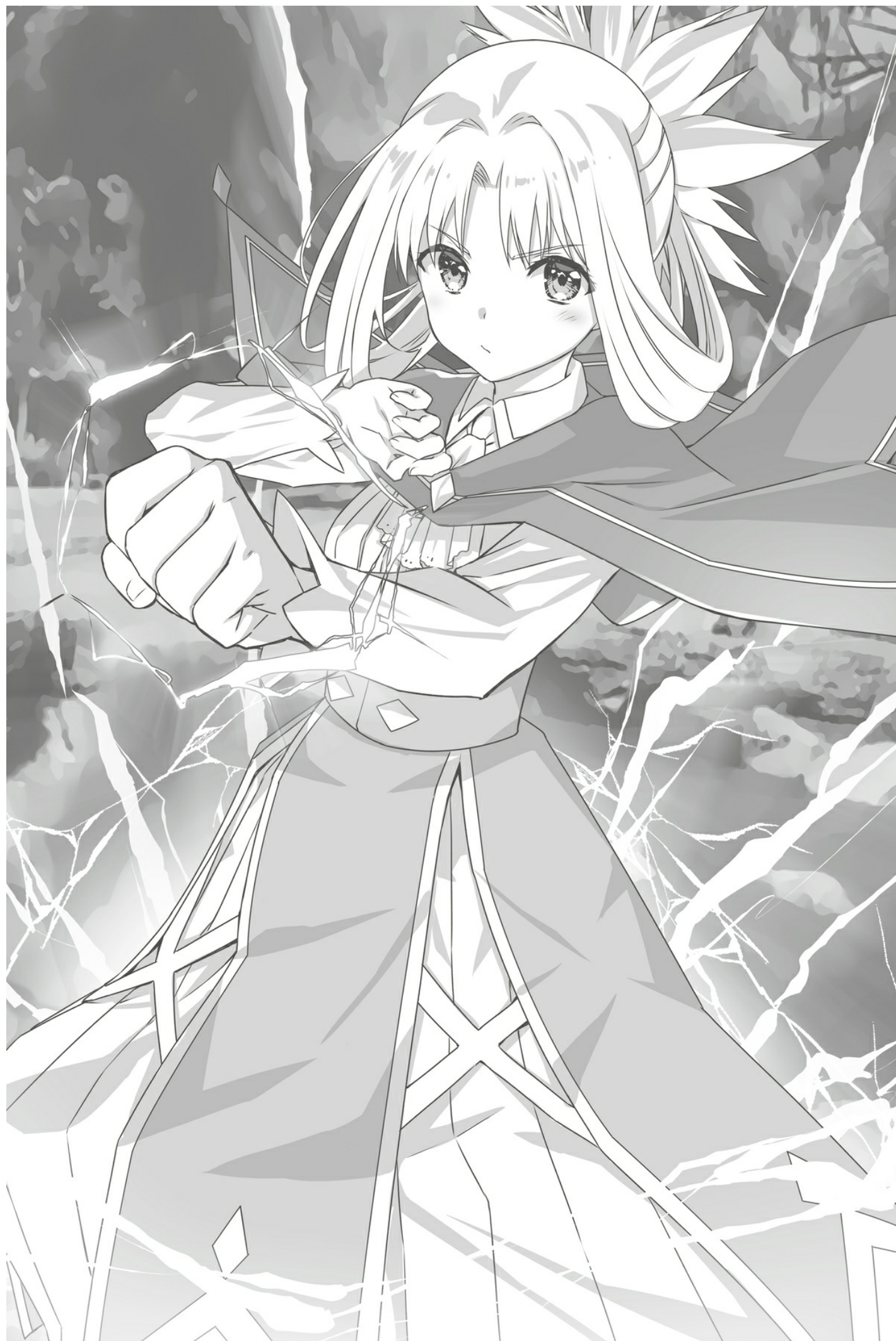
“Celestial Chain! Cocytus!”

As her skills activated, the mob’s advance stopped dead, as if they were stitched to the ground. A moment later, a white mist spread out, turning them all into popsicles.

Powerful stuns prevented any of the horde from laying a finger on the party.

“Disseminate Disaster! Gravity’s Groan! Brittle Ice Sculpture!”

With each command, the immobilized monsters were hit with debuffs that hugely increased damage taken. These skills themselves did no harm. But each time the effects started wearing off, Hinata locked them in place again, preventing them from moving or attacking.



So who was the damage dealer here? You know who.

“Eye of the Storm. Lightning Rain.”

Velvet was once more surrounded by electricity, bolts scorching the hell out of the ground in every direction—and a massive volley of strikes from above decimating all and sundry.

As long as Hinata had them bound, they couldn’t dodge even if they saw the bolts coming. Monster or otherwise.

Only the boss itself survived, but Velvet bounded to it, fist swinging.

“Chained Strike!”

The boss could not move, and her fist slammed home, the air splitting, bolts spitting everywhere. Each strike that landed was stronger than the one before, scorching the boss’s body, and vaporizing its HP.

“W-wow! That’s incredible!”

Watching the two of them clean up, Maple waved all four arms excitedly, eyes sparkling—well, not that her monster had any eyes.



With the boss down, they left the dungeon, resting in a safe zone where monsters wouldn’t spawn. Maple immediately voiced the question on her mind.

“Velvet, you’re not actually a mage?!”

“Damn, slow down, girl. Take it easy!”

The rich-girl act had totally vanished. This dynamic grin was clearly much more her speed. Maple found the real Velvet much easier to talk to.

“Sorry for, like, hiding stuff?” Velvet said. “My guild members are always on my case about learning more about the major players.”

“So you can fight them later?”

“Damn right! Gives you a real leg up. And you sure shared a lot!”

“Agh, I guess I did...”

Not only had Maple used a lot of skills, but the boss fight had also arguably

revealed her biggest weakness.

“It never hurts to know what you’re, like, dealing with? But the goal here is to fight fair and square! You know?”

It wasn’t like they’d been forced to show off their moves in the boss fight. Velvet could easily have chosen defeat instead. Maple took that as proof she meant what she said. The sudden crisis had simply been a good excuse, and she’d always wanted to strut her stuff.

“The rest of the guild...keeps saying she should keep things secret...”

“But it was so cool!”

If she’d fought them without prior knowledge, Hinata would have rendered her instantly helpless, and Velvet could easily have pummeled her with ranged and close-up attacks.

Hiding their skills definitely gave them the edge in a fight.

“But a good fight’s a fair one! Maple, I’m putting you down as a rival.”

Velvet sounded pretty confident, and her grin offered a challenge.

“You’re sure you don’t mind? Your guild isn’t gonna yell at you?”

“Well, not like we didn’t get nothing out of it. I learned more about you, too, so it’s all good.”

Hinata seemed to have doubts about that claim; even with her bangs hiding her eyes, it was clear she’d pulled a face. Maple gathered Velvet was pretty much always like this.

“Also, I still got tricks up my sleeve!”

“Yup, same here!”

“What?! There’s more?!”

Velvet said every one of Maple’s skills would be anyone else’s best move, but that just seemed to make her look forward to the fight.

“I was hoping I’d, like, run into you eventually. Glad we did!”

“It was total chance, too!”

In retrospect, the lightning she followed must have been Velvet all along. But the scale of that lightning was much bigger than what she'd used in the dungeon—proof Velvet still had secrets to spare.

“And was the whole rich-girl look trying to disguise your identity?”

She'd switched to gauntlets in the fight, revealing her weapon—but she hadn't changed clothes. Maple changed outfits a lot, so she wondered if Velvet was doing the same thing.

“These are actually my best threads!”

“She got them from a boss...and she's been practicing acting the part to match the look...”

“I—I see...”

No guild strategies or deeper motives involved. Entirely personal reasons.

“It's damn hard! Usually people tell me I should, like, calm down.”

She'd changed up her hairstyle to match the outfit, but her actual combat style was the polar opposite of that look—she was a full-on brawler whose aim was mass destruction. That fit her real personality, so the act slipped real quick. This didn't seem to bother Velvet at all; she was sitting cross-legged and laughing heartily.

“So there you have it! Dunno when the next PvP'll be, but when it happens, we're coming.”

“Mm-hmm! Just...play nice?”

“Ha! That ain't an option.”

“Ugh, well, then me and Maple Tree will do what we can.”

“Our guild will, too!”

“First...we have to admit we showed off our skills...”

“Urk, true.”

“Y-you're sure it'll be okay?”

“Well, yeah. I'm guild master, so they always come around!”

That fact was a shocker, and Maple's eyes went wide. Velvet revealed the name of her guild: Thunder Storm, a large guild that had been on the rise right before the fourth event, and managed to land in the top ten. Velvet and Hinata were the guild's top players.

"Let's play together again sometime!" Velvet said, eyes gleaming. "I've got more skills to show off then!"

Hinata leaned in, whispering in Maple's ear.

"I think...she cares less about a fair fight...and more about flaunting her badass skills."

"I get that."

Behind all Velvet's choices was a simple desire to share what she thought was fun. That was something she and Maple had in common, so Hinata's take was convincing.

Velvet suggested they friend each other, and Maple agreed; after that, they called their horses over and rode back to town.

"Rivals, huh?"

Maple had never had one of those until she started this game. She figured Sally had always had a few around.



Defense Build and a Starry Sky

When their schedules aligned, Maple and Sally were ready for another tourism run. They first met up in a café in the stone-walled town on the second stratum, making plans.

“Oh? New friends?”

“Yup! I was out looking for new places to explore and happened to bump into them!”

Maple was telling her all about Velvet and Hinata.

“She’s guild master of Thunder Storm!”

“I know that guild. They went nuts in the fourth event. If she’s a lightning slinger, she must be the one from the replay vids.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, just this massive column of lightning, so bright you couldn’t even see the player.”

Maple could imagine that was Velvet inside. If no one had been able to see her, it made sense she could go unrecognized.

“She was super strong! Oh, and she went and punched a monster like you do.”

Maple put up her dukes and helpfully threw out some combination punches.

“Ah-ha-ha, my Martial Arts skill is something I accidentally earned by dodging a lot. If she’s attacking with that, it’s probably something else.”

“Oh? You think?”

If Velvet and Sally were using the same skill, Maple had figured Sally could fill her in on the details. But if it was something else entirely, then oh well. She wound up telling Sally all about the skills she’d seen.

“That is strong.” Sally nodded. “This Hinata girl hangs out in back debuffing, while Velvet carries the offense real hard.”

Naturally, both those high-impact punches and AOE lightning skills had their downsides. The first was super short range, and the latter could be negated by certain skills, or by escaping the area affected.

But all that changed if she had Hinata with her.

“Maple, you know how hard it is to hit a moving target?”

“Yeah, I don’t think I could ever hit you.”

“But if you make them stop still, you can score a bullseye—and that’s really powerful.”

“Right.”

“In other words, they’re not a great matchup for me.”

Sally was primarily a close-range fighter, which put her in range of lightning and debuffs alike. It would probably be very difficult for her to take out those girls on her own.

“She prefers fighting head-on, so if I’m careful, I can probably avoid that...”

“After the dungeon she was totally different from when we first met up. It really made my head spin. Do you wanna meet them sometime?”

“Hmm, I’m curious, sure. If they’re that good, we’ll probably have to face them eventually, so learning more about their fighting style and skills would be worth it. Velvet might not be into information warfare, but...the more you know.”

Attacks as swift as lightning could only be dodged so much on reflex alone. It helped to know exactly what the range was.

“Then we should meet up sometime! They pair up a lot, so I want to introduce you!”

“Heh-heh, as your partner?”

“Yup! Exactly!” Maple nodded.

A smile escaped Sally. Then she locked her gaze on Maple.

“Then I’ll have to show them what your partner can do.”

“Heh-heh-heh. Looking forward to it, Miss Sally.”

“I aim to please, Miss Maple.”

With that, they got down to the main order of the day.

The plan was to further explore the second stratum. Compared to later maps, this one hadn’t offered a dramatic difference from the first; together, the two of them provided the orthodox fantasy setting experience.

Maple had let Sally do the legwork on this layer and was excited to find out what awaited them.

“Knowing you, Maple, I’ve got a place you’ll love. But it’s only available later on, so I figured we’d take our time getting there.”

“Interesting!”

“And it’s a bit far.”

“Then we should buy lunches and get going!”

“Good idea.”

The sun had set, and Maple and Sally set off across the darkened fields.

Like the first stratum, the second lacked any foes that posed a threat to them. They switched into less conspicuous gear, and Sally carried Maple, running toward their destination.

“Can you guess what it is?”

“Well...it’s gotta be at night, right?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Maple had run into time-sensitive stuff before. The second event had monsters that only showed up at night, and where they were headed likely worked on that principle.

“But if it’s spooky, *you* wouldn’t be taking me there.”

“.....I would not.”

“And it *is* nighttime.”

“I think you’ve got it.”

They agreed to compare answers once they arrived and ran on.

Eventually, Sally pulled up before the yawning entrance to a cave. It was pitch black within, and it was all they could do to make out a path sloping down. There was no mountain behind it, so barring a transport circle, they would likely be headed underground.

“Huh... We’re going underground?”

“Mm? Not what you expected?”

“I was thinking starry skies. Like that nighttime place with the food that changed our hair colors.”

“Heh-heh-heh... Well, you’ll find out!”

“Hokay!”

“I brought a light.”

Sally took a lantern out of her inventory and lit their way.

“There are monsters, so keep an eye out.”

“Got it.”

Maple put Martyr’s Devotion up, just in case, keeping Sally safe in its soft glow.

“.....Do we even need the lantern?”

“.....Maybe not.”

Sally took a long look at the glow of Maple’s skill, and went to put the lantern away.

“.....Wait, Sally, what say we do this without Martyr’s Devotion?”

“Hmm? Sure, the monsters here won’t be a problem for me.”

Sally didn’t seem clear on why Maple suggested it.

“I mean, we’re here to see something pretty, not clear a dungeon. The mood is important! Even on the way in.”

“So you wanna enjoy exploring the cave, then?”

“Exactly!”

“Cool. I can dodge these monsters just fine, and if we’re exploring...here!”

Sally took a few more items out of her inventory and lined them up in front of Maple.

A torch, a helmet with a headlight, a rope, a pickax, and a big rucksack...all themed around the idea of spelunking.

“We’ve got inventories, so don’t really need the rucksack, but...style points.”

“Mm-hmm! You get it, Sally.”

She had two of each, and soon, they were fully decked out. The rucksack worked like the pouch Sally sometimes used and could hold several items outside their inventory; Maple put the rope and pickax inside, and they were ready to go.

“How’s that for mood? We might not be dressed right, though.”

They were wearing the same outfits they’d used to sightsee on the first layer—a bit fancy for a cave.

“We’ll have to buy the rest later.”

“We could.”

“For now, we just head to the back?”

“Yeah, that works.”

“Cool! Onward!”

Maple raised her torch high, and they ventured forth into the cave. Being the second layer, there were no elaborate puzzles or powerful monsters, and they thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Sally’s magic was more than enough to handle foes this low, and she dispatched everything before they even got close.

“Just don’t slip!”

“Right. Keep our feet lit... It’s downhill all the way, huh?”

“The terrain should start changing soon. Maple, put the torch out.”

“If you say so!”

She checked for monsters first, then doused the torch. Darkness enveloped them.

But looking closer at the ground, she saw the occasional glow, so dim they could never have spotted it with the torch lit. It was less like something phosphorescent than like some strange power holding light itself in place. Maple bent down for a closer look.

“Ah, you spotted them. Those are our guide.”

“Oh! We’d have missed these exploring normally.”

“You think you’re probing every corner, but there still stuff you can overlook. I bet there’s still plenty of things nobody’s discovered.”

“Hmm, then we’ll have to do our best to find them!”

Maple’s smile clearly assumed Sally would be with her, so Sally threw up her hands and smiled back.

“So you get what we do now? Just check the path at each branch.”

“Okay! Then let’s light the torch again.”

With the glow to guide them, they wouldn’t get lost. Like Sally suggested, they doused the torch at each intersection and followed the correct path through the darkened cave. The passages grew steadily narrower, with more and more sections where they had to duck down or turn sideways.

“Whew, we’ve come a long way.”

“Mm, shouldn’t be much longer. There’s a vertical shaft, and it’s just down that way.”

“Oh! Exciting. Let’s do this!”

“Don’t want you falling, so...maybe no need for this, but...”

“No, let’s.”

Maple climbed on Sally’s back, and Sally tied her on with the rope. She tied another rope to a rock and got ready to climb down the shaft. Maple frequently jumped off Syrup’s back or let her defense cover the crash landings from her

rocket flights, so she could probably just jump down, but that would ruin the whole torchlight spelunking vibe.

“Hang on tight!”

“I see any monsters, I’ll paralyze them!”

“Thanks. Going down!”

One arm holding onto Sally, Maple kept her other hand ready to draw her short sword and use Paralyze Shout. Once she was ready, Sally pulled the rope tight, put her feet flat against the wall, and started the descent.

The walls were knobby and dry, with no risk of slippage. Sally made steady progress. She shone her headlight down the shaft every now and then, checking for safety, and Maple paralyzed incoming bats, letting them drop to the bottom. When they completed the climb, Sally used her spells to slaughter these bats. Certain there were no more monsters, she breathed a sigh of relief.

“Whew, good work. I’ll put you down.”

“Okay!”

Once Maple was back on her own two feet, they found a narrow passage leading away, with the guide glows on the walls and floor.

“They look like fireflies.”

“True. Our destination should be right through here.”

Sally switched off her headlight and urged Maple to do the same. The guide glows were no longer faint and provided more than enough light for them to move by.

They headed through the glowing tunnel and emerged in the cavern depths.

A domed chamber was filled with faintly glowing orbs of many colors, floating free. The floors and ceiling were dotted with lights, like those that led them here. A real planetarium vibe.

The girls moved to the center. Reaching all the way up to the roof was a column, which gave off an even brighter light. On closer inspection, the source of this illumination differed from the suspended orbs—the column was studded

with gemstones.

“Maple, pick one up?”

“Okay...whoa, they come right off. Um...apparently it’s Heaven in Hand?”

The sphere Maple held didn’t seem like it did anything but sparkle, but that made her eyes light up.

“Ohh, it’s so pretty! Well worth spelunking for.”

“Heh-heh, you think? Then good. Nobody’s actually found a use for it, so...”

“Huh...”

“It’s a long trip, so pretty as they are, not many people bothered.”

“So it’s a well-kept secret!”

“Exactly. We can enjoy it all we like.”

They sat down in the silent chamber, looking up at the glittering rafters.

Maple realized her prediction had come true.

“See? It *is* a starry sky.”

“Just an underground one. From what I can tell, there’s a spot like this on every floor.”

“Huh...then we’ll have to complete the set!”

“I’m in. If you think it’ll be fun, we can check them out any time. And maybe there’s a reward for seeing them all!”

“That would be nice. But it’s also fine if there isn’t.”

“Yeah?”

“I mean, just coming here was fun enough!”

The only reward Maple required was the pleasure of this scenery and the exciting journey here.

That would likely never change.

“Well...yeah, I guess I agree.”

“Oh! Sally, we only got one keepsake this time! What do we do?”

“...You keep it, Maple.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yup. That way you can always remember this.”

“But don’t you want one, too?”

“Heh-heh, I won’t forget this that easy.”

“But that makes it sound like my brain’s a sieve!”

“Does it?”

“It does!”

They turned to face each other, and even in the darkness, they could tell the other was grinning. They spent a nice long time relaxing together, looking up at the sparkling rafters, and eating the lunches they’d brought with them.



Defense Build and a Party of Four

Maple and Sally had been spending a lot of time on lower floors, but today, they were meeting other players in the seventh stratum town.

“Any minute now?”

“Mm-hmm, I think that’s them there. Right?”

Sally pointed down the street—at Velvet and Hinata. They matched Maple’s descriptions, and she’d spotted them easily.

“Glad our schedules, like, matched up already!”

“And this is, um, Sally...?”

“Yup! Nice to meetcha.”

“Time’s a-wasting! Let’s chat as we go.”

“Okay. You’re in, Sally?”

“Sure thing.”

The four of them set out across the field. This was a social engagement. But everyone also knew they were trying to get a sense of each other’s skills and combat styles—and Sally and Velvet had pretty different notions of *that*.

They chatted about this and that, headed for a place where some good monsters spawned. Maple was on Sally’s horse today, so she didn’t have to worry about transport. On the road, Velvet suddenly hit Sally with a proposition.

“Hey! Mind if we, like, duel later?”

“With me? You sound like Frederica. But given what Maple told me, I *did* see this coming.”

Velvet’s eyes were gleaming, waiting for her answer. Sally considered it.

“.....If we’re doing this, it’ll have to be at the end of the day.”

“Ah, gotta warm up on some monsters first!”

“You don’t want to duel Maple? You already seen enough of her moves?”

“Uh...honestly? I just really wanna fight you, Sally.”

Learning about her skills was secondary. Like Maple had implied, Velvet was all about challenging worthy foes. And she’d likely gone with Sally over Maple because she’d gleaned that Sally had a similar mindset.

“You really are just like she said. I’m certainly way more into PvP than Maple is. Win as much as I can, don’t take duels I can’t. So I may decline the offer if what I see looks like too much for me.”

Sally kept her tone light, like she was joking around, and Velvet insisted you never knew the outcome until you tried.

“But I mean it,” Sally said. “I pick my battles. Can’t afford to lose.”

“Sally still hasn’t taken damage yet. At all.”

“Wha?! Seriously?! Whoa, now I’m really looking forward to this.”

“Skills earned by not dying in PvP...c-could actually exist.”

“Damn, like, this game really could have skills for anything!”

“It seems impossible, but you also can’t rule it out.”

“I hear you. But I’m still eager to try!”

But their first goal today was to take down a specific seventh stratum monster.

They stopped their horses at the base of a rocky mountain. From here, they had to climb the trail to their destination.

“There’s, like, checkpoints along the way, and you’ve gotta get through all of them to reach the boss at the end!”

“And if you fly on pets like Syrup, you won’t trigger the fights on the way?”

“.....You’ve heard?”

“I read up on all kinds of things for Maple. Figured she hasn’t been here before.”

They moved toward the trail, Maple only just realizing they weren't here for sightseeing.

The path led into the mountain itself, emerging at the peak. The checkpoints Velvet mentioned were all *inside*.

"Shall we?"

"Hell yeah!"

Maple and Velvet led the way, with Sally and Hinata behind. The mountain interior looked like any other cave, but with no monsters. That made it easy to get to the first checkpoint.

Like the door to a boss room, this was guarded by an elaborately engraved gate, and everyone immediately knew what lay behind it.

"We're here!"

"That's very big. Um, what do we do?"

"Pick however many party members you want and move on if you win. The monster strength varies by party size."

"Ah-ha."

"I'm going in!"

".....Seems like it's less a matter of compatibility than just eager to get some action in."

"Damn straight!"

Since they hadn't needed to fight anything yet, Velvet was chomping at the bit. She set the challengers to one, and the gate opened.

"We can go in with her...j-just not join the fight."

"Then we can cheer!"

"Basically."

Velvet ran on through, and the others followed. The room beyond was a circle, at the center of which stood a humanoid statue, two yards tall, made of stone.

Velvet put her gauntlets on, clenched her fists, and was ready to throw down. As she did, the statue rumbled to life. It had no weapons either—matching her fisticuffs style. That stone body was far harder than Velvet’s own, which at first glance made it look like she had no shot at winning.

“Let’s do this shit! Thunder God Advent!”

At Velvet’s cry, an insane amount of lightning burst off her, making the statue flinch mid-swing.

“Electromagnetic Leap! Heartstopper!”

Before it could move again, she closed the gap, moving far faster than Sally’s Leap skill, and put that momentum into a mighty punch. Electricity pulsed at the moment of impact, and the statue locked up again just as it was starting to move.

“Double Whammy!”

In that instant, both her fists slammed into the stone form. The dull thuds made it clear the force behind this far outweighed her slender build. The statue was flung backward.

“Dart!”

This was an acceleration skill only available to those who fought with fists, allowing them to swiftly close the gap back to punching range. As she reached that range, currents coursed around her body again.

“Discharge!”

Every hit she’d landed and taken built up a charge, and this skill unleashed all that pent up energy, repeatedly scorching the statue.

When that died down, the currents crackling around Velvet went with it, and the statue fell over—exploding in a shower of light.

“Yup, these suckers aren’t a match for me!”

“Whoa! That was so different! You were moving all over the place, took it down so fast!”

“Not my first run here, so I knew how to lay the beatdown.”

“Nice. Moving quick is so cool!”

“.....”

“.....Sally?”

While Velvet and Maple were whooping it up, Sally had her eyes closed, reviewing the fight she’d just seen.

Not just the electric attacks Maple had described—this time she’d seen some tricks that weapon choice allowed.

And that bugged her.

Fisticuffs fighters had ultra-short range, which is why their skills were high damage.

But even in light of that, Velvet’s fists were hitting like a truck.

“It’s a risk, but...I gotta.”

“.....?”

“Oh! Well, what do you say? Wanna fight me now?”

“Mm-hmm, yeah. Let’s do that later on,” Sally said.

Velvet beamed.

“Course, you showed me quite a bit...so I’ll take the next one.”

“Yeah? I dig it!”

“And if that makes me look dull, feel free to reconsider.”

With that jab, they headed off toward the next gate.

Like the first one, there were no monsters on the road, making progress a cakewalk.

“You said you’d been here before, Velvet?”

“It’s a whole gauntlet of one-on-ones! But they’re getting a bit too easy.”

Every time they heard about a good dungeon, Velvet was grabbing Hinata and making a run at it, searching for the toughest bosses around. When Hinata was with her, she could body most bosses. And that meant the fights weren’t much

fun for her.

Hinata wasn't always with her, and on her own, every fight felt like a much bigger threat, so she'd been training here.

"I'm getting much stronger myself, and with Hinata, nothing beats us."

"So you're looking at me and Maple for a new challenge."

"I knew you were damn good based on the events!"

"Yes, we're rivals now!"

The more they talked, the more Sally was certain Velvet didn't have a dark side. Just like Maple said.

"You might be rivals, Maple, but you aren't that into PvP, right?"

"Um...I guess not. Only during events, really."

"So if you ever do want to duel, Velvet, hit me up."

She already had one player coming after her on the regular, so two wouldn't be a big difference.

"Hinata's not as combat-oriented as I am, so it's good to know someone who is!"

Hinata would fight if she had to, but she wasn't exactly hunting down solo challenges in her free time.

"I like playing with Velvet, but...I'm glad there's more people who can entertain her."

"Sally, this is a grave responsibility."

"Uh, first let's put on a show through this gate, shall we?"

"Bring it!"

Sally took the lead, approaching the second gate.

"We good with me soloing it?"

"Good luck, Sally!"

"Um...I'll cheer you on."

“I’ll watch like a hawk!”

“Then off I go.”

Sally set the challengers to herself and stepped into the room—another circular arena.

This statue held a greatsword—that looked pretty dull.

“Clearly a power fighter,” Sally said, drawing her daggers. “Oboro, Whet Wisp.”

Once her fox’s flames wreathed her, Sally darted forward, closing the gap. The size discrepancy was just like the first fight, but this time, the statue’s weapon gave it an even bigger reach advantage. It attacked first.

That sword descended at speeds that belied the statue’s heavy stone body, slicing the air. A small puff of dust flew, and Sally twisted just enough to slip past it, countering by slicing the sword itself.

“No damage, huh? Then on I go!”

She slipped past the statue, slashing its side with her daggers. Damage sparks flew, and she was back at range.

Since Sword Dance wasn’t giving her a significant STR buff yet, Sally hadn’t exactly reached her full DPS potential.

But her base attack stat was hardly insubstantial, so the tiny fraction of its HP she’d claimed really proved just how hard Velvet hit.

“Phoo! Hah!”

Sally spun around and skimmed the ground, ducking under a sweeping horizontal swing. This in no way slowed her down, and she slashed a leg in passing, getting behind it.

She did this over and over. Each time the statue tried to attack, it wound up spraying damage sparks. Attacks left it exposed, and aggression led directly to lost HP.

Perfect counters. Sally used no skills, just pure technique—and tore the statue down. Even without using any obviously powerful skills, the fight was a sight to

behold.

“My first time seeing this with my own two eyes, but damn.”

“Yes...I don’t think she’s got any debuffs on that statue. Um...Sally’s really just...just dodging.”

“Eh-heh-heh. Cool, right?”

“That’s cool as hell!”

Maple looked as proud as if she was fighting herself, but Velvet never took her eyes off Sally. She could tell Sally wasn’t using a skill to enhance her evasion. And she was right—this was all basic attacks and physical dexterity. Sally was holding back.

“Yup! I can’t wait!”

Looking forward to their duel, Velvet watched Sally effortlessly dodge another swing and slash the statue once more.

The fight wrapped up without Sally ever taking a hit. The only skill she’d used was Whet Wisp.

“Nice work, Sally!”

“Mm, thanks.”

“Damn impressive! I can’t wait to duel you!”

“Good to hear.”

“Definitely wanna watch you fight more, too. Clearly this statue wasn’t tough enough.”

The statue attacks had enough force behind them that a player with low defense would easily be blown aside, but between the chained stuns and ultimate dodging, neither of them had given the statues an inch.

“I hear the boss is tougher?”

“Yeah, I ain’t soloing it! So let’s knock these suckers out and give it a run!”

“Looking forward to it.”

Velvet kept babbling excitedly, and Sally kept her company. They headed to

the next gate, with Maple and Hinata trailing behind.

“They seem to have hit it off. Totally in sync.”

“They...have a lot in common.”

“Maybe so!”

It hadn't taken them long to find a rhythm, likely because they were similar types.

“How many checkpoints are there?”

“Um...one more. And the boss, so two more fights.”

“Thanks! Then since you've both taken a fight, we should handle the last one.”

“Er, I'm not...good at fighting solo. Maple, if you can go alone...or with me?”

Hinata's build was extremely specialized in debuffs. She could weaken a foe like no tomorrow but still not finish them off herself.

“Then let's go together! And all of us can take on the boss!”

“O-okay! I'll do my part!”

“Great! Sally, the two of us are having a team-up!”

“I heard! Gonna be rough!”

“Are they strong?”

“Uh, no. I meant, rough for the statues that have to face you two.”

“Yup! Hinata's super good!”

“So is Maple.”

“Ah-ha-ha, I saw that last time.”

This duo's strengths and weaknesses were much more obvious than Velvet or Sally's. But given how these statues fought, the outcome was equally obvious.

As they neared the peak, they found the last checkpoint, and Maple and Hinata stepped forward.

“Let's do this!”

“R-ready!”

Maple braced her Great Shield, and Hinata hid behind her. It looked just like the other chambers—but this time, there were two statues.

One held a giant bow, and the other a massive hammer.

“Whoa, there’s two of them?!”

“Er, um...I’ll stop them moving!”

“Sounds good! I’ll use...Martyr’s Devotion!”

Maple’s first move was to keep Hinata safe. Then she summoned Syrup, and checked what Hinata was up to.

“Cocytus!”

Frigid air poured out of her, spreading across the arena, and freezing both statues. It was far stronger than Maple’s Zone Freeze, and the statues were now ice, not rock. Before they thawed, the two girls got busy.

“Syrup, Giganticize, White Garden, Red Garden, Sinking Ground.”

Maple and Hinata climbed on Syrup’s back and turned the ground below into their domain.

“Celestial Chain, Disseminate Disaster, Brittle Ice Sculpture, Gravity’s Groan.”

The same set of skills she’d used with Velvet before, applying more cold and gravity to the statues, keeping them in place.

“Needs more...Rusted Armor, Death’s Footsteps.”

Black mist poured out of Hinata’s doll, rolling out across the ground and coating the immobilized statues—dropping the defense. This was a very long bind. Once they stopped moving, she could cast skill after skill, never letting them attack.

“Maple, um...try attacking.”

“Okay! Full Deploy! Commence Assault!”

Sunk into the ground, frozen, under gravity’s pressure—the statues had no way of stopping Maple’s gunfire.

“Wow! Insane damage!”

Her volley did way more damage than Maple had expected, melting the statues’ HP. Beneath the pounding battery, she could hear Hinata whispering more skills. As proof of that, each time the statues shifted slightly, they instantly locked up again—and their defense got even lower.

Maple’s attack power hadn’t changed, but lowering their defense this far meant each bullet hit much harder—ordinarily, the skill achieved quality through quantity.

“Maple told me the gist...but this is worse.”

“She gets going, anything’s doomed.”

As Velvet and Sally watched, Hinata’s ice and gravity and Maple’s status ailments and terrain alteration kept the statues sitting ducks, making for the single most lopsided fight yet.

With the last checkpoint clear, they didn’t stop to rest—just kept moving.

“Well? Ain’t Hinata something else?”

“Yeah! She was amazing!”

“Er, um...I’m not that...”

“Hinata’s actually way stronger than me!”

“You’re plenty good, Velvet. But I haven’t come across a build like Hinata’s before.”

Enemies had to be prepared before even entering Hinata’s range to stand a chance. Her skills were harder to block than Velvet’s lightning, and once an opponent was under their influence, she could stack them quickly, landing each new skill before anyone could respond—very dangerous.

“When I’m with her, we’re unstoppable!”

Velvet sounded confident, but Hinata was shrinking up, clearly unused to all this praise. Still, the fight itself had proven no one was exaggerating.

“Well, Sally and I are just as unstoppable!”

“Sweet!”

“Well, now I’ve gotta prove she’s right.”

“Then let’s take this boss down and see what Maple’s partner can do!”

“I’m...looking forward to it.”

Especially since each had shown their moves on the way here. Anticipation made them quick on their feet, and they ran up the rest of the slope.

“Uh, so it’s our first time fighting this boss with four. It might be tougher than we’re expecting.”

“If the four of us go all out, I’m sure we can handle it. Any boss we can’t is off the charts.”

Each member of this party had their strengths, and those were head and shoulders above most players. No ordinary boss could stand against them.

“Hinata! Whatever we get, we’re counting on you!”

“I’ll keep you safe!”

“R-right... Very encouraging.”

“The damage I do is slow but steady, so this fight might be mostly Maple and Velvet.”

Neither Sally nor Velvet had heard what this boss served up against four-player parties, so it was best to stay flexible until the fight started. Once they saw how it fought, Hinata and Maple could buy them time to plan.

Once again, there were no obstructions on the way, and they were soon outside the boss room. Without hesitation, they opened the door and went on in.

The mountaintop was craterlike, with rock walls all around—like a giant colosseum. At the center was a statue like the ones they’d fought, only twice as large, wearing armor, and holding a stone spear and shield.

“The spear’s new! Hinata, go all out! Thunder God Advent!”

“Okay...”

“Same here! Predators!”

“What’s it gonna do?”

Everyone braced for combat, staying in range of Martyr’s Devotion, creeping closer to it, watching close for its first attack.

“Here it comes!”

It sprang to life as they neared it, pointing the spear at the sky above. They watched carefully—and it bent its knees, leaping high.

“Whoa! It took off!”

“And it’s coming back down!”

Even at this range, they could tell that spear was *glowing*. It was clearly busting out a big move to try and shatter their formation first thing.

“But that’s...”

“...The way we like it!”

“Um, Melting Wings.”

Hinata’s skill robbed the statue of its airborne momentum, forcing it out of the sky.

“Zone Freeze, Celestial Chain, Disseminating Disaster.”

As the statue landed, Hinata kept it on the ground by freezing it, then set about lowering its defense. Maple aimed her guns, and Sally and Velvet wreathed themselves in fire and lightning, respectively.

“Electromagnetic Leap!”

“Waterway!”

Sally swam up through the water she generated, while Velvet vaulted forward, lightning in her wake. Each rapidly closing the gap and racking up damage.

“Eye of the Storm! Lightning Rain! Thunderbolt Alley!”

Velvet had reached the statue’s feet, and an immense array of bolts began crackling around her, one after the other scorching the statue’s surface, taking chunks out of its HP.

“Quintuple Slash!”

The moment the damage dealt made the boss target Velvet, Sally shifted to a skill attack that dealt much more damage than her ordinary slashes. Sword Dance’s buff wasn’t maxed out yet, but the damage was more than satisfactory.

“Commence Assault! Saturating Chaos!”

She couldn’t risk using Hydra here, so Maple went with ranged skills too powerful to really classify as supporting fire. The statue couldn’t quite block all that with its giant stone shield, and damage sparks spurted out all over it.

But since Zone Freeze was only locking down its feet, even as they pushed it off-balance, it thrust its spear at Velvet—who’d done the most damage.

“Parry! Mighty Blow! Chained Strike!”

She threw up a fist, knocking the spear away. It never reached her, the skill ensuring the success of her defensive move. That bought her time to land a big right hook, backed by a burst of lightning that generated a brilliant cloud of damage sparks—combined with the ongoing strikes from above. Sally was still slashing away on the statue’s far side, and between the two of them, they kept the boss’s aggro pulled away from Maple and her gunfire.

The boss had taken far too much damage in the blink of an eye, but at last it escaped Hinata’s binds, and attempted to flee the rain of lightning.

“I’ve got it! One more!”

Maple used her rocket flight to close in, bounced once, rolled to her feet, and activated a skill. One she and Hinata had in common.

“Zone Freeze!”

Ice shot across the ground, snagging the boss’s feet as it tried to back away.

“Pile on!”

“Slash away!”

The boss had blown its one chance, and its fate proved no different from that of the other final checkpoint statues.



Defense Build and Rivals

“Aw, is that it?”

“Easier than I thought. Nice work, Maple.”

“Mm, you too.”

“Um...now what?”

With the boss down, Velvet glanced at Sally. Sally hadn't changed her mind, so she nodded once, and Velvet sent the duel invite.

“Good luck, Sally!”

“I don't plan to lose. No matter what.”

“Well put!”

“Velvet...I'm cheering for you.”

“This is gonna be way more fun than that boss fight!”

Sally accepted Velvet's invite, and they were teleported away.

In the duel space, they kept their distance from each other, waiting for the fight to begin.

“Whew. Ready when you are.”

“HP hits zero, it's all over! I'm going all out!”

“Naturally. Can't hold back when you've gotta win.”

“Here goes!”

The countdown began. Velvet raised her fists, and Sally her daggers, waiting for the signal. When it blared, lightning coursed around Velvet.

“Thunder God Advent!”

“I've seen you use that. Here I come.”

Electricity crackled all over her, but the statue fights had proven that skill

itself did not do damage. Sally wasn't being optimistic; she'd concluded that the skill merely enabled Velvet to use her other lightning skills. In other words, the lightning crackling around her did nothing if Sally could avoid taking a hit.

"Eye of the Storm!"

This cry sent lightning crackling across the ground in all directions, centered on Velvet.

"Ice Pillar! Right Hand: Web!"

"Awesome!"

Sally bailed skyward with her webs and, once the lightning burst passed by, took action.

"Oboro: Smog!"

Black smoke filled the air around Sally, hiding her from view—and an instant later, *five* Sallys shot out of it, all dashing toward Velvet.

"Stun Spark!"

The effect of this skill was rather like Maple's Paralyze Shout, and it knocked all the Sallys to the ground.

"Vibrofist!"

Velvet punched the ground, and a shockwave shot out from the point of impact, hitting the five downed Sallys in turn, vaporizing them all.

"Pinpoint Attack!"

"Ha, I thought that was too easy!"



The stab to the back of her neck dropped Velvet's HP hard. Sally was already bounding back before lightning could strike her. Based on the damage, Velvet's defense was pretty low; Sally's blow had taken away almost half her health.

"But you can't fool me. One of those vanished *different*."

"Good eyes."

"But I didn't hit *you*."

"I know my weaknesses. Can't let myself get stunned."

"Sharp as a tack!"

Some attacks couldn't be dodged once they started up, and those could only be *predicted*. Especially AOE stun or paralysis moves—Sally always had that threat in mind.

Her best option was to bait her foe into using these fatal skills. She'd made it look like Velvet hit all five, but one had been Mirage. The real Sally stood back and used Leap and Superspeed to stab her in the back once she'd wasted the skill.

"I had a hunch, but I don't see myself winning on the gambit front."

"So...?"

"I'll have to bring the storm!"

"Ah-ha...!"

"Thunderbolt Alley! Lightning Rain!"

Abandoning thought, she simply used her widest range skills. If any of those bolts hit, the duel was done, so she needed to merely produce so much lightning that Sally couldn't get close. A pure display of power, no need for subtleties—drag the fight onto *her* turf.

Those two skills maintained a ceaseless barrage of bolts around Velvet, the area affected changing as she moved. Velvet herself was a thunderstorm.

"How you like that? Electromagnetic Leap!"

Velvet bounded forward, and the surge of lightning came with her.

“Oboro, Fleeting Shadow!”

Her fox’s skill made Sally vanish, and before Velvet found her again, she darted away, out of the storm’s range. Visible once more, she backed off, waiting to see what came next.

“Polar Flash!”

Trying to cut off Sally’s escape, the charge around Velvet intensified, and the skill activation generated a glowing circle centered on Sally, from which emerged a mighty pillar of lightning with a crack of thunder. It would definitely have vaporized her if it had hit—and indeed, there was no trace left behind.

“Again?!”

Velvet’s eyes darted around, locating Sally outside the falling lightning.

“Are illusions *that* easy to control?”

“I just have several skills that take advantage of them. It’s time I came to you.”

“Seriously?!”

“Yup, that lightning ain’t forming a column anymore.”

Sally dropped low, racing headlong into the storm. Velvet figured she wouldn’t do this without a plan and raised her fists, on guard against Mirage.

“Hoo...!”

“.....!”

Velvet could not believe her eyes. Sally dodged *all* the bolts on reflex and instinct alone. She made a beeline through a barrage so dense it should not have been possible, yet bolt after bolt failed to hit her.

Might against might. A power move designed to thwart an unthwartable skill.

“That’s insane!”

“If I can’t do this much, how can I stand beside *her*?”

“Purple Bolt!”

Velvet thrust her palm forward, firing a streak of violet lightning right as Sally

narrowly dodged a strike from above. Lightning is notoriously fast, and this bolt was no exception; Sally's escape routes were all blocked by other strikes.

"Okay...!"

No way forward, back, or sideways—Sally took to the air, trying to vault *over* the purple bolt. She could make platforms in midair, so moving vertically was always an option.

"Superspeed! Leap! Chained Strike!"

Velvet had been waiting for that. She leaped into action, bounding toward Sally. Sally could move in the air but wasn't nearly as nimble as she was on the ground. Velvet slammed a crackling fist into her, and Sally's body was racked by the current.

"You're shitting me?!"

A flawlessly timed finishing blow—led to her third miss. Sally dissolved into thin air...and Velvet felt someone behind her.

"Discharge!"

"Superspeed! Leap!"

A whole bunch of electricity shot out from Velvet's body, but behind her, Sally kicked off a platform, using a skill to dodge back out of reach.

"A skill to nullify an attack, right? You nulled the Purple Bolt and baited me with an illusion."

"That would be telling. But now you've used all the dangerous skills you've shown off earlier."

Given how Velvet's HP had dropped, if Sally had landed a hit there, it would have been game, set, and match. For that reason, Velvet had resorted to a skill she knew could make Sally back off. She had been forced to use Discharge and electrify the air all around them.

"Rad! I'm have a blast!"

"Ha-ha, I'm hanging on by a thread. But...it's a lot quieter now."

Discharge had stilled the raging storm, stopping the constant crackle of

current around Velvet. That skill also took her out of electrified mode, preventing the use of those high-damage skills—but she'd had no other way of staying alive.

“You’re awesome! You really do dodge everything. You gotta gimme tips later!”

Velvet put her dukes up again. She still looked totally confident, like she wasn't in trouble at all.

“You still got an ace up your sleeve?”

“Damn right!”

“Ha-ha, you really don't hide things.”

Sally didn't really have a skill that could instantly change the tide. Her only option was to stay the course and steadily work her way toward victory.

There were any number of attacks that could only be dealt with by accurately predicting them and making them miss. Sally would have to guess what type of move Velvet's ace was and not let herself be lured into range. Sally was always walking hand in hand with death. Any advantage she might seem to have would vanish if she took a single hit.

Sally figured that even without her electricity, Velvet *did* have something left in reserve. She wasn't the type to bluff here.

Keeping her distance, Sally watched for her chance, hoping to finish this before Velvet could get Thunder God Advent up again.

“Not making any careless moves? Then...Oboro, Smog.”

Since this move just obscured a foe's vision, the cooldown was pretty quick, and Sally moved to shake up Velvet again.

Only one Sally came out of the smog, running right at Velvet.

Three previous Mirage traps delayed her reaction to this charge. That moment of hesitation provided an opening to use Mirage for real and turn the tables.

And even if she did just charge straight in, she had the option of just dodging.

Sally wasn't about to walk into an unknown attack.

She was on the offensive but always ready to retreat.

"....."

Only a few steps out now, yet Velvet still hadn't moved. On guard against that, Sally pressed on—and Velvet dropped her stance.

"Electrobeast!"

The opposite of Polar Flash, this produced a surge from within Velvet herself that coalesced in a bright white column that lit up the area.

Sally used Mirage, combining it with the effects Oceanic and Ancient Ocean to drop Velvet's AGI and help her back away in time. She had Shed Skin on hand to negate damage once on her last rush; with Spirited Away still on cooldown, that would prove vital. For that reason, she didn't want to waste it yet.

Velvet's move was unexpected, but Sally kept her cool, backing off and observing. When the column of light died down, she found herself facing a giant white tiger, crackling with electricity.

"Hng, I didn't manage a hit!"

"I knew you were up to *something*. But...didn't know anyone but Maple had one of those."

"Rad, ain't it? I'm coming to you!"

This thing was as big as Maple's Atrocity form. It was overwhelming on its own, but it also brought the lightning back. That barrage might resume at any second—but Sally was grinning.

"Mm, worth a shot. I've got a good skill for this."

".....?"

"I'll be the one attacking."

Where anyone else would back off, Sally sped up, running right at beast-form Velvet. And that surprise delayed Velvet's opening attack.

"Flash Spout!"

“Eeaugh?!”

Just as she did step forward, the leg she’d used to brace herself was forced upward by a waterspout. The knockback effect on this move didn’t care how heavy or big you were. Velvet lost her balance, and before she could use a skill again, Sally was underneath her.

“Oboro, Whet Wisp! Double Slash! Waterway! Subzero Domain!”

Doing damage with skills that would finish before she recovered, she checked to see how much HP Velvet had gained and moved to her next trick. She placed water all around Velvet, then froze it. For a moment that bound Velvet, buying her time.

“Grr...”

“Ice Pillar! You aren’t using skills, so this form limits you?”

The five ice columns Sally put out were ordinarily just basic walls. But at Velvet’s size, these neatly caged her in—she was too big to slip between them.

“Those don’t break. You can’t get out in that form. That’s how it works.”

“I sure didn’t expect to get shut down this hard! My loss.”

“Oh? Well, I’ll accept that.”

Once she was trapped like this, Sally could just fling spells at her. Like Velvet said, she was out of options, and the match was settled.



The duel was over, and Sally and Velvet were comparing notes, still hanging out in the duel room. Velvet had a ton of questions about how Sally had pulled off certain moves; she seemed very interested in the process that led to this result.

“Hmm, I just don’t get it. However sharp you are, can you really dodge like that? And it’s crazy to think that’s the first time you’ve ever seen Electrobeast!”

“.....I’ll let you in on the secret behind this victory.”

“Oh? What, what, tell me more!”

“Normally, it wouldn’t be nearly this one-sided. You’re plenty strong, and my

skills aren't that great a match for yours."

"Yup, I felt that, too. Like it was much easier for me to attack you than you me."

But the results said otherwise. In which case, what Sally said next was key.

"Velvet...you're like her."

"I am?"

"Mm-hmm. Crazy AOE's, status ailments you can't afford to take, crazy strong up close, ranged options galore. And you can transform."

That last one Sally had mentioned aloud during their fight, so Velvet figured it out.

"Your threat profile is a lot like Maple's."

"Ohhh...you've fought alongside her so much you know exactly how dangerous she can be?"

"Naturally, that's a factor, but not quite... Don't tell Maple."

".....? Cross my heart," Velvet said.

Sally let it hang a beat.

"I wanna fight Maple one day. I'd love to be the one to beat her, but also—I'm gonna lose to anyone, I'd like it to be her. So I've likely spent more time than anyone figuring out how to give her a run for her money."

She hadn't just spent a great deal of time watching Maple fight—she'd run a ton of simulations on how to handle her moves. And since Velvet moved a lot like her, those assessments had come in handy.

"Yeah! That would do it. You're her partner *and* her rival."

"Well, it's one-sided. Maple doesn't go for that stuff, so I don't know if we'll ever end up fighting. But I'm not about to lose a fight until that happens, and I'm gonna keep Maple safe."

".....And the pressure not to lose polishes your every move."

"Exactly. But next time, it probably won't go so smoothly."

“I still have stuff I haven’t tried, too. You just got the best of me! And I’m strongest when I’m fighting *with* Hinata.”

Maybe someday they’d do a pair fight, Velvet and Hinata versus Maple and Sally.

“I’ll win that. I can’t afford to lose.”

“Same here! Glad I got to pick your brain.”

“.....Maybe I said too much.”

She’d sensed it, but this girl definitely felt a bit like Maple. Sally hadn’t been this chatty with anyone else.

“We’d better get back. Hinata’ll be getting antsy.”

“Gotcha.”

She promised to give Velvet another shot someday—like she did Frederica. Now she had two duel partners.

“I hope...you get your wish.”

“Yeah...don’t know if I’ll get another chance.”

When they returned from their duel, they were so obviously chummy that the other girls looked downright baffled.

Velvet was beaming about the duel all the way down the mountain.

“Ah, that was good...thanks, Sally.”

“It’s just a duel! Nothing to thank me for.”

“Well, I’m glad we met! I’m gonna go get stronger for the next fight!”

Looking forward to a pair battle someday, they began to go their separate ways.

“Oh, right. Word to the wise...”

“Hm? Me?”

Velvet pulled Sally aside just before they left and dropped some intel to thank her for the fun fight.

“On your map...around here? Some strong players have been grinding levels.”

“Oh? I should check it out. There’re definitely more threats showing up.”

“I hear what you said, but still, I wanna be the first to take you down. That’s what rivals do!”

That sounded just like another player she knew, but Sally thanked her for the tip.

“Don’t lose till I beat you!”

“Like I said, if I do go down—it won’t be you, Velvet.”

“That just pumps me up even more!”

Either way, that info proved to be the last order of business.

They said good-bye, and Maple and Sally headed back to town. They rode together on Sally’s horse, the wind on their faces.

“Was Velvet good?”

“She was. Sounds like she’s not the only player making a name for themselves. The lead she gave me might reveal more. Wanna check it out?”

“Mm-hmm, since she told us! Maybe we’ll make more friends!”

“Then let’s do that next time. Sounds like they’re usually around on weekends. But they might just wind up being new rivals, like Velvet.”

Quite a few people were establishing rivalries with Maple. It was just another way to form connections.

“I’ll have to get stronger! I’m the guild master, after all.”

“Good. I’ll help.”

“Yeah! I know I can count on you, Sally.”

“Heh-heh, glad to hear it.”

Chatting about this and that, before they knew it, they were back in town.

No events, eighth stratum a ways off...

Time to take it easy.

624 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Seventh layer's plenty big. Not like we've seen every nook and cranny.

625 Name: Anonymous Archer

That's true for every floor, but the seventh especially.

626 Name: Anonymous Mage

But once you've found a pet monster, it feels like you're done.

627 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Well, you've still gotta train the thing.

628 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

True. That last event proved how vital they are.

629 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

I'm just grinding levels like crazy.

630 Name: Anonymous Archer

Oh, you're back.

631 Name: Anonymous Mage Yo, what's going on?

632 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

Uh, not a lot. Maple's barely been on the seventh layer.

633 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

What, did she find a new dungeon?

634 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

Sightseeing with Sally.

635 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

The good life.

636 Name: Anonymous Archer

So her.

637 Name: Anonymous Mage

Never been one to live the grind or hunt for dungeons.

Been like that since event one.

638 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

Doodling in the dirt.

639 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

Always feels like I gotta do this, gotta do that. Maybe I should just kick back a bit.

No better time for it than now, that's for sure.

640 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

This game does have a lot of nice views.

641 Name: Anonymous Archer I've barely been to those. Might be a bit of a waste, really.

642 Name: Anonymous Mage

Everyone has fun their own way.

What did Maple go see?

643 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

She mentioned the flying castle. Above the clouds.

644 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

That ain't some tourist trap! It's got that hella strong dragon!

645 Name: Anonymous Archer

It was pretty, but one false move, and you'd be dead.

646 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

Maple can just go anywhere for a view. Kinda envy that.

Feels like brushing off surprise attacks is the biggest upside.

647 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

Bet she's out sightseeing again today.

648 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

And somewhere that would be a death trap for any ordinary player...

649 Name: Anonymous Archer

The times being what they are, defense is a vital tourist skill.

650 Name: Anonymous Mage

Well, we can all hit up regular tourist spots. Maybe I should try a few...



Defense Build and a Twist

They planned to follow up on Velvet's tip that weekend, but today, Maple was hanging out in the seventh stratum town. She hadn't been here much lately.

It being the newest map, most players were here, and the place was bustling. She was sitting in the shade on a bench, enjoying a popsicle.

"She said there was a starry sky spot on every stratum. I should see if I can find one on this floor!"

So far, Sally had found nearly all the great views. They'd stumbled across a few while Maple was leading the way, but she hadn't really found anywhere she could bring Sally to later.

"I wanna return the favor!"

A good view for a good view.

Since Sally had given her the starry tip, Maple decided she wanted to locate at least one and escort Sally there.

"Okay, gonna give it my best shot!"

Maple finished her popsicle and jumped to her feet.

"Gotta gather info!"

Sally always started with that, so Maple followed suit. She already knew nobody had found a starry view on this level yet.

"It's probably a nighttime-only thing!"

But Sally had proven the starry theme didn't necessarily have to be above ground. It could well be somewhere out of sight of any actual stars.

"How'd she know there was one on every floor, anyway?"

If she had to guess, that information must be out there somewhere. Player gossip...or something more concrete?

“Okay, let’s hit the library.”

Sally didn’t say things without solid evidence. So Maple figured she could find a hint from NPCs or the resources the town made available. No time like the present; she plodded off toward the seventh stratum library.

The library contained a prodigious quantity of books, and not all of them contained anything significant. There were several off-limits areas, and sections where only the spines were modeled to make things look more library-like. That meant the number you could actually read was not *that* large.

But it was still a lot.

She doubted Sally had gone through every one of them personally, so she must have had an idea what she was looking for...or the hint was just that obvious. Maple wandered around with that in mind and soon found a likely looking section.

“Anything about stars or lights should be...oh, this looks good!”

She plucked a book from the shelf—a collection of stories about stars.

“This might be the one! Um, a starry sky above a lake...the darkness of evolution...? Yeah, that sounds like the seventh layer!”

The mention of evolution meant there was a chance this could be a quest that would make their pets stronger.

“Okay!” Maple nodded. “Gonna go check it out!”

Like she had when spelunking with Sally, Maple prepared appropriate gear ahead of time. Going to a lake meant more than just lights and ropes—she needed her snorkel so she could go underwater without the Swimming and Diving skills.



Night stars twinkled above, so it was about the time the monsters in the fields changed up. Maple was flying on Syrup’s back.

“It’s been a while! Most of my time on this layer, I’ve been on Sally’s horse.”

Every now and then, a bird monster attacked, but she let them be. Martyr’s Devotion kept Syrup safe, and they soon gave up.

Unless there were monsters designed to stop players skirting the intended route, she could relax and enjoy the journey.

“Um...so if it’s a lake...”

From what she’d looked up, there were three known lakes on the seventh stratum. There was no clear indication which was the one she was looking for.

So she just had to go to each.

Fortunately, Maple was thoroughly enjoying the night flight itself. She need merely aim Syrup in the right direction and use a minimal amount of Psychokinesis.

That gave her the leeway to lie back on the turtle’s shell and gaze at the stars above. The sky was specifically designed for aesthetic beauty and had far more stars than were generally visible in the real world—no telescopes needed to enjoy these sights.

“Okay...I’ll just hit them all!”

Maple flew off across the night, ready to scope out all three lakes.

Ultimately, though, all three spots came up empty.

All the lakes were very pretty, but given how prominently positioned they were, their secrets had probably been long since discovered by other players.

“Hngg...finding stuff is *hard*. Where else could it be?”

If the book meant anything, there must be something else worth calling a lake.

“.....Oh!”

An idea struck her, and Maple got back on Syrup, headed for the far edge of the map...

...where the ocean lay.

It wasn’t great for grinding, so there weren’t many other players here—just the quiet sound of the surf. Maple had Syrup fly out across the water to an island with a single palm tree—there, she put Syrup back in the ring.

“Now I just have to wait!”

She took some snacks out of her inventory, leaned back against the palm tree, and waited for the time to come.

“Hmm-hm-hmm...oh!”

As she relaxed, an inky black tentacle rose from the dark waves and grabbed Maple.

“Thanks!”

Yes, Maple wanted this tentacle to take her to the pool of water below. She wasn't really sure if it counted as an underground lake, but figured it was worth a shot. There was a splash, and she was dragged below the murky surface.

When she opened her eyes, she was in a narrow space surrounded by wet rocks.

“Whew! I made it!”

Maple stretched, and started in. She'd figured out how to get through this last time, so she let herself be grabbed by tentacle after tentacle, making rapid progress.

These tentacles were supposed to be harmful and kept slamming her against walls or trying to squeeze her, but she paid that no mind, proceeding damage-free.

She'd earned a skill here, but by a means ordinary players wouldn't use; anyone else would have left with nothing to show for it. Since this dungeon's entrance was pretty specific, she'd thought there might be something else hidden here.

“Wonder what the view's like?”

Maple was already thinking about the stars when another tentacle grabbed her.

But Maple had not yet realized...

...that a place filled with tentacle torments was likely not meant for tourists.

Only Maple could just ignore that threat. A regular player would not have her defense and would find this place highly dangerous.

Thus, Maple made it all the way to the boss without sustaining injury.

“.....?”

Things looked different from before—the night version of the boss room seemed to have a lot more water and murk in it. But Maple knew how to fight it now, so she wasn’t daunted—she just prepped her weapons.

“First, gotta climb inside!”

Maple knew full well she could easily defeat this boss from the inside. That wasn’t why she’d brought a snorkel with her, but she put it on anyway, enhancing her underwater abilities, and dove right on into the inky pool.

“Here goes!”

There was a splash, and below the surface, a tentacle reached for Maple, dragging her under. That was exactly what she wanted!

She wasn’t about to lose to a monster she’d beaten before. She filled the octopus’s insides with poison, monsters, bullets, and vegetation, and blew it all to hell. Maple used her weapons to rocket back up to the surface, and then landed on the shore.

“I beat it...but nothing happened. Hmm.”

This place was well-hidden, so Maple had assumed there’d be something else here, but beating the boss sure didn’t trigger anything she could see.

“I’d better take a good look underwater.”

The pool was so murky she could barely see or even tell how deep it was.

Last time she’d been satisfied with her new skill and the octopus arms, so she’d just left, but this time she put a light on her head in the hopes it would improve visibility and went back into the water, detonating her weapons to go all the way down. She looked around for any clues and found a hole at the center—which seemed to go even deeper.

Maple examined the hole’s size and decided her weapons wouldn’t fit. She surfaced for the time being.

“I didn’t even realize that was there! It’s right below me...”

The plan was to buy herself more time by rocketing to the bottom once more, then scope out the hole. If her breath didn't hold out, she'd have to give up for today.

"I know Sally struggled early on before she leveled Swimming...so let's hope it's not too deep!"

She blasted herself as far as she could, then dove into the hole. Walls on all sides, so dark she might as well have had her eyes closed. She could feel the bubbles streaming past her face.

Not long after, the walls around her disappeared, and she realized she could breathe again. She felt herself slowly sinking through the darkness...but in time that stopped, and she could tell she'd reached the bottom.

Maple looked up once at the surface far above. Either the water was more transparent here, or her eyes had grown used to it—the hole she'd come through looked bright, like a full moon. But perhaps it only gave that impression because she was looking for a starry sky.

"Hmm, this isn't exactly a pretty view. Shame! I wonder if there's anything else here..."

It seemed like a waste to just go home, so she looked around, paying much more attention than she usually did.

"Oh? I wonder what that is!"

Maple had spotted a familiar object in the darkness. A treasure chest—she must have missed it last time.

"Wow! Okay, they don't all just pop up right in front of you. I'll have to look carefully next time."

Pleased she'd decided to come back, she popped the lid. But instead of the standard light of blessing, what emerged was clearly dark—even in these dim conditions. The darkness wrapped around Maple, seeping into her body.

Skill: Twisted Resurrection acquired.

".....???"

Apparently this evolution wasn't for Syrup. She'd missed this chest once—and

perhaps for her rivals' sake, she should never have found it.

Maple escaped the depths and went back to the nighttime beach, examining her unexpected new skill.

Twisted Resurrection

Grants immunity to all status effects for one minute at the cost of half AGI.

The user's next selected skill will be converted to a specific alternate skill. This effect lasts five minutes and costs 500 HP.

"500 HP...I can only use that in Atrocity form, or in my white gear."

Reading the conditions for using the skill, she was forced to change her gear and top up her HP.

"Okay! Twisted Resurrection!"

Black mist sprayed out of Maple, mingled with red damage sparks. She opened her menu, confirming how much health she'd lost. She checked the skill list and found several skill names flashing.

"Atrocity, Heaven's Throne, and Martyr's Devotion?"

Those were the only three skills Twisted Resurrection could alter.

"Then let's try the one I use most! Martyr's Devotion."

She checked the post-twist skill name, and hesitantly spoke it aloud.

"Um...Unrequited Ardor!" she cried.

The usual white glow was replaced with a circle of black light. Black wings grew from her back—even her halo was eerily dark.

"Ohh! Wow! This looks way better with my black armor."

Probably not what would delight most people, but that was her first thought—she switched armor sets, delighted. But soon remembered there was a time limit, and checked what the skill actually did.



“Hmm...so damage that should hit the user goes to allied players and monsters in the affected area. That really is the twisted version!”

This effect was the exact opposite of Martyr’s Devotion and would make everyone else take damage for Maple. Since Maple nerfed most damage, that made Martyr’s Devotion into a really powerful skill—but made Unrequited Ardor virtually useless for her.

This was clearly a skill to increase survivability for a player with low defense and high attack. It guaranteed they’d stay alive until every other party member died, ensuring they could dish out as much damage as possible.

“Oh, but it might let Predators protect me!”

It meant she had to summon her monsters and then change up her gear, but if she used it right, she could fight in completely new ways.

“Cool! I’ll have to think about how to use it.”

Pleased with her new find, she went off in high spirits, hoping this time she’d find a good sightseeing location. She spent much longer searching each place she visited, not wanting to miss anything—she’d *just* gained a new skill that way.

“I can use Twisted Resurrection again after the five minutes is up, so I’d better try out the other skills, too!”

Testing her new skill and exploring, Maple wandered the beach.

802 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

Breaking News: Maple Has Fallen. Like angels do.

803 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

?????

804 Name: Anonymous Mage How’s that new?

805 Name: Anonymous Archer

I heard she wasn't up to much?

806 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

Don't look at me.

807 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

Only one woman I know walks around flanked by monsters that are all mouth.

808 Name: Anonymous Mage

Fair.

809 Name: Anonymous Archer

Gotta be her.

810 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

And this Maple had jet black wings.

And a black glow.

811 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

She changed the effect color?

812 Name: Anonymous Archer

I've heard of pets that can do that, but not players.

813 Name: Anonymous Mage

Was Maple a pet monster all along?!

814 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder Well, she is a monster.

815 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

Parts of her.

816 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

You can't deny it entirely.

817 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

That's all I got. Waiting for someone to fall victim to it.

818 Name: Anonymous Mage

It's just a matter of time...



Defense Build and the Archer

Unaware of the new rumors floating around the forums, that weekend Maple and Sally met up in the seventh stratum town.

“...Another weird skill?”

“Mm-hmm, sure surprised me. I wonder if I’ve missed anything else?”

“Can’t rule it out entirely. If you beat a boss and got nothing, or the boss seemed weirdly weak, it might be worth hitting up again.”

Sally mentioned the mountain they’d gone to with Velvet as an example. Perhaps they’d just been too strong for it, but it also felt like those monsters weren’t strong enough for a dungeon occupying a whole dang mountain.

“Places like that might still hold secrets. But without more info, we’re clueless.”

“Hngg, exploration is surprisingly complex. Oh, I’ll have to show off my new skill later. It’s pretty tricky to use right, but maybe you’ll have some good ideas.”

“I’ll certainly try. Oh—you still haven’t used your medals from that last event, right? Maybe something there will work with it.”

“Yeah! We’ve got rivals now, so I hope I find something good.”

“I already picked mine. I’ll show it to you sometime.”

“Ooh, can’t wait.”

Sally had won the duel, but the real contest would be in a PvP event. If they wanted a definitive victory, they’d need to figure out an anti-Hinata strategy.

“The people we’re going to scope out will probably be strong, too. Let’s hope we can see a few of their skills.”

“Okay! Sally, let’s hit the road!”

“I’ll get the horse ready.”

They figured it was time to stop talking and get riding. On horseback, they headed toward the grinding spot these strong players were known to use.

“Velvet said we’d know ’em if we saw ’em, so I’m assuming they’ve got distinctive gear.”

“Mm-hmm.”

They found themselves on a prairie where a gentle breeze was blowing. This was home to flying monsters—both birds and tiny dragons, none especially rare—and they were flitting about the skies above.

“Martyr’s Devotion!”

“Oh, thanks.”

This area had a lot of monsters that were pretty quick. Sally could easily dodge them all, but they were here to find these other players, so best they didn’t get interrupted.

“Now we just look for anyone who stands out?”

“Yup. Velvet didn’t exactly give us any descriptions.”

She must not have wanted to spoil the surprise—all she’d given them was a location. Normally, that would make it nigh impossible to locate any specific player.

But if she was sure they could do it, then there must be something that would draw the eye—the same way Maple had found Velvet.

“They must be obvious at a glance—like you, Maple.”

“Huh?”

Even as they spoke, Maple was being hit by wind spells or dive-bombed by the flying monsters, but all these attacks were bouncing off. They’d both grown used to that, but it was certainly not ordinary.

So they just had to search for someone equally extraordinary.

They didn’t have to walk around the prairie long before someone stood out to them.

A man and a woman, both on the tall side. The man was carrying a massive bow as long as he was tall, and he was dressed like a bard; the woman was wearing a classic maid outfit and carried a mop. Like Sally said—one glance and they were obviously unusual. The girls stopped a ways off, observing.

The man was doing the bulk of the attacking, while the maid focused on support.

The speed and power of his archery were something else. One moment, he'd be taking aim at a dragon flying past, and then the next, the dragon was already exploding in a shower of red sparks. A single hit was enough to drop it to zero HP.

"Wow! Is that how bows work?"

"Uh, you haven't really met any archers. That is *not* how they work."

This archer was scoring clean hits on moving targets—and that alone was nuts. The way Sally survived through expert evasion was proof that projectiles *did* need to be aimed. And with bows, you didn't just need to line up the sights; you also had to predict where the enemy would be once the arrow got there.

"Power, accuracy, speed. Each of those is extremely high level, which makes him real strong. I don't think he's even using any skills."

Bows came with skills that allowed shots that would be impossible in the real world. You could shoot multiple arrows at the same time, alter the flight path with your mind—but since this guy wasn't using any system-enhanced moves, it was even harder to tell what *else* he had up his sleeve.

"Given how Mai and Yui work, he's definitely hitting too hard. There's gotta be a reason for that. I'm betting that maid's buffs are seriously strong."

The twins' builds were all about STR and skills that buffed that, so if he was hitting similar power levels, it couldn't just be natural talent—there had to be skills enhancing his damage.

"I see..."

The bard and maid were strong as a duo. Sally and Maple could see why Velvet had been interested in them. The girls watched the pair shoot down

monster after monster, never once missing a shot.

“Bows are kinda cool...”

“Well, if you can hit like that, it must be pretty fun.”

Maple and Sally watched from a distance until the other two shot down all the monsters in the area. The man lowered his bow, then he and his companion both started walking toward the girls. Didn't seem like they'd picked that direction by chance. They stopped nearby and the man spoke.

“Well, well,” he said. “I thought I had a captive audience, but for it to be *you...*”

“We've snagged some celebrities.”

The man's vibe was soft-spoken and pleasant, while the woman's was forthright and collected.

“You know me?”

“Well, yes.”

“Naturally. In that gear, anyone could recognize you.”

This being the seventh stratum, Maple and Sally were both in their best loadouts. The pair had a point—in the girls' trademark gear, almost every *NWO* player would know who they were.

“Maple and Sally, yes? Scouting the enemy?”

“Uh...Velvet said you were worth checking out.”

That name got a nod from both of them.

“Ah, you've met her. Velvet came by just the other day.”

“She said she'd had a great fight and mentioned that she recommended us to the other party. I suppose that would be you.”

“You were amazing!”

“I certainly aim to please.”

“That's all in a day's work for Will.”

At this point, they realized they'd yet to introduce themselves. The man's full

name was Wilbert, and the maid was Lily.

“I’m Rapid Fire’s guild master, although I could never keep it running without Will’s help.”

“Ah-ha-ha, I know that feeling.”

Maple left most of their strategies and planning to Sally. Her leadership mostly boiled down to finishing touches. Like in the last event—it had been her idea to turn herself into a human firework to help them regroup.

“Would you care to chat a while? Scouting the enemy is not much of an exaggeration, here.”

“It *is* our first time meeting face-to-face. And I’m pretty curious about anyone who’s achieved so much with so few guild members.”

“Well, in that case...”

“Yes! Let’s talk!”

Velvet’s smooth introduction had enabled them to meet the leaders of Rapid Fire—and like Thunder Storm before them, establish cordial relations.

“The monsters we were hunting will respawn soon. If we wish to talk, perhaps we should head to a safe zone...unless...”

“Is this the infamous zone of defense?”

Maple had kept Martyr’s Devotion active the whole time they were watching, keeping Sally safe. Anyone who’d seen Maple fight—during the fourth event’s livestream or in person—had seen these wings, so few, if any, frontline players were unaware of the skill’s existence.

“Um, it only protects party members.”

“I figured. That’s not a concern. Neither Will nor I are feeble enough to get taken out by monsters here.”

“Any place we should go? We haven’t been out this way much, so no clue where the safe points are.”

Lily offered to show the way and set out. Monsters spotted her and came charging in, but Wilbert shot them all down.

“...If Maple fought you, she couldn’t exactly hide behind her shield.”

Wilbert’s aim was far too accurate, and with Maple’s rock-bottom AGI, no amount of attempted footwork would make evasion possible. Worse, any part of her that stuck out from behind the shield would get shot through.

“Ugh...I—I can see that happening...”

“I know the basic bow skills. You can change up the number of arrows shot and curve your shots.”

“Yes, no point hiding that. I’ve naturally learned the core bow skills.”

“...But with you, there’s gotta be something more.”

“Perhaps. Though it looks like you have an idea already.”

“You can’t hit that hard or shoot that fast without *something*.”

“You have a keen eye.”

“Ha-ha, Will’s *good*. I mean...Sally, you’re known for evading. But when the bolt flies so fast it hits you before you spot it, it’s hard to dodge.”

“.....Is it?”

“Oh? Now I wanna see for sure.”

Lily laughed, saying this must be what Velvet meant. Maple paid that no mind at all.

“Lily, your gear is really nice!”

“This? I’ve been using it a while now. Perhaps I’ve finally grown into it.”

Lily twirled her mop.

“She didn’t care for it at first, but with what it *does*...”

“Yeah! Finally found some rare gear, and it’s this. I deserve some sympathy!”

Lily’s vibe definitely didn’t match her costume. She was more the type to *have* servants, or at least be in command. Maple and Sally could see why she was guild master. It was less that it looked weird on her than that it didn’t match her bold attitude.

“It’s all top-class stuff. The outfit and this mop—which is technically a spear.”

“A spear?!”

“Yes, but it’s no more deadly than it looks.”

“.....You’re certainly sharing a lot.”

“Not worth hiding. Besides...”

Lily wheeled around to face Sally. The other guild master grinned with challenge, her entire frame projecting confidence.

“Even if you know our skills, I believe Will and I can still win.”

“As always, an exaggeration.”

“I’d say it’s an accurate assessment.”

“...I merely do my best.”

“Yes, Will. As you should.” She turned to Sally. “There you have it.”



“You must get on well with Velvet.”

“She’s certainly sure of herself; we have plenty in common. And Velvet and Hinata have the goods.”

“The next ranked PvP event will certainly see a shake-up in the standings. The safe zone’s just up there...but perhaps we never needed it.”

Wilbert was shooting all the monsters down even as he spoke, and Maple and Sally had never been in any danger, so it was like they were in a safe zone anywhere.

“Not true, Will. Conversations take off when you’re sitting comfortably.”

“Point taken.”

They reached an area where monsters wouldn’t bother them.

A tall tree to the edge of the prairie—no monsters came too close to it, allowing them to kick back and relax.

“I’ve seen footage of your event performance. Always wanted a chance to get to know you. I’ll have to thank Velvet for the intro.”

But Maple and Sally had just come to take a look at the players Velvet admired—from a distance. They’d only just learned the first thing about their fighting styles and characters. Neither had expected to have a real conversation and hadn’t exactly prepared any questions.

“Hmm, well then may I ask first?”

“Sure!”

“What would you say your best skills are?”

That was such a straight pitch, it shocked them both. Lily let out a little laugh.

“I’m at least half joking. That would hardly be a fair exchange. Instead, let’s pull a trick from Velvet’s playbook, and run a dungeon together.”

That would benefit both sides. Given how strong Velvet and Hinata had been, it was clear The Order of the Holy Sword and Flame Empire were not the only guilds to look out for. So far, guilds that had dominated were those that had found unique series, or skills with powerful synergy early on. As time went on,

more people did the same, and the game was no longer all about the big two.

“I’m sure you’re equally curious. And we want to see how you’ve changed.”

Sally caught the look on Lily’s face, and figured this was her angle. She wanted to see if Maple Tree’s top two (arguably) were still a viable threat or if they had fallen behind the curve.

She figured Lily would also be better than Velvet at figuring out what skills they were hiding; clumsy attempts at subterfuge would likely backfire.

“What do you think, Sally?”

“Why not? If I can see more of Wilbert’s bow, it’ll be easier to plan against.”

Sally had a good grasp of her own skills (naturally) and Maple’s. She didn’t think it would make a big difference if they used skills these two already knew about. Fighting alongside them might reveal a few habits, but as long as they avoided their biggest guns, they could still turn the tables in a real fight.

And like Lily, she was pretty confident they could pull off a win even if they had shown some things. Knowing about a skill you couldn’t neutralize didn’t make much difference.

“Maple, you just fight like you always do.”

“Okay! I’ll do that!”

Maple’s primary skills hadn’t changed much since the fourth event. She had a number of new additions, but her core repertoire was still keeping the party safe with Martyr’s Devotion and using her summon skills to attack from a distance.

She’d earned plenty of attention in previous events, but if she fought normally here, all she’d give them is a better look at those same skills.

“Where should we go? In this area...”

“Over there, Will. Lots of monsters, and tricky ones. Harder than the arena run Velvet showed us, but it has points in common. And we’d like to see you strut your stuff.”

Maple and Sally agreed to this plan, and they headed for a nearby dungeon.



They made it there without incident.

The dungeon's entrance was a magic circle, located in the lushest part of a green forest. Vines ran out from the circle to the trees around, as if the circle drew energy from them.

They'd formed a party to clear it, so now they just had to step onto the circle, and they'd be inside the dungeon.

"It looks dangerous, but it's safe enough for us. Step on in."

"Okay. Sally, here goes!"

"Yes, yes."

Maple stepped on, and the four of them were wrapped in light, guided within. They found themselves in a place where the walls and floors were made of wood.

"Monsters here are weak to fire, but if you use that element, the dungeon itself will stick some debuffs on you."

These included lowered stats, damage reduction, more damage taken—standard stuff, but all at once. Fortunately, neither of them were particularly reliant on fire, so they had plenty of options here.

"I only really need to be careful with Oboro's skills. You'll be fine, Maple."

"Yep! I don't really use fire!"

"That works. Mind taking the first turn?"

"Not at all!"

Maple and Sally agreed to handle combat through the dungeon's first leg. Martyr's Devotion kept the other two safe as they watched the fight.

Not far in, they found another magic circle—like the way inside—and three humanoid monsters made of wood emerged from it. Each was distinct from the others: One had extra-large arms, while the others carried a bow and a sword, respectively.

"Maple, keep it simple."

"Full Deploy! Commence Assault!"

Three enemies before them, and they were in the middle of a hall. Only one thing to do. Maple summoned her weapons and opened fire on them.

These were clearly a trash mob and burst into light under Maple's barrage.

"Good work, Maple."

"I got this!"

Their charge never paused. No monsters here could get past the wall of gunfire. Lily and Wilbert watched closely, comparing rumors to reality.

"What do you think, Will?"

"It's certainly a powerful skill, but each individual shot isn't that strong."

"True. And you can hit that weakness."

"Yes...but we'd have to pick where we fight."

A firsthand look made all the difference. Flash did not always mean strength. Wilbert's bow was every bit as fast as her guns, and far more powerful. As long as he didn't rush her head-on, that would give him an advantage.

"Still, seen up close, it's a lot. I imagine it's more than enough to shock anyone who's unprepared."

Even as they spoke, Maple was mowing down more mobs. The monsters hefted their weapons and blocked the passage, but never got past Maple's preemptive fire. They were doomed to an untimely demise.

Eventually, they got through the narrow wood corridor and emerged in a wide-open room.

Clearly a far larger space—even Maple figured something was up.

"Maybe something stronger?"

"Yep! There it is!"

Thorns thickening on the ground, winding around each other in the center—then a massive red rose bloomed. Like it had a mind of its own, it reached out its arms, using the thorny strands like whips.

"End of the first leg. We'll take over after this. The two of you can handle it, I

assume?”

“I-I’ll try...”

“Maple, defense is all you. We know the dungeon’s gimmick, so it shouldn’t be an issue.”

The visual was clearly baiting them to use fire, but since they knew better, they wouldn’t fall for that trap. Sally darted forward, and the fight began.

“Saturating Chaos! Commence Assault!”

Maple’s monster lunged at the giant central rose, and a hail of artillery followed.

She crept forward as she fired, moving Martyr’s Devotion close to Sally, getting it in range of the rose. That meant Sally was safe to focus on attacking, and Maple could focus on shooting.

Sally was both protected by Maple and making sure not to take any hits that might be piercing damage—since that would all go to Maple.

“Whew...”

There were four thorny whips coming at Sally, two from each side. She let them come as close as possible, then slipped past. One, two. Lily and Wilbert could tell Martyr’s Devotion wasn’t the deciding factor here.

“Huh...”

“I see...”

Like Velvet before them, seeing this in person was a real eye-opener.

“Well, Will? Think you can hit her?”

“Not with an arrow that is merely fast. And...”

Maple was now thoroughly bound in thorny vines and doing just fine. Will winced.

“High-powered arrows won’t do much to *her*.”

“The rumors were true.”

They looked back at Sally, only to find her perfectly dodging *six* whips—two

more than before. The vines having their way with Maple could not catch Sally at all. That made it clear no ordinary AOE would ever hurt her.

But Sally hadn't used any skills, so the rose's HP was dwindling quite slowly.

An ordinary player might manage a few dodges, but gradually lose their nerve and try to finish things. But Sally just kept on dodging like that was normal, making it clear this was how she always fought.

"Maple! Hit it!"

"Yup!"

Maple blew up her weapons, freeing herself from the vines, and rocketed straight toward the rose.

"Predators!"

She raised her black shield, and two monsters appeared on her flanks; all three came down on the rose.

"Hah!"

The shield swallowed the flower whole, the spray of sparks every bit as vivid as the bloom had been. The Predators crushed the vines, and with nothing to support her, Maple fell over backward and rolled away.

"Didn't seem like it was piercing, but better safe than sorry. Quintuple Slash!"

Five hits with each hand, an additional five on each from Chaser Blade. With her buff on, a twenty-hit combo from skills any dagger wielder learned was a solid finisher. Sally had jumped in to land the hit while it was still reeling from Maple's body slam. Right after she carved up the stalks that had supported the flower, there was a shattering noise, and the rose monster burst into light.

"Nice work, Maple. You okay?"

"Mm-hmm! It was all spiky, so glad those weren't piercing."

"Yup. We could have played it a bit more aggressively."

She helped Maple to her feet, dusted off her armor, and looked up to find the others approaching.

"Impressive. Even seeing it firsthand, it's hard to believe it possible. Your

strengths really do lie in your core natures.”

Maple’s outlandish defense turned her into a stationary artillery battery, improving her accuracy. She could completely forgo repositioning and adjusting her aim on the move—which made her that much stronger. Sally’s evasive skills meant all her attacks were counters. Like Lily said, their skills and maneuvers were strongly influenced by the core of their approach.

“Time we showed off our style. At least to the degree you did.”

“If we wanna see more, we gotta show more?”

“More or less, yes. I welcome it anytime.”

Like Lily said earlier, she believed this demonstration would change nothing. If it was true that they could win even with all their skills known, then their strength must be the kind that could not be countered—and the more Maple and Sally showed, the deeper the hole they dug for themselves.

Sally had considered this, and concluded she was better off seeing as much as she could. Lily’s observation skills were impressive, but so were Sally’s. Even if they did hide some major skills, she could glean an idea what they might be.

Given Maple and Sally’s obvious weaknesses, even if they failed to put a name to Rapid Fire’s skills, they at least needed an idea of what types of skill they had.

“We’ll take the lead, as promised. Watch close.”

“Hokay!”

“.....Heh-heh. O-oh, no... Never mind.”

Heedless of all the mind games going on around, Maple was just excited to see the fight. That proved rather disarming. Lily took Wilbert ahead, whispering with him.

“They can hit like a truck when they need to. They’re a good pair.”

“Yes. And Maple’s Martyr’s Devotion makes a huge difference. The older footage showed it protecting her entire party—the range it covers is hardly small.”

“Yeah, when they’ve got their whole guild together, it really shines. Assuming

I'd be taking the lead, then...my main concern is Sally."

"Her evasion skills?"

"Yes. What would happen if you tried to shoot me, Will?"

He seemed unclear what that question meant, but said the shot would be neutralized and bounce off. Direct attacks against party members were rendered moot at the point of contact; that meant ranged fighters like Wilbert had to pay close attention to their positioning.

"Exactly. But from what we just saw, Maple's aim isn't exactly good. And Sally's up in front of the monster, blocking her line of sight. So *why* is Maple still doing solid damage?"

"The bullets that *would* hit Sally don't...you think she can actually *do* that?"

"That *is* the question. I couldn't do it even if I had eyes in the back of my head. But she's dodging friendly fire that's coming at her from behind. And that's a no-holds-barred barrage. I imagine her performance varies by the day...but you see my point."

Wilbert nodded. "Yes, let's not use *that* skill."

"Yeah, and Maple's here, which makes it tricky. Didn't expect playing with them to make it this clear, but...well, aim and shot speed are our whole thing; we'll just have to prove we can land hits when it counts."

"Yes...yes, indeed."

Grateful that Velvet had introduced them, Lily's mind was focused more on how she could beat those two than the fight at hand.



With the rose boss down, it was Maple and Sally's turn to hang back and watch the fights. That said, trash tree monsters were simply crumbling before the might of Wilbert's bow.

"I didn't think anyone but Mai and Yui could dominate *quite* this hard..."

"He really does one-shot them all! And I've yet to see him miss..."

"Yet he moves far faster than you do, Maple. Lots of bow skills require high DEX to get, so he can't be a pure STR build."

Seen up close, they could tell that Lily didn't appear to be using any skills herself. Wilbert was just mowing down all the enemies that spawned before him, giving them no new real information.

"Hmm, which means it's gotta be passive skills..."

Lily had admitted her maid outfit was rare. The veracity of that was unclear, but at the least, there was a reason she was equipping this instead of more conventional spears or armor.

"Hopefully they'll show more once they hit a stronger monster, like that rose."

Trash mobs were eminently disposable, and not the kind of foe that could pry any secrets out of Rapid Fire. Lily was just twirling her mop, playing around as Wilbert did all the fighting. At last, they reached a larger room.

"What spawns here, Will?"

"A mushroom. Mildly tricky."

"Then allow me to help. As promised. I was getting rather bored, anyway."

"Appreciated."

Spores flew before their eyes and a giant mushroom grew. A mob of mushrooms appeared around it, all turning toward the intruders.

"Able Aid, Tactical Tutelage, Transcendent Power. Hmm...oh, Venerable Command! Yes, that should do it."

"Drawn Taunt. Mighty Shot."

Wilbert's bow glowed red, his string drawn to the limit—and the arrow flew too fast for the eye to track, piercing the line of mushrooms before him, and letting the wind whistle through the hole it opened in the base of the giant mushroom beyond. This alone did not finish it; a prodigious quantity of red sparks flew, but the monster hung on with a few dots of HP. An instant later, it recovered back to 30 percent health, spraying spores in all directions and spawning scores of mushrooms.

"Huh, I swear that killed it last time."

“Thirty percent is no concern.”

“Let me help a little more. Take Heart. Advice.”

The advancing mushrooms were spraying spores that looked poisonous, and the skills Lily used offered no visible alterations.

“Yes, that should do. Range Expansion. Arrow Rain.”

Wilbert aimed his next shot high—and like the skill’s name suggested, a rain of arrows began falling. Range Expansion broadened the affected area, leaving nothing untouched; each and every mushroom was shot through. This included the giant one—easily dispatched before it could take further action.

“Nice. That’s what I like to see...!”

“Had you given the first a little more oomph...”

“Ah-ha-ha, let’s not go there,” Lily grinned. She turned to Maple for an evaluation.

“That was amazing! I didn’t know bows were so strong!”

“That’s all Will.”

“.....First shots. Your passives provide a huge boost to the first shot taken on each target.”

“Ohh...?”

This was their first time seeing Wilbert take a second shot at a target. Sally knew nothing about any of the buff skills used, but she knew how Arrow Rain worked. It was a core bow skill, and an AOE—so it didn’t hit that hard.

Even then, his second shot’s power was clearly far inferior to everything else they’d seen from him. Lily had applied additional buffs, but given Arrow Rain’s innate power, there were clear signs that a major boost had been dropped from the equation.

“Pretty close! You’re good.”

“And...you’re telling the truth.”

“Like I said—knowing won’t help.”

“You sound...sure of yourself.”

“Yep. Okay, as a reward for getting it right—we’ll handle the boss.”

“Oh? Really?”

If they took over the boss, they might have to bust out some more skills. Sally was hardly going to refuse.

“Oh, but—can you handle the path there for us? From here on out the path forks, and if you pick the right branches, you can avoid hitting any more clearings.”

“Okay...I guess we could.”

Sally wasn’t sure what to make of that request, but they rolled with it, taking the lead again. Hanging back a bit, Wilbert and Lily began whispering again.

“You’re sure about this, Lily?”

“Like I said, I’m bored.”

“Yeah...I get that.”

“And we’re not going to learn anything else with regular enemies. Even Maple isn’t careless enough to use something new, and Sally’s even worse.”

With nothing better to do, Lily spent the rest of the dungeon twirling her mop, occasionally telling them which way to go.

They reached the boss room easily.

Maple and Sally might not be one-shotting things like Wilbert did, but they could clean up trash mobs without breaking a sweat. With Maple around, nothing had a chance if it lacked piercing attacks.

“As promised, Will and I will handle the boss.”

“Okay! Good luck! If you need anything...”

“Ha-ha, we won’t. I recommend you watch close.”

“.....?”

Clueless as to what that implied, Maple nodded, and followed them into the boss chamber.

At the back of the room was an altar covered in leafy branches. A figure stood before it, the height of a child, wearing clothes made of leaves, and offering up a branch with flowers blooming at the top. They'd fought a lot of plants and wood people on the way in, and this was clearly their boss—a spirit or dryad of some sort.

“Oh, I’ve fought monsters like that!”

“...In the jungle? This looks a bit different.”

If it used a similar bag of tricks, it might forcibly change their gear.

But despite the visual similarities, it soon became clear the fight design was unrelated. This boss started out by summoning a pair of rose monsters—like the one Maple and Sally fought—and then summoned a range of magic circles, spawning wood figures.

“Ah, always a solid opponent.”

“Lily, it’s coming.”

The mobs were advancing, yet Wilbert lowered his bow—and both he and Lily spoke the same skill name.

““Quick Change.””

Their loadouts dramatically shifted. Like he was swiping Lily’s shtick, Wilbert was now wearing a butler suit. Lily’s maid outfit had given way to a gaudy suit of armor, and her mop was now a flag with a crest.

“Junkyard Seat,” Lily intoned.

Behind her appeared a highbacked chair made of broken machines. A bit like Maple’s Heaven’s Throne, but this one hovered slightly above the ground. Lily hopped up onto it, her eyes on the boss as it summoned even more adds.

“Lifeless Horde. Toy Soldiers. Sand Swarm. Venerable Command.”

At her cry, an army of mechanical units appeared—their numbers a match for the boss’s pack of minions. Maple and Sally both knew exactly which stratum these came from. Their lasers and gunfire might be inferior to Maple’s, but quantity had a quality all its own.

And in answer to Lily, Wilbert began using some familiar support skills.

“Able Aid, Tactical Tutelage, Transcendent Power.”

“Whoa?!”

“They’ve swapped roles...and it’s highly effective.”

Ignoring the question of how that worked, Sally focused on the facts before her. Wilbert no longer had a bow—he was using throwing knives instead, but without his prior power. Now Lily was the real threat. She called out wave after wave of mechanical servants, who fired volley after volley at her foes. She had several types of summon skills, and her buffs affected them all; the suppressing fire was tremendous. It did not seem hard to take out any individual soldier, but she could call in reinforcements as fast as they went down. They were steadily forcing the boss’s summons back.

Wilbert was all quality and Lily all quantity; whenever they swapped places, the other would focus on buffs.

“Whew...lots of stuff we’ve gotta plan for.”

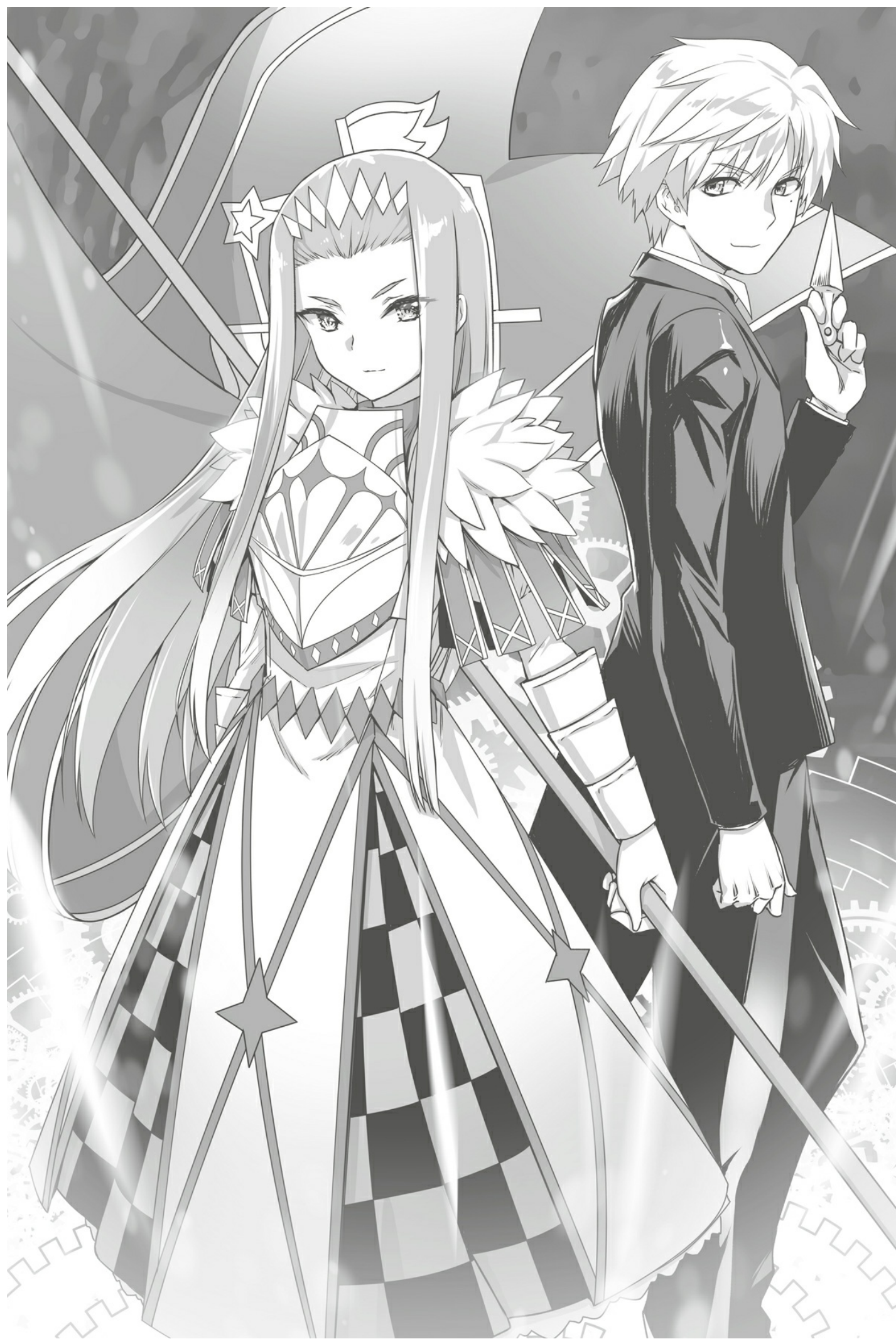
“Yeah! I’ll do what I can!”

“Thanks.”

“I’m the guild master, after all!”

“Heh-heh, that you are.”

Watching the military campaign waging before them, both knew they had some serious competition.





Defense Build and Information Exchange

A few days after the dungeon run with Rapid Fire, Maple was wandering alone around the perpetual night of the fourth stratum's town. She'd friended Lily and Wilbert, but hadn't met up with them again. The two pairs had split up without speaking much after the boss went down.

"The next event, hmm...?"

Lily's summon skill had pulverized that boss.

After that display, they definitely needed a plan; Sally was using what they did know to do what they could. All with an eye on an upcoming unannounced event. No clue when it would really be necessary, but Sally figured it was better to handle this sooner than later.

"They're all amazing. But if I'm forming a team of two, I'm definitely sticking with Sally."

Both teams she'd encountered got much stronger when they fought together. Maple and Sally were each strong in their own right, but without any real synergy, it might be hard for them to win.

"I should check to see if there's any good skills I could use these medals on."

Maple wasn't really someone who cared that much about winning. But if she was in a fight, she'd give it everything she had—it wasn't like she enjoyed losing.

Still, she wasn't about to spend all her time figuring out ways to beat other players. Today she was here to visit a new cat café they'd added to the fourth stratum.

"If it's nice, I'll have to bring Sally!"

Maple opened the doors and found a girl with blue hair and clothes playing with a bunch of cats in the back.

““Ah...!””

Their eyes met—and both made a weird noise. The blue-haired girl was Mii in disguise.

Maple stepped in, making sure there were no other players in earshot.

“You came, too, Mii?”

“Mm-hmm. I heard a new place opened. Didn’t imagine we’d overlap.”

But chance had brought them together. They caught up as they played with the cats.

“Rapid Fire and Thunder Storm...my guild’s certainly aware of them, too.”

“We met the top players from both, and they were so strong!”

“Guild masters are generally players who can survive when outnumbered. I bet they’ll rank pretty high in the next event.”

It had been a long time since an event with a PvP focus or any sort of ranking, so once one came around, they’d want to make their mark.

“Yeah, they were definitely strong enough. I think they’ll manage it.”

“.....Not really something you care about, huh?”

“Huh? Uh...I mean, if it’s fun...?”

“Heh-heh-heh...man, if that’s your attitude, you shouldn’t have come after us in the fourth event.”

“Oh, that was because we all wanted to get in the top ten.”

This contradicted her last statement, and Maple herself looked a bit puzzled—but she soon worked it out. If everyone around her was having fun, so was she. She’d been motivated to help them achieve their goal.

“Fighting *alongside* everyone is a blast!”

“Nice. Events are reason enough to go all out, then? They are a big deal.”

But Mii was Flame Empire’s guild master and couldn’t exactly let Maple waltz off victorious. They were looking forward to a rematch.

“We won’t be bested as easily this time. We might even take you down!”

“Uh...be gentle...”

“That’s not how it works!”

“Hngg. Then I’ll just have to bust out my new skill!”

“Erp?! Y-you found something else weird?”

“I promised Sally I wouldn’t show it off, but yeah. It’s weird!”

“Ha-ha...b-be gentle?”

“Heh-heh-heh. That’s not how it works.”

“Ah-ha-ha. Well, I won’t take it lying down.”

“You’re a rival, too, Mii! And now I’ve got Lily and Velvet and...”

“If you need a team-up, tag me in. You make it easier for me to fight, too.”

“Okay! I hope we get a chance!”

They focused on petting cats for a while.

“Oh, right...like you do, Velvet was *acting*.”

“Oh? Really? I’d heard how she fights but haven’t actually spoken to her.”

“Her reason’s a bit different, though.”

“Y-yeah...this one’s just me...”

Mii had backed herself into a corner, but Velvet didn’t care who knew it was a performance.

“When we first met, she was all ladylike, but once she started going all out, her whole vibe changed. I never saw it coming!”

Maple told Mii the story of how they’d met, and why she was role-playing, and Mii nodded a lot.

“Ohhh...I think I get that. Your gear does influence you. If I hadn’t found that gear and those skills, I might have wound up playing someone very different. I *do* like them, but...”

The Flame Empress skill and equipment that matched it had really locked Mii into her part. They weren’t controlling characters on screen but embodying

them—and that meant gear and skills made a huge difference.

“You might not act, Maple, but have you ever thought you’d, like, try other gear?”

“Absolutely!”

Maple actually often changed her gear to match skills, or wore clothes appropriate for her destination. Role-playing might just be an extension of that.

“It’s a virtual world, so anything goes. But if you take it too far...you’ll regret it.”

Mii would likely never find the opportunity to admit the truth. For that reason, she envied Velvet.

“You wanna meet her sometime? I could set up an introduction!”

“Sure, sounds fun. From what you’ve told me, she sounds like the life of the party.”

“I’ll see what she thinks!”

Maple and Mii took turns trading stories about what they’d been up to, and there were no signs of either running out of things to say.



Meanwhile, back at the guild, Sally was thinking about their new rivals.

“Hmm...”

How could they beat them? From what she’d learned, there was one natural conclusion—*a win wasn’t likely*.

“It’ll certainly be tough solo. If Maple’s with me...”

There was still a lot they didn’t know, and plenty of ways in which they could turn the tables. Velvet had admitted she had an ace up her sleeve, and Lily was clearly hiding plenty. Sally was still wondering about it when the door opened, and a familiar face popped in.

“Uh...oh, Sally! You’re here!”

“.....You act like this is your guild. What is it today, Frederica?”

“The usual. What’s up?”

Frederica was waving her wand around, ready for another duel—which reminded Sally of something important.

“Hey, Frederica, weren’t you allegedly in charge of intelligence gathering?”

“Not allegedly; I *am*.”

“.....I mean, I fed you fake intel.”

“Only you’re capable of that!”

“Fine. You know Rapid Fire and Thunder Storm? We wound up fighting alongside them a bit.”

“Hmm...I’ll tell you if you beat me in this duel.”

“Big talk from a perpetual loser. But why not?”

“Puh-lease. I’m totally winning today!”

They got ready to duel.

A few minutes later...

Frederica came back, sulking, and fell face-first onto the couch, kicking her legs.

“You seemed super distracted! I thought it was my day!”

“I focus once the fight starts.”

“You’re a machine!”

“Yeah, yeah. Now, you did promise...”

“Sure. We’ve run into them enough.”

Frederica checked her notes and told her what she knew.

“Still, there’s lots of unknowns. First, Thunder Storm—Hinata’s debuffs are mostly movement blockers or attack hindrances, but those have gotta be limited, so if you can stop and restart the fight, you’re better off.”

But to make that happen you either had to break her debuffs or get away clean, so this was easier said than done. A mere hypothetical.

“You’re confident of that?”

“Yeah. Velvet, though...she can keep that lightning going forever. And it just keeps getting stronger, so she’s great in long fights. She’s mostly on the fifth floor, but she’s been hitting the sixth more lately, might be a reason for that. She’s got that lightning rain, so you’d better look out, Sally.”

“Don’t worry, I dodged it.”

“.....Okay, dodging lightning is just ridiculous.”

“My evasion is evolving.”

“I know that better than anyone... Next!”

Frederica turned the page and dug into Rapid Fire.

“I’ll leave out what you witnessed, but they do say Wilbert’s arrows never miss. Can’t be sure that’s a skill, but...he always hits. Lily’s worse as the king than the maid. There’re restrictions on how much she can summon at once, but only an upper limit.”

Since she could just replenish whatever she lost, they were functionally infinite. But her strength-in-numbers play style bothered Sally less than Wilbert.

“A guaranteed hit... I mean, I figured there was a skill like that out there.”

Definitely her Achilles’ heel. She had to count herself lucky the skill was rare enough that she’d never run into anybody with one.

“Yup. Don’t get hit by it until I find it. I’m gonna be the one who takes you down, Sally!”

“Can’t, already got someone in mind for that. But thanks! Glad you’re doing the job right these days.”

“You make one mistake...”

Remembering the lie Sally had fed her clearly got under her skin, and she threatened to feed Sally some lies if she kept poking her about it.

“I’ll see right through ’em.”

“Ugh, and the worst part is, you probably would. Oh, one last thing—nobody’s seen any of them with a tamed monster yet.”

“Got it, thanks. Still, surprised you had any real info.”

“.....Should I drop you on the sixth layer?”

“I—I take it back!”

They traded barbs and dueled every time Frederica got her motivation back, but the outcome was always the same.

And not long after they’d met Rapid Fire, the ninth event was announced.

125 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Fully co-op, huh?

126 Name: Anonymous Archer Still a ways off.

Unlike last time, no PvP elements at all.

127 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

So the monsters must be pretty tough.

They’re forcing us to gang up on ’em.

128 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

No PvP means no need to stress it.

Not that I mind that or anything.

129 Name: Anonymous Archer

But they’ve yet to release any real info.

All we know is exploration focused, and it’ll affect the eighth stratum.

130 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Something like the access passes on the fourth?

131 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

I guess that counts.

It being co-op, they might drop for everyone who participates.

132 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

No time dilation, so if you're lacking you can go power-up before it ends.

133 Name: Anonymous Mage

Speaking of which...I might have a lead.

134 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Yeah?

135 Name: Anonymous Mage Dunno if it's a tamable monster or just a hidden quest, but I saw this pure-white monster in a deserted valley.

Had some sort of armor on—not a shell—and gave off this real bad news aura.

136 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

Yo, wut? Never heard of that.

137 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

Nice. Like some sort of holy guardian beast or whatever?

138 Name: Anonymous Archer

You might well pull ahead of us!

139 Name: Anonymous Mage

I wasn't ready for it, so I just turned tail and fled.
But def gonna go back.

140 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Best of luck.

141 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

Get yoself as buff as Maple!

142 Name: Anonymous Mage

Yup! Would love to catch up. Worth a look, anyway!



Defense Build in the Sky Above

Meanwhile, in the valley the forums were discussing, a white beast was dragging other monsters around. It seemed to have no attack capability at all—it had one monster lodged in its jaws, and was clawing the hell out of another, but doing no damage.

And naturally, these monsters fought back. The goblin in the beast's mouth had a spear, and it managed to stab the creature in the face. It scratched the beast's armor-like hide, but each time it hit home, swords made of light appeared from the ground, minimizing the damage. Desperate to free itself, the goblin kept thrusting—and damage sparks began spraying from its body. The added glowing swords buffed the beast's stats enough to harm an unarmored goblin.

Even as their deaths approached, they had no options beyond basic attacks that only served to strengthen the beast they fought. In time, they shattered, and the beast nodded happily.

“Cool! Gotta try more stuff!”

Within that white beast, Maple cheerily went off to find more things to fight.

Twisted Resurrection had given Maple a new body—Heaven's Guardian. She was running about these remote mountains trying to master it. A white body protected by a sturdy exoskeleton, a holy twist on her Atrocity form. This body had only four limbs, did not breathe fire, and received no STR boost after transformation.

Given Maple's core stats, that meant she started out unable to do any damage—but it made up for that in powerful support abilities. Which would be more than worth it to anyone on her side.

“Each time I take damage, it generates a field that reduces incoming damage. And any allies in that field's range get a stat buff. Interesting.”

Since she had to actually take damage to test this out, she'd found some goblins with spears—which did piercing damage—and ran her experiment.

Like Atrocity, the beast form had its own HP, and each time that took damage, swords made of light thrust upward, reducing her damage. This also raised her stats, but since her default values were so low, it took a while before she could actually hurt anything.

“Shame it only lasts five minutes. I hope I get this skill for real sometime!”

Odds are these twisted skills *were* out there somewhere. Everyone was talking about her black monster form, but she'd heard nothing about a similar white beast. If she could find it herself, she'd love to do so right now and make full use of it.

Maple spent a while practicing with her surprisingly toothless new form, but five minutes did not last long, and she was soon her old self again.

“That's it?! Argh, and Atrocity is so useful.”

Just then, Maple received a message from the admins concerning the ninth event.

“Oh, we get to work together. I wonder if it's like that jungle event, with a special map but no sped-up time?”

In which case, there might be a requirement to enter the event map, but she'd just have to wait for the full explanation to arrive.

“But that's nice! I'm good at co-op.”

When she finished practicing with her new body, Maple headed back to town.

There she met up with Sally, and the ninth event was the first topic on both their lips.

“Seems like it's still a way off, but at least we know something.”

“Yup, and it's co-op!”

“That helps. We're still not 100 percent on our PvP strategies.”

And if the game was getting an eighth stratum soon, their downtime was nearly at an end.

“Gonna be so much to do!”

“Do we wanna do one last touristy thing?”

“Yeah...I was trying to figure out where the seventh stratum’s starry thing is, but it wasn’t what I thought.”

The lead she’d found had given her a strange skill, but that hadn’t been her real goal.

“Good news, Maple.”

“All ears! What is it?”

“I found a hint for the seventh layer.”

“Really? Urgh, I thought I had, but it didn’t pan out.”

“Well, this layer’s version isn’t purely sightseeing.”

“More like the flying castle, then?”

“Yeah, there’s just a nice view included. The monsters there are pretty tough.”

At the least, it would be a bigger challenge than the places they’d gone with Velvet and Lily.

“Sounds rough...but maybe that’s what our final adventure *should* be!”

“True. And this one we can do at any time of day.”

“Then let’s go now!”

“That’s what I’m talking about! I figured you’d say that, so I prepped some things. Let’s swing by the guild home first.”

“.....? Okay, if you say so!”

Maple followed Sally’s lead back to their base.

In her guild home workshop, Iz was using her full range of crafting tools, making things.

With the event announcement, all guild members had gathered to update each other.

“Another event... Our pets are getting pretty strong, so I guess we’re ready.”

“I’ve certainly got the levels, but we still know so little. I’m sure there’ll be tough monsters in it, but otherwise...”

Chrome and Kasumi were the two highest level players in Maple Tree. But the level advantage alone did not guarantee victory.

“Co-op can mean a lot of things. If all eight of us can play together, not much can beat us.”

As he spoke, Kanade moved a piece on a board game.

“Ah!”

“Um...”

“I win again.”

““Aww...””

He’d been playing against Mai and Yui, who drooped visibly—and immediately challenged him to another round.

“No Maple and Sally today?”

“They should be here soon enough. Sally asked me to make these,” Iz said, emerging from her workroom.

“Really? That doesn’t happen every day. Oh, speak of the devil!”

The door had opened, and Maple and Sally came in.

“Sally, I’m done!”

“Thanks a lot.”

Iz opened her inventory and passed the fruits of her labor to Sally.

“You two headed off together?”

“One last bit of sightseeing before the event!”

“Nice. Have fun! Oh, I also wouldn’t say no to souvenirs.”

“You got it!”

“Let’s hope you can find some neat skills, too.”

“Ah-ha-ha...she already did that.”

Sally’s eyes looked a bit glazed—she’d already been given the rundown. Chrome had learned about it accidentally and had an almost identical look on his face.

“Is this the fallen angel thing...?”

“That’s not all it is. We’ll give a full rundown while planning for the event.”

“Fair enough.”

“We’re outta here!”

The guild members waved Maple and Sally out. Kanade and the twins went back to their game, but Iz and Kasumi were giving Chrome a look.

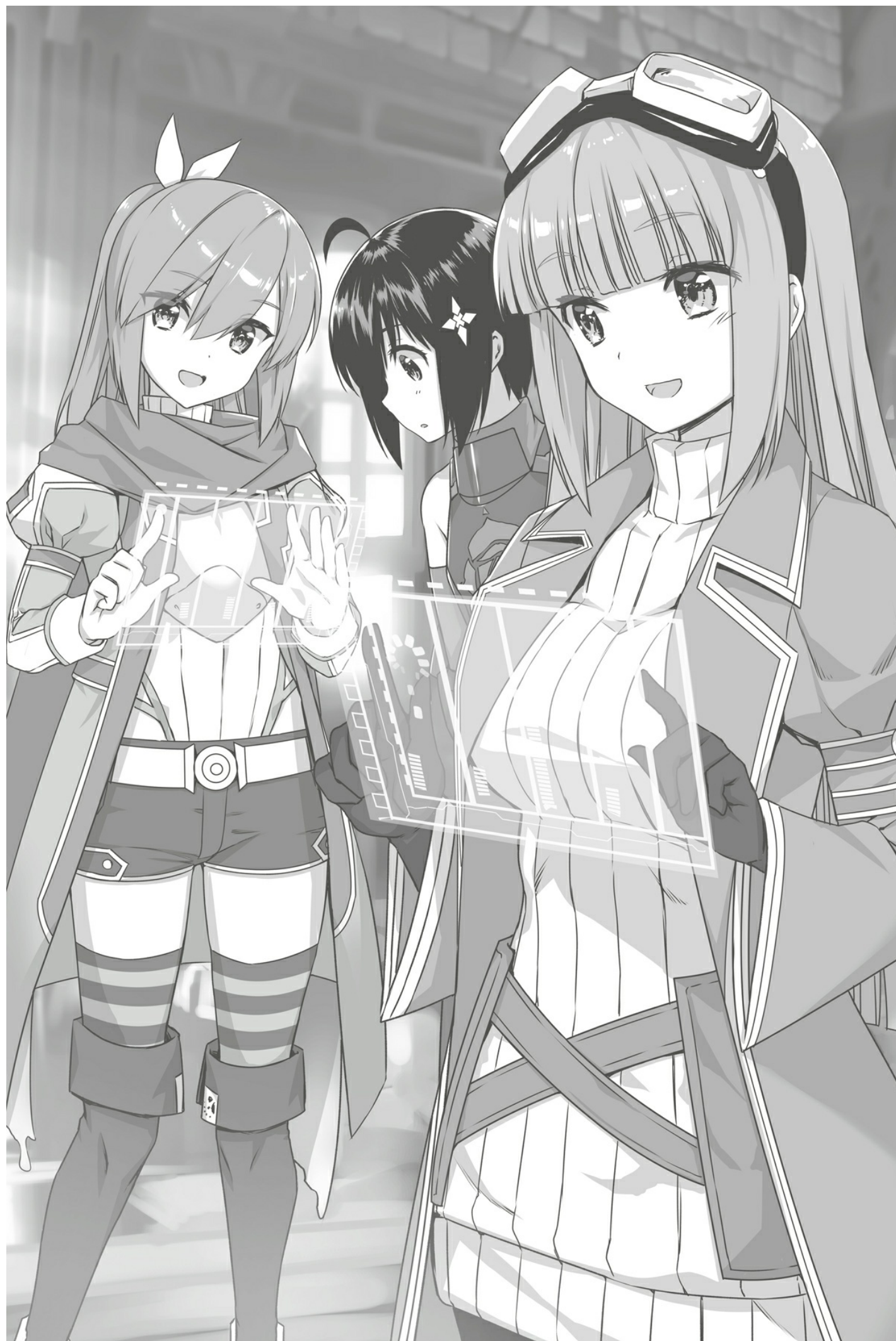
“Fallen angel...?”

“Maple’s been out and about lately, so I ain’t see it myself, but apparently, she’s found a way to get a dark version of Martyr’s Devotion.”

“.....That would shock people.”

“Yeah, no clue what it means. Doubt it’ll be any less strong...”

“Even if it was, that would just make people cautious. Let sleeping dogs lie.”



Wherever Maple had found it, she was their guild master—her becoming stronger was only a good thing.

“Oh, Kasumi. Question for you.”

“Shoot.”

“You said you found Haku in the deep valleys, right? Did you see any white monsters wearing what looked like armor?”

“.....No, nothing like that. Something rare?”

“If you don’t know it, probably. Rare, or tamable...”

“Hmm, would like to see it myself.”

It would not be long before they learned this monster was neither rare nor tamable—just Maple.



As usual, Maple rode on the back of Sally’s horse as they headed to their destination.

“Sally, where are we headed?”

“Snowy peaks.”

“Haven’t been to those since the tower!”

In the tower conquest event, they’d descended a snowy slope and fought a boss below. *Descended* meaning Maple had just jumped off and soaked the fall with her defense.

Velvet had taken them to the colosseum-like crater, and Mii to an active volcano—the seventh stratum had a range of mountains.

The snow-capped peak Sally took them to was surrounded by clouds, the top hidden from view.

“I’ve only found a hint, so we’ll just have to see if I’m right. But if we do this through the proper route, it’s gonna take forever.”

“Uh-huh.”

“So we’re gonna need Syrup’s help.”

“Roger that! It’s been a while.”

“Lots of people learned to fly here, so we’re not the first to try—but word is, when you do, it’s just powerful monster attacks.”

No one else would sound so dismissive here—but no ordinary monster could pose a threat to this dynamic duo.

“So I figure we’ll fly to the midpoint, taking out monsters as we go.”

“Not all the way to the top?”

“That’s not possible, apparently. This is more a shortcut designed for flying players who reach certain strength benchmarks.”

The horse galloped on, taking them closer and closer to the mountain. The sheer height of it began to dawn on them. It was so steep, sections of it looked vertical—Sally said there were legs of it that required you to go inside.

“I can see why you wanted to skip a chunk of it,” Maple said, head craned all the way back.

A thick bank of clouds blocked her view of the top; they were very dark, suggesting rough weather.

“If it just blew us off, you’d be fine, and we can just tie ourselves on. But you remember when you stepped in that lava?”

Molten rock.

Another tower floor—the first thing that ruined Maple’s no-damage run. The terrain—her ultimate nemesis.

“I don’t like that! Not at all!”

“That’s why we’re only going halfway. Once the weather sours, we’ll do a circuit of the mountain and find a way in.”

“Gotcha! Let’s hit the road!”

Maple and Sally climbed on Syrup’s back and began their leisurely ascent.

As Maple moved Syrup along with Psychokinesis, it began to snow—though they didn’t feel the cold.

As it did, the monsters Sally had warned of began heading their way. Birds made entirely of ice, three on each side, screeching as they swooped in.

“I know way stronger ice birds! Full Deploy! Commence Assault!”

Maple started spinning, firing at both packs of birds. She didn’t need to aim all that precisely; there were too many bullets and lasers for them to dodge. They shattered before they could even fling any ice.

“Nice!”

“They aren’t dead yet!”

“Urp?!”

She’d pulverized them, but they reformed in midair, approaching through her barrage.

“Best to go with fire! Oboro, Whet Wisp!”

Fire cloaked Sally, and Maple rested her guns, letting Sally handle this.

“Martyr’s Devotion! Taunt!”

Maple baited the enemies to make it easier for Sally to fight and kept her safe in case of accidents.

While Taunt was active, she didn’t need to attack; she could just stand there and the monsters would swarm around her. The birds were attacking from all directions, pecking the hell out of her, or flinging cold and lumps of ice her way.

“Uh, that’s quite a visual!”

“I’m fine!”

Maple’s proof of life was barely audible over the sound of birds smashing against her. Sally started cutting them down, one at a time.

“Oboro, Spreading Flames. Blighted Blaze.”

Her fox generated more flames, melting the ice birds. Sally was getting used to quickly freeing Maple from monster mobs.

“Last one!”

“Whew, thanks!”

“But they’ll probably come at us again.”

“Ugh...good luck, Sally!”

“I got this. I just gotta peel ‘em off you!”

Even as Maple was getting pecked, Syrup’s ascent continued unabated.

As they neared the midpoint, the flurries thickened, and between waves of ice birds, they were forced to crouch against the wind.

This was no trick of the mind—the weather was clearly getting worse.

“Guess that’s as far as we get.”

“Then let’s start circling.”

Maple maintained their altitude, having Syrup fly sideways, just above the mountain’s slope. Monsters were still attacking her, so they focused on peeling them off her face so she could see to avoid bumping into the terrain.

“There we go! Oboro, Spreading Flames.”

Sally had spotted an entrance and had her pet help de-bird Maple again.

“Okay, grab hold.”

“Mm-hmm!”

“Leap!”

With Maple held tight in her arms, Sally vaulted off of Syrup and landed on a little foothold jutting out of the mountain face. The path went up and down in either direction, but naturally, they headed up.

“Thanks, Syrup!”

“On we go.”

With the turtle back in her ring, they went in. The walls and floor were coated in glowing blue ice. Yet the surface wasn’t slippery; they could walk freely without having to pick their way.

The terrain was a good indicator of what kind of monsters waited within, and Maple took out some fire charms so that she could help fight.

“I’m getting good at icy areas!”

“If the charms won’t cut it, I’ve got just the item. Hold on.”

Sally opened her inventory and took out the items she’d asked Iz for. One was a cloak, and the other an orb pulsing with a red light.

“If you put this on and use the orb, you’ll diminish incoming ice attacks, and gain Freeze Resist.”

Maple went right ahead and used both. The cloak was quite thick, clearly designed for cold areas.

“Effective and fits the locale!”

“Nice, I like it!”

“Tell Iz that when we get back.”

They had several of the orbs, so there was little chance of running out. That wasn’t the end of what Sally had asked for, either—these two were just the most handy at the moment.

They moved further in, and three lumps of ice wreathed in glittering frost clouds came flitting toward them.

Both girls stopped in their tracks, weapons ready, watching closely. Eyes and mouths of blue light appeared on each, and they sped toward the girls.

Sally was inside Martyr’s Devotion, so she dove forward, slashing a lump in passing. Whet Wisp had her wreathed in flames, and that coursed through her dagger into the ice, generating red damage sparks. A solid hit. Sally was about to go after the others when she saw the one she’d hit emitting a bright blue glow. She hit the brakes and used Leap to dive behind Maple.

A moment later, the ice detonated, sending razor shards in all directions. She’d only noticed just in time to avoid a hit. Sally straightened up with a sigh of relief.

“Didn’t think it’d blow up on me. That was a close one!”

“Don’t worry! We’ve got Martyr’s Devotion!”

“Yeah, thanks. I’ve seen it now; that won’t be a threat again.”

While Sally was retreating, the lumps were breathing cold air from their

glowing mouths. This filled the narrow passage, but Sally didn't try and escape; she just let Maple handle it. Maple took double attacks.

"Well?"

"Doesn't seem like it...did anything?"

"So business as usual!"

With that confirmed, Sally darted forward. These lumps were more like traps than monsters; they had low HP, but handling them the wrong way could prove fatal to the average player.

"Hokay!"

Sally slipped between the remaining pair, spinning smoothly, and stabbing one with each hand.

"Now—Superspeed!"

She'd escaped with Leap the first time, but that was on cooldown—instead, she simply ran out of range of the explosions.

Sally came sliding back to Maple as the frost plumes gushed across the icy floor.

"Wow! What a spectacle!"

"Yeah? Thanks. Dodging the explosion just in case, here. Those shards are sharp and might be piercing."

Sally had managed to avoid taking any damage, but that had required quick, careful movements; if there was an easier way to fight them, that would be ideal.

"I'll handle the next at range," Maple suggested. "Even if they come back from it, it'll at least slow them down enough for you to cast a fire spell."

"Good plan. Let's do that. But don't use too much."

"Got it!"

Confident they could handle these lumps, they moved on.

"Oh, Maple—you buy a medal skill, yet?"

“Yep! I liked the one you had, so I got something similar.”

“.....Specifically?”

“You’ve got Water Wielding, I’ve got Earth Wielding.”

Maple grinned and flashed a peace sign.

“Oh! Right, that comes in other elements. And you chose that one?”

“Yup, figured good synergy with Syrup.”

“Nice. You might learn some neat stuff as it levels.”

“What’d you pick, Sally?”

“I’ll show you in the next fight.”

“Can’t wait!”

A little further in, they encountered two bears made of ice. That same white frost was radiating off the translucent bodies.

“That should do the trick. Maple, shield up...like that, yeah.”

“Y-you’re sure?”

“Yup. Here goes!”

Maple watched nervously as Sally darted off toward the ice bears. They spotted her and closed in.

From the way she took off, Maple assumed Sally’s new skill was offensive—but then she saw her use it.

“Substitute!”

Maple’s vision blurred—and their icy claws were right on top of her.

“Yeep?! Whoa...!”

Her mind went blank, but Sally had given her fair warning—and her shield was right in the claws’ path. Devour activated all on its own, turning the bears to light and swallowing them before they could put themselves back together. Maple let out a sigh of relief and turned around. Sally was waving at her, looking pleased with herself.

“Argh! Sallyyy!”

“Ah-ha-ha, too much?”

“I freaked out! This is just like the time you first showed me Mirage.”

“Didn’t mean to scare you that much. This skill lets me swap places with an ally. Used right, it can help with offense and defense.”

“And I bet you’ll use it perfectly.”

“Then expect it to snatch victory from the jaws of death.”

“I will! Oh, more bears.”

“Wow, is this a whole den?”

Their conversation was interrupted by more ice bears. Since they weren’t here to play with them, they decided to make short work of it.

“Let’s just Devour this mess!”

“Agreed. I’ll step up in the boss fight. I got the fire we need for it.”

“Cool. Chaaarge!”

Maple trotted off to fight—an adorable sight, but everything her shield touched was instantly vaporized.

All Maple had to do was run at them, and ice monsters shattered into light.



Not long after, the frozen cavern’s blue ice began to pulse with light so bright, they closed their eyes.

“Hyah!”

“Flame Bullet!”

Maple was now wearing her green dress beneath that warm cloak. She’d switched to that to gain access to Poltergeist, which in turn allowed her to turn laser beams into swords.

Swinging laser swords wildly about a narrow passage frequently fried monsters even as they spawned. If they tried to revive after a hit, Sally’s magic projectiles took them out.

“Hyah! Hahh!”

“Mm-hmm, been a while, but still just as crazy.”

Sally remembered fighting fake Maple in the second event. That fake had just spammed Hydra and did not have anything like this level of control, but the real Maple had plenty of other tricks, and could aim them all intelligently—making her tougher than any boss.

“Hoo! Huh?”

They’d been mowing down ice bears, ice lumps, ice sprites, and snowmen, the light of Maple’s lasers sparkling in the frozen mirror-like passage walls. Then up ahead, they saw a familiar door.

Maple put her weapons away and changed her gear back.

“The boss?”

“Mm-hmm. Poltergeist simplified the route, but our goal is to beat this baddie and get to the peak beyond. Sorry in advance if it proves a bust.”

“Then we’ll just have to bring Iz the boss drops!”

“Yeah, sounds like a plan.”

Maple and Sally pushed open the door together and stepped into the room.

The ice coating the walls and floors was even thicker. In the back was a woman in blue robes, skin so pale you could almost see through it. Her face was so devoid of expression, they could instantly tell this was no player. Her vibe was more like the ice sculptures that had lined the way.

As they crossed the room, frost sprayed from the ground, generating dozens of the exploding lumps at once.

“Let’s win this!”

“Yup!”

Thus began their battle with the ice queen.

“Taunt!”

Maple kicked off the fight by pulling aggro, pulling the ice lumps to her even

as she and Sally charged in.

“Oboro, Spreading Flames!”

The pet fox’s skill made the whole cluster light up in a swath of blue fire.

“Pierce Guard!”

No matter how strong the resulting explosion was, no matter how many hits Martyr’s Devotion soaked for Sally and Oboro, as long as she cancelled the piercing effect—none of it mattered.

Sally charged right through the flurry of ice shards, letting Maple soak all the damage as she closed in.

While Pierce Guard was active, the only thing that could hurt them were attacks higher than Maple’s damage. This window was a chance they were not about to miss.

“Quintuple Slash!”

“Cover Move! Predators!”

Certain the blast could not get through Martyr’s Devotion, they went on the offensive. This was the boss—there was no need to hold anything back, just hit it as hard as they could.

Each hit of Sally’s combo was wreathed in fire, scorching the queen’s icy body. Maple warped over to her, slammed her shield against the boss, then summoned monsters to pile on.

The boss’s body turned to clear blue ice and shattered, crumbling to the floor.

“Huh?”

“Doesn’t feel like—”

Sally felt a wind behind her, and spun round, spotting the boss reforming in a swirling blizzard. That blizzard then turned to shards of ice aimed their way.

“Cover!”

Maple kept her shield down to conserve Devour uses, stepping in front of Sally. Even with Martyr’s Devotion active, if Cover would help, then that would avoid a worst-case scenario. With her blocking the path, there was no risk of

Sally and Oboro getting peppered by piercing attacks.

“Whew, good! It’s just a blizzard.”

“You’ve frozen up, though.”

Parts of Maple *were* frozen, covered in a layer of blue ice.

“.....Doesn’t seem to do anything?”

“It must lower stats.”

“Oh, right you are!”

“Could be dangerous if it stacks too high. Use the shield if it seems risky.”

With that, Sally darted off again. She’d only been halfway through her combo before the boss switched to ice; the damage had hardly been fatal but still, not too shabby.

As Sally got close, the boss put its hands on the ground, and glittering frost gushed out.

“Ice Pillar!”

Sally used that and her webs to evac to the skies.

“Hinata’s way worse... Flame Bullet! Fire Ball!”

Neither spell hit all that hard, but they exploited the boss’s elemental weakness from a safe range and chipped away at its HP. The queen kept summoning the foes they’d seen on the way in, but Taunt was pulling them all to Maple. Normally, too many of those would prove her undoing, but not with Maple—she didn’t even need to handle them.

“Sally, leave them to me!”

“Huge help!”

With Maple removing numbers from the equation, Sally was free to focus on her forte—one-on-one fights.

“Oboro, Binding Barrier!”

With several plans in mind, she started running down the list.

Oboro’s bind succeeded, and Sally leaned way forward.

“Rapids!”

A torrent of water enhanced Sally’s speed, like it was sweeping her along. She kept herself positioned so she could easily dodge the boss’s blows and hit it hard when the moment arrived.

“Oboro, Blighted Blaze! Flash Spout! Triple Slash!”

As Binding Barrier ran out, she used Flash Spout to knock the boss upward, preventing it from taking action. Sally knew just how powerful that could be.

“Time to back off? Fire Ball!”

She threw a spell at the boss in the air and backed away, glancing once at Maple. Maple feared instigating them could provoke piercing attacks, so she was letting the ice and snow monsters have their way with her. Since this wasn’t affecting her HP, it didn’t matter.

“Maple.”

“Oh, right! Cover Move!”

Maple warped herself out of the monster mash and over to Sally’s side.

They were now in the center of the chamber, right between the boss and a mob of adds.

As they watched for the boss’s next move, a series of cracks came from behind them. They glanced back and saw the summons all crumbling—and the blizzard swirling around the boss intensifying.

“Here it comes.”

“Mm-hmm! Pierce Guard!”

Maple activated the skill just in case, and sound of ice hitting ice echoed as the white airborne frost filled the room.

As it dissipated, Sally realized the glow beneath their feet had vanished. She turned to Maple—and Martyr’s Devotion had clearly been swept away. As had the Sword Dance aura around Sally.

Preparing for the worst, Sally went to use a skill—but before she could say anything, ice shot across the ground, freezing their feet to the ground.

Clearly, they'd dropped the boss's HP enough for it to enter the next phase. The queen now held an ice sword, and the blizzard around it had hail within. Then, the queen ran toward them.

"How long till we're free...?"

Sally's brain went into overdrive, wondering what skills in what order might let her live—but suddenly the ground vanished beneath her feet, and the world went black before her eyes.

".....! I died.....?"

That was a sensation she'd never once experienced since she started this game, so it was a distinct possibility. But the voice next to her soon proved that theory wrong.

"Good, you're here, too! Whew!"

"Maple?! Um...where are we?"

"Hmm? Underground."

"Uh..."

"I told you I bought that new skill. This is called Ground Cradle. It pulls you into the ground for a little bit."

"O-oh? Well, that sure helped here."

"Heh-heh! You ain't seen nothing yet."

".....?"

Sally shot her a baffled look, but Maple was already busy prepping something.

The boss was standing still above them, waiting for them to reemerge. In due time, Maple's skill effect ran out and the ground rippled.

They were forced upward, reentering the fight.

Along with a *ton* of luggage.

Maple was seated on a pitch-black throne, surrounded by flowers and monsters, a bottomless bog, and blossoms that put her foes to sleep.

She'd activated all her placeable skills underground, and they'd been yanked

to the surface along with her.

Like a hunter waiting to pounce on its prey. The boss was forced into a zone of peril.

“Lure of the Deep.”

The twisted throne no longer blocked evil skills, so she could sit right there and snare the boss—half-sunk in her mire—with her tentacles. Her leftover Devours swallowed all the health left after Sally’s attack.

The battle done, Maple put her tentacles, gardens, and throne away, relieved it had worked out.

“My first time trying that with anyone else in tow! I was so glad it took you with me.”

“It sure bailed me out of a pinch. That’s a real good skill. And it’s got room to grow.”

“Leveling it is kinda hard, though. There’s a long cooldown before I can use it again, but it’s the only thing I have access to so far.”

“Then you’ll just have to dive under every time the cooldown ends. Although if you do that anywhere and everywhere, you’ll probably scare the crap out of people. Anyway—boss down.”

“Finally! So where do we go now?”

“Follow me. There should be a passage leading to the peak in back.”

They searched the boss room, and like Sally said, there was a narrow crack leading upward. They had to turn sideways to fit through, emerging above.

“Much more peaceful here.”

“Whoa!”

They were up above the storm. Like the flying castle, a sea of clouds was visible below. At this hour, the sky was still blue—but this was the highest point on the seventh stratum.

The peak was only just large enough for the two of them to stand together, but they could see for miles.

“Mm, maybe we should have come at night. We already did the flying castle... oh, well.”

“But it’s still pretty!”

“Heh-heh. Maple, you remember I said it didn’t matter when we came?”

“.....? Yeah, you did say that.”

“Again, sorry if I’m wrong. I won’t drop you.”

With that, Sally picked Maple up.

“Er, uh?!”

“Here goes! Leap!”

Sally bounded off their narrow perch into the sky above, then made more footholds in the air, climbing higher and higher.

“Hokay...and we’re really here.”

“Really where?!”

Sally had taken one last jump—and they escaped gravity’s pull, floating in space. An indigo magic circle appeared in the sky directly overhead.

“Ha-ha, I’d love to see anyone try that without good cause.”

“Whoa!”

“Time to teleport.”

With that, they vanished—and a moment later, the magic circle faded away.

Maple slowly opened her eyes. They were still floating. She took a look around.

Once, she and Sally had found a view underground that mimicked the night sky. But here, the difference was clear.

Maple was floating *in* the night sky.

The real sky would never work like this, but that hardly mattered. The view before her was like the star-scape seen from the surface, but with herself flung out into the middle of it.

She was back-to-back with Sally, drifting.

“A bit surprised it really was true.”

“You just soared off into the sky! No one would find that by accident.”

“I dunno. You might well have fired your weapons and gone rocketing into it.”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha...”

“See, you can’t even deny it.”

Sally glanced over her shoulder, then reached out and picked up a light drifting past—then tossed it away.

“Heh-heh...like a shooting star.”

“You can touch them?!”

Maple followed suit, grabbing and throwing a light.

“Hmm, it’s like we’re in a miniature universe.”

“That sounds right!”

Maple and Sally tossed lights back and forth at each other, drifting around, then took a seat on the oversized moon, gazing at the stars.

“Oh, I had Iz make us some food, too.”

“Really?”

“Mm-hmm. Lemme get it out. Here...”

Sally took a basket out of her inventory, but it looked ready to drift away. She quickly tried to grab it, but almost drifted away herself. Maple had to catch them both. Only then were they able to get the food and drinks out.

“Cheers!”

“Mm, cheers.”

“Oh, that’s good! I dunno, today keeps reminding me of when we first started playing.”

“Powerful ice monsters, food beneath the stars, and my skill?” Sally said.

Maple blinked at her. “Eh-heh-heh. You were thinking the same thing?”

“Yeah. It sure takes me back.”

“But Iz makes much better food.”

“True.”

Holding her glass in one hand, Sally grabbed a passing light, flipping it around her fingers.

“Next time, I’ll find a good view!” Maple said. “With the event coming, that might be a ways off, though.”

“Looking forward to it.”

“As you should!”

Sally looked up at the stars, tossed the light in her hand away, and drained her glass.

“Wish we could stay like this forever.”

“Yeah! It’s just that pretty.”

“Heh-heh...that, too.”

But their time was limited. Once the basket was empty, they kept their word, procuring gifts for everyone back at the guild.

“These are the obvious choice!” Sally said, scooping up several stars. They turned into items in her hand, with a bottle to boot.

“A Handful of Stardust.”

“Let’s get enough for everyone! They’re not gonna vanish on us, are they?”

“I don’t think so.”

Once they had enough for every guild member, their final pre-event sightseeing trip came to an end.



Epilogue

A few hours after their trip ended, the ninth event's details were revealed.

There was no new map; instead, each layer had time-limited monsters added, and the total number killed would determine how much of the eighth stratum was available to a player at the start—and score medals for everyone involved.

Maple Tree looked this over and were relieved they didn't have to try that hard.

"There's no guild-specific ranking. It's just how many the entire player base kills."

"I'm curious about the materials these limited monsters drop, though. Especially if this is tied to the new stratum—they might drop some good stuff."

"Hopefully, we can hunt them while grinding levels. And these medal rewards should motivate everyone."

"There've been a bunch of challenging events in a row. I'm down with one where we can relax and take it easy. Gives me a chance to stock up on grimoires."

"Let's do our best, Mai!"

"Y-yes! I want to beat lots of these. That new skill should help!"

"Looks like we can figure out how to handle these other guilds next time. Whew, a reprieve!"

Sally did not think she was ready for an immediate PvP event.

That last fight had proven how quickly she could go from dominating to dead. She'd have to hunt down some skills that could change that.

"If they're on the eighth stratum, great...but we'll find out."

While Sally's mind was on potential PvP, Maple was entirely preoccupied with the new event.

“Been a while since the last hunting event. But now I’ve got Atrocity!”

Seventh stratum players had gotten used to seeing her run around in monster form. No need to hide it anymore, and it more than made up for the lack of mobility that had hindered her in previous events.

“Welp, that’s the ninth event! Let’s all do what we can!”

This might classify as a co-op event, but everyone in Maple Tree was pretty strong; they’d be less efficient if they fought together. Ideally, they’d all be out fighting solo, killing monsters as they spotted them.

No one in the guild objected; everyone would handle it their own way.

“Each monster counts the same, so it might help to go to layers and areas without many people. Like Iz said, the materials they drop might be the real prize here.”

The monster levels varied by stratum, so everyone could go somewhere right for them.

“But the event length is interesting. Are they trying to give us enough time, or...?”

Kasumi trailed off, unsure where that thought was going.

And the length reminded her of something else—what had happened to Maple during the bull hunt event.

Maple herself and the twins—who hadn’t joined yet—wondered what the others had started whispering about but were too excited to worry about it long.

“Good luck, you two!”

“Okay!”

“If we can get more medals...”

Excited and terrified by the prospect of Maple derailing this event again, Maple Tree set about their final grinding runs.

A decorative header featuring the word "AFTERWORD" in a bold, pixelated font. It is surrounded by five stylized, four-pointed floral or star-like symbols in a light gray color, arranged in a circular pattern around the text.

AFTERWORD

If you happened to pick up Volume 10, nice to meet you. If you've been reading from the start, you have my heartiest thanks for that. I am Yuumikan.

Volume 10 means we're in the double digits—worth celebrating! Getting here has meant all kinds of new experiences. Manga, phone games, TV anime—all things that had never happened to me before, and all thanks to you.

What did you think of the anime? I hope you enjoyed it. A story that started out as words on a screen has now given the characters voices. A delight, but almost scarily so—a strange contradiction. Perhaps these pages will now give you a more vivid glimpse of the characters' voices and expressions. That is less the result of improved technique on my part than it is the support of so many talented individuals. What I began alone has taken me so far.

As for the next season, I hope you'll be patient on that front. I'll be doing my part to ensure you all experience Maple's adventures again!

In Volume 10, the story has reached a new phase, and it feels more like the first volume. Maple and Sally, out exploring and sightseeing—and making new friends. I hope you enjoyed it. Now that I think about it, it's strange how fast we'll all be on the same page with these new characters. Maple existed for over a year before she first received an illustration, after all. It felt like no time at all but it actually took quite a while.

I keep looking back here, but perhaps it's time I wrapped this up. Not to repeat myself, but I hope you'll keep enjoying the manga, the game, the anime, and of course—the novels.

This series is getting quite lengthy.

But Maple and company are not going anywhere.

I hope you'll join us once more.

And are looking forward to Volume 11!

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