A Late-Start Tamer's Laid-Back Life

2

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CONTENTS

Prologue

Chapter One: Don't Underestimate Weeds!

Chapter Two: Life with Bear Bear

Chapter Three: Plenty of Things to Do in Town

Chapter Four: The World Is a Scary Place

Chapter Five: Welcome to Silver-Haired's Farm

Chapter Six: There Are Many Kinds of Players out There

Epilogue

Prologue

“How is it, Rick? Tasty?”

“Chirp!”

“Glad to hear it, buddy!”

Rick, my newly tamed Gray Squirrel, let out a joyous squeak as he feasted on the acorn cookie I gave him, his cheeks puffed out from the excess bites he had crammed into his mouth.

“That’s freaking adorable...” I sighed.

“Chirp?”

“Go on, have some more!”

“Chirp!” He closed his eyes as I stroked his head gently, a look of pure contentment on his face.

“Mm-mm!”

“...!”

“Whoa there.”

As I was playing with Rick, I suddenly felt something bump against my hip, followed by a light tug on my robe. I turned around to find my two other tamed monsters there. Olto, the green-haired gnome, was hugging my waist, and Sakura, a pink-haired tree nymph, was tugging at the hem of my robe. Both of them glanced up at me expectantly.

“What’s up? You two wanna play too?”

“Mm.”

“...”

“You little munchkins!”

“Mm-mm!”

“...♪”

Olto and Sakura beamed with delight as I tousled their hair. They were a mess by the time I was done, but they didn’t seem to mind.

“Chirp chirp!” Rick squeaked as he climbed on top of my head. He was determined not to be excluded.

“Come to join us, Rick?”

“Chirp,” he replied as he munched on the rest of his cookie.

“Hey! Quit spilling crumbs on me!”

“Chirp?”

Judging by the huge mess I had seen him making earlier, my head was no doubt filthy now. As much as I wanted to dust the crumbs out of my hair, both of my hands had already been claimed by Sakura and Olto.

“Mm!”

“...♪”

“Oh well, I’ll deal with it later.”

Better to enjoy this blissful moment surrounded by my three adorable tamed monsters while it lasted.

“I wasn’t sure how things would turn out at first, but I’m glad I decided to continue playing this game.”

If I had chosen to rebuild my character back then instead of sticking it out, I wouldn’t be living my best life, like I was right now.

“Come here, you cuties.” I beckoned to my monsters.

“Mm-mmm!”

“...♪”

“Chirp chirp!”

This was only the beginning. Just thinking about the many more exciting and joyful moments sure to come made me smile.

“Man, I can hardly wait!”

Chapter One: Don’t Underestimate Weeds!

“Add this and this and mix ’em all up...”

“Chirp?”

“Oh, hey, Rick.”

As I was cooking on the table in the barn, Rick climbed up on my shoulder and glanced down to observe. I wondered at first if he was interested in the cooking process until it occurred to me he might have just been drawn to the food. My hunch turned out to be correct—he scampered down my shoulder and began sniffing at the blue acorns and walnuts among the assortment of ingredients.

“I need those for cooking, Rick. Don’t eat them,” I cautioned.

“Chirp?” He looked at me questioningly.

I was currently testing out some recipes that I’d unlocked in the past few days upon obtaining new ingredients. First on the list was a recipe using the green peaches I’d just harvested. Since I had four of them, I could attempt the dish a few times.

“Guess I’ll start with this one first.”

I pulled up my status window and viewed my list of available recipes for Cooking. Recipes that I hadn’t tried out yet were listed as *????*; if the box was also colored gray, that meant I lacked the ingredients to make them. White squares, on the other hand, indicated that I had all the necessary ingredients.

I selected a square that listed the following ingredients: honey, fruit, and water. If I had to hazard a guess, I’d say it was likely a recipe for the honey carrot juice that I got from Alyssa. Although that drink used carrots rather than peaches, I figured I’d be able to make something similar.

“Let’s give it a shot.”

I chopped up a peach and added it to my mortar along with some honey and purified water for good measure. After stirring everything together, I infused

the mixture with magic, and within seconds, I had an item.

“Still wish I knew where these containers come from,” I muttered, eyeing the clear plastic cup that had suddenly appeared before me, filled with a translucent, pale-green liquid.

Wasn’t this a little *too* easy, though, even for Auto Mode? Not that I expected it to be all *that* complicated, seeing as it was just mixing ingredients together...

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Name: Honey Peach Juice
Rarity: 2 / Quality: 3★
Effect: Recovers hunger status by 32%.
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According to my Appraisal skill, the liquid in the cup was indeed juice.

“No surprise there.”

“Chirp?” Rick squeaked curiously.

“Come to think of it, this is your first time seeing me cook something, isn’t it?” I asked him.

“Chirp!”

Rick seemed fascinated by the cup that had suddenly appeared, and began sniffing at it. After a few whiffs, however, he turned up his nose.

“Oh. Do you not like juice, buddy?”

“Chirp.”

Apparently, Rick was not a fan. He curled up in a ball at the edge of the table, giving no indication of even wanting to taste it. He had seemed interested in the walnuts and blue acorns earlier, but he was a squirrel-type monster, after all. Perhaps he preferred nuts?

“Hmm, should probably test that out later.”

Right now, I needed to focus on improving my honey peach juice. Auto Mode allowed me to churn it out in no time flat, but the end quality was way too low for ingredients as valuable as I was using. If I was going to get the most out of

them, I needed to raise the quality.

“This is where the fun starts.”

After experimenting with various methods, including different ways of chopping the ingredients and boiling water, I achieved the following result:

Name: Honey Peach Juice

Rarity: 2 / Quality: 5★

Effect: Recovers hunger status by 24%. Endurance +1 for 1 hour.

“No way. A buff?”

Although its hunger status recovery rate had dropped slightly, this new batch of juice came with a buff.

“Dang, that’s pretty dope.”

I’d never seen food items with a positive status effect before, so I hadn’t been expecting this. *I mean, a tasty meal that comes with an Endurance buff? Talk about a win.*

I almost forgot to mention this, but simply put, buffs refer to all status effects that benefit the user. This includes stat boosts and resistances to certain ailments. In contrast, effects that negatively affect your stats are called debuffs. The honey peach juice that I just created had a buff that boosted your stats.

“Never knew you could get buffs from food...!”

So...what was I waiting for? I *had* to try out the other recipes too! Who knew what kind of handy-dandy item I might create next?

“Let’s try making some food rations with blue acorns next.”

“Chirp!”

“You wanna help, bud? Awesome, thanks.”

Rick scooped up some blue acorns into his tiny paws and moved towards me. His interest seemed renewed now that I was making something using one of his

favorite foods.

Mix some edible grass and blue acorns together, then grind it all into a paste. Easy as that. The mortar glowed once again as I infused it with magic, producing a fragrant bar of food rations in no time.

“Looks like that went well too. Let’s try it with walnuts next.”

Nothing complicated about this batch either; it was just more grinding and mixing. Although both food rations looked almost exactly the same, my Appraisal skill let me know that one was an acorn cookie and the other a walnut cookie. Their recovery rates were also slightly different; the walnut cookie restored your hunger status by an extra five percent. What mattered the most, however, was the taste. With gusto, I started right in on the juice and blue acorn cookie.

Munch munch...

“Whoa! This stuff is great!”

The acorn cookie tasted like the kind of energy bars I was used to eating in real life. Although it was pretty dry and less sweet, it was still a huge improvement on the food rations I’d been eating up until now. Beats me how I ever managed to eat those in the first place.

“How about this one?” I muttered, taking a bite out of the walnut cookie next.

“Hmm... Yep, it’s good. Might be slightly sweeter, in fact.”

The walnut cookie was sweeter and less dry than the acorn one. That was probably due to the fact that walnuts were a slightly rarer ingredient.

“This juice better not let me down.”

It turned out to be way tastier than I expected, and perfectly sweet. No complaints there. It was a wonder how I had survived on food rations and water all this time.

“I should stock up on cookies and juice from now on.”

This wasn’t going to be an easy task, though. Unlike food rations, which I could make five of in one go, I could only make one cookie at a time using multiple ingredients. Still, after finding out how good these were, there was no

way I could go back to those dry and tasteless energy bars. Besides, it seemed like there was still plenty of room for improvement on these cookies.

“Maybe I’ll try adding honey next.”

Should I have removed the husks too? Actually, hadn’t I once heard someone mention that it’s best to soak acorns in water to get rid of the bitterness?

“Hmm, that sounds too time-consuming, though...”

I’ll just remove the husks and crush them for now, I decided. I concocted my next recipe by adding honey, edible grass, and some dehulled and crushed blue acorns to my mortar, then repeated the process I had used with the walnuts. From this, I managed to produce two unique recipes—user-created recipes that weren’t available on the usual recipe page and were listed separately.

“I’m getting pretty psyched here.”

I was determined to experiment more and create tons of original recipes. Users could name the recipes they created, though by default, my two new recipes were named Honey Acorn Cookie and Honey Walnut Cookie. Although their recovery rates were the same as their non-honey counterparts, the most important thing to me was how they tasted.

“My hunger status is currently at a hundred percent, but...”

To hell with that, I thought, taking a bite out of the honey acorn cookie.

“Oh man, this tastes incredible!”

The cookie was much sweeter this time and tasted utterly delicious. I was sure it would cost me a pretty penny if I were to buy it—that was how tasty it was.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Hm? Hey, Rick. Curious about this?”

“Chirp!”

Rick seemed interested in the honey walnut cookie on the table. Did he want to eat it?

“Okay. Go ahead.”

“Chirp!”

Naturally. I placed the cookie in front of Rick, who immediately latched onto it, holding it neatly with his front paws and nibbling it with his front teeth.

“How is it?”

“Chirp chirp!” Rick gave me a thumbs-up with his tiny paw. I guessed that was a yes from him. The only problem was that he was spilling crumbs everywhere. Seriously, this game had no business being this realistic.

“Great, the honey ones were a huge success. What else can I try?”

What other ingredients could I mix into juice or cookies? I pondered that as I perused my inventory. I had all sorts of items, but...

“I know. How about medicinal herbs?”

Who knows? It might give me an HP recovery boost. While I might be losing out on flavor, I could deal with that if it gave me an exceptional buff, although it was best if it tasted great *and* came with a positive status effect.

“Please don’t turn out like those awful spinach ones,” I begged. Just remembering the taste was enough to make me cringe. Not only had they been super bitter, but they tasted like dirt and made my mouth extremely dry. This time, though, I was adding nuts and honey to the mix. At worst, they ought to cancel each other out, and the result should wind up tasting like regular food rations. At least, I hoped that was the case!

As I was grinding the ingredients to a paste and praying for good results, I suddenly heard a small *Poof!* and black smoke rose from my mortar.

“Yikes! I-It exploded!”

It looked like my experiment had resulted in failure. I was left with a black, coal-like substance, which, according to my assessment, was nothing but trash. *Ouch.* That was harsh.

“Are my Cooking skills that bad?”

It was either that, or the system didn’t allow this particular combination of ingredients. After all, I couldn’t have messed up any steps in such a simple process. It wasn’t as if I had an endless supply of nuts, and I didn’t think I could

handle any more failures, so instead of combining them with unrelated ingredients, I decided to try adding both walnuts and acorns together—mixed nuts, if you will. I appeared to be on the right track here. My experiment was a success, producing the following cookie:

Name: Honey Nut Cookie

Rarity: 2 / Quality: 3★

Effect: Recovers hunger status by 27%. Prevents hunger status from dropping for 1 hour.

Not only did it recover my hunger status, but it prevented it from dropping for one hour to boot. This would make it much easier to manage my hunger. My Cooking skills were already an effective deterrent against hunger, but still, it would help. Let's see, what else could I use? I was hesitant to use herbs, but I didn't have any other nuts on hand.

Wait a minute. I *did* have one other ingredient.

"I can use wild strawberries, can't I?"

Wild strawberries were a type of herb that I'd been asked to grow by the florist NPC. Since they didn't have a specified delivery date, I could spare a few for cooking as long as I left some for propagating later. Having made up my mind, I added a few to my Honey Nut Cookie mixture.

Name: Honey Nut Cookie with Herbs

Rarity: 2 / Quality: 3★

Effect: Recovers hunger status by 27%. Prevents hunger status from dropping for 1 hour.

Aside from its name, everything else was the same. How about the taste, though?

"It looks pretty much the same as the acorn cookie."

Upon eating it, however, the difference was apparent. A hint of acidity cut through the sweet cookie, giving it a refreshing taste. The sweetness of the honey and the sourness of the strawberries complemented each other perfectly, just how I liked it. I made a mental note to grow more wild strawberries from now on. While I'd thought plain blue acorn cookies were pretty decent, now that I'd tasted this, there was no going back. Even if it meant using up more ingredients, it was worth it for the taste. *Man, I sure am acquiring an expensive palate,* I fretted as I munched on the honey nut cookie with herbs and drank my honey peach juice.

"This is the life," I sighed. I'd be hard-pressed to eat something this posh-tasting in real life, as juice and cookies of this quality would likely cost a pretty penny if I were to buy them. Besides, eating in-game didn't affect your actual weight, no matter how much you ate. I could see why cooking enthusiasts wanted to recreate real-life recipes in LJO.

"Hey, maybe Olto would like some too. It *is* pretty tasty."

I called Sakura and Olto over and offered them some juice.

"Mm-mm!" Olto exclaimed delightedly. Clearly, he had a sweet tooth. As usual, he placed a hand on his hip and downed the juice in one gulp, like someone fresh out of a bath drinking coffee milk.

"Mm-mm-mm-mmm!"

Just like before, Olto got a fresh case of the zoomies, bursting out of the barn and resuming farming at breakneck speed. It was probably best to give him juice as often as possible to boost his productivity.

"How about you, Sakura?" I asked, trying to offer her some juice as well. However, she made no move to accept it.

"...?"

Since she possessed Photosynthesis, she appeared to not require food. While that was useful, it also meant that she wouldn't get bursts of energy from food like Olto did. How about Rick, then? I wasn't sure if he actually drank juice, though.

"Chirp? Chirp chirp!"

Guess not. It looked like different species had different tastes and foods they could or couldn't eat, and giving them something they liked resulted in a motivation boost.

"In that case, I better grow more fruits. I'll need them to feed my tamed monsters."

Seeing as I expected to acquire more monsters down the road, I had to make sure there was enough food for them as well. With that in mind, I handed some green peaches, walnuts, and blue acorns to Olto to propagate.

The following day was another productive day of harvesting and crafting, my yields about as decent as usual.

"The peach tree's blooming already? Wow."

My green peach tree currently sported five buds. At this rate, I could probably expect another harvest tomorrow. Once every two days was a pretty good pace if you asked me.

Unlike the green peach tree, which had grown steadily and already borne fruit, the Lakeside Sequoia had shown no signs of growing ever since it had produced Sakura. Judging by its sporadic growth spurts, things weren't as straightforward as they seemed. Still, it had seemingly grown overnight in the past, so it wouldn't be surprising if it suddenly became enormous; there was no telling what would happen.

"Man, I sure have a lot of saplings now."

This farm could very well turn into an orchard in the near future. In fact, all of my companions possessed skills suited for that purpose: Olto and Sakura had Arboriculture, while Rick was capable of harvesting nuts and Pruning, which was a skill that improved the quality of the trees in your care. I really *was* going to end up with an orchard at this rate. Regardless, I had no intention of pursuing only farming —I was keen on going on field expeditions too.

"If I want to do that, I'll have to complete more quests and raise my level."

I decided to go report on the quests I had already fulfilled the requirements for. After delivering my daily batch of potions to Alyssa's stall, I headed to my

real destination with my tamed monsters in tow: the florist I had received the wild strawberry seeds from.

“Hi there,” I called out.

“Hey! Fancy seeing you again, boy!” The old man greeted me gruffly, sounding more like a greengrocer or fishmonger than a florist.

“I brought the wild strawberries you asked for.”

“Excellent! You grew them! Thank you! Here’s your reward.”

Delivery Quest

Requirement: Grow and deliver ten wild strawberries.

Rewards: 200 G, mint seeds.

Time Limit: None

I received 200 G and two types of mint seeds from the old man—five blue mint seeds and five red. *Do they smell or taste different from each other?* I wondered. I looked forward to finding out.

“I appreciate your help, son. The name’s Spade. Pleased to meet ya.”

Now that he mentioned it, I hadn’t introduced myself yet.

“Hi, I’m Yuto,” I told him, shaking his hand.

“Well, Yuto, you seem trustworthy, so I’d like to ask you a favor. Mind hearing me out?”

“What is it?” I asked, taken aback by the abrupt request. All I had done was grow some weeds.

“Thing is, my brother runs a stall, and he’s been having a bit of trouble stocking up on items. I’d appreciate it if you could give him a hand.”

“I’d like to, but I’m not very good at fighting.”

“Doesn’t matter. Just hear him out, will ya?”

Hmm, was this some kind of quest chain? It seemed like the wild strawberry

quest had triggered another request. Oh well, I supposed it wouldn't hurt to hear what his brother had to say. I could always say no if I couldn't handle it.

"All right. I'll pay him a visit."

"Excellent! My brother's stall is in the North District!"

At the sound of Spade's voice, a red dot appeared on the map, marking my destination.

"See you around."

"See ya! Say hi to my little bro for me!" Spade waved me off with a grin. Next stop: Spade's brother's stall in the North District.

"Mm-mm."

"...♪"

Olto and Sakura walked behind me amicably. At first glance, Sakura looked like she could be Olto's big sis, but in fact Olto was showing her around as her senior, pointing out familiar places and explaining them to her.

"Mm."

"...♪"

"Mm-mm."

"...!"

While I hadn't a clue what they were talking about, I couldn't help but smile at their exchange. After walking for a while, we arrived at our destination, where there was indeed a stall.

"That's it, right?"

I was pretty sure I had passed through this area during my mapping quest, but I didn't recall seeing any shops back then. Perhaps it had only become visible now that I'd accepted this particular mission.

"Hello?" I called out tentatively.

"Greetings, young fella. What can I do for ye?"

The old man who greeted me wore a stern expression exactly like that of the

florist, although he seemed slightly shorter and broader.

“Spade, the florist, mentioned you to me. He said that you were having a bit of trouble.”

“Ah. Are ye one of those otherworldly travelers?”

“I am. My name’s Yuto.”

“Mm.”

“...”

“Chirp!”

“And these are my tamed monsters,” I added.

“Ha ha ha ha! Y’all are adorable little munchkins! Welcome!” Spade’s brother guffawed as my three companions bowed and greeted him like obedient children.

“I’m not sure if I can accept your request yet, but could you let me know what’s going on?”

“Sure thing. The name’s Ryver. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you too.”

“As ye can see, I mainly deal with herbs and spices, but...”

As he said, the stall sold a variety of colorful herbs and spices such as salt, pepper, red mint, and basilil. Just looking around at them was fascinating. Out of all the condiments, my eyes were drawn to some dried herbs sold in small individual packets.

“They must be herbal teas!”

The leaves I spotted weren’t any old dried herbs, but tisanes. There were several types available:

Name: Herbal Tea Leaves (Chamomilé)

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 8★

Effect: None. Edible.

Name: Herbal Tea Leaves (Lahvender)

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 8★

Effect: None. Edible.

Can I make these myself? I wondered, ecstatic about what I'd found. At present, the only drinks I had were water and juice; I had been hoping for some tea too. While some people weren't fond of herbal teas, I actually liked them. I was thrilled at the prospect of being able to drink tea in-game.

"Curious?" Ryver chuckled dryly as I picked up one of the packets in spite of myself. Yikes, I'd interrupted him!

"S-Sorry."

"Ha ha, it's fine. Means you're interested in my products, right?"

Thank goodness he was a nice person.

"Sorry, you were saying...?"

"Thing is, my herb supplier is closed for the time being, and I haven't been able to get my hands on new herbs. I'd like ye to grow a few for me."

"Will I be getting seeds?"

"Of course."

In that case, growing them wouldn't be too difficult. However, I was reluctant to grow hundreds of herbs on a regular basis, not to mention they would take up a lot of space on my farm. Thankfully, it turned out to be a onetime deal.

"I've already found a new supplier—it's just that it'll take them ten days to harvest and deliver the goods. As long as I get my delivery for this week, I'll be fine."

Delivery Quest

Requirement: Grow and deliver eight sprigs each of blue sage and red sage.

Rewards: 300 G, lahvender seeds.

Time Limit: Four days

As always, the reward was extremely low. If this was a quest chain, however, it was possible that I'd get something good by the end of it. I didn't want to turn down a request from an NPC, and besides, I had an idea. The NPCs in this game apparently operated on a highly advanced AI system and were fairly flexible. In that case, I figured, perhaps I could negotiate with them.

"Do you sell herb seeds? If not herbs, flowers will do too."

"Ye want seeds?"

"Yes. I'm interested in herbs."

"That's a pretty rare request for an otherworldly traveler. If ye deliver those herbs to me, I'll consider it."

"Really?"

"Sure thing. It's not as if these are rare items anyway."

Ryver showed me the herb and flower seeds he currently had in stock, which were oregarno, muggywort, hydrangeas, and cosmos. Good thing I'd asked. Or perhaps it was my high favorability score that was getting me results. After all, I had fulfilled his brother's request. Since Ryver had promised to throw these seeds in as an additional reward, I had no reason to say no to him.

"I'll do it."

"Ye will?! Thanks, much appreciated."

That was how I received ten blue sage and red sage seeds each. I also bought some herbal tea to try since I was curious about its taste. On the way home, I mulled over the remaining space on my farm. I didn't have much space left to plant the seeds I'd been asked to grow. I'd need a bigger patch to grow more herbs if I planned on making tisanes as well.

"Guess I'll buy a new farm."

Herbs were considered weeds, which meant they'd still have a relatively high

rating even if I didn't put in much effort. Since I didn't have to worry about the soil grade, the cheapest 2,000 G option ought to suffice. *Might as well buy more land,* I figured, otherwise I wouldn't have enough space for growing plants for experimenting.

Having made my decision, I headed to the Farming Guild and purchased two additional plots of land. The process went off without a hitch, as I had gone through it countless times already. As soon as I returned to our farm, Olto and I began sowing the herb seeds I'd just acquired.

"Mm-mm, mm-mm."

"I'm gonna water them now. Ready?"

"Mm!"

I waited for Olto to form some mounds and drop the seeds into them, and then I watered the plots. Instantly, the seeds began sprouting thanks to Olto's Forced Cultivation EX skill.

"No matter how many times I see this, it never gets old."

At this rate, I could most likely harvest and deliver them tomorrow.

"Let's have some fun experimenting next."

Since Olto and Sakura still had some work left to do, I decided to do a bit of crafting while I waited.

"Wanna help me, Rick?" I asked.

"Chirp!" he replied.

"I now appoint you my assistant."

"Chirp chirp!"

Rick saluted me in reply. I gave him a pat on the head before checking my inventory.

"Let's see, what weeds do I have?"

At the moment, I had basilil, chamomilé, wild strawberries, and tulips. Since it didn't take much effort to mass-produce basilil and chamomilé, I figured I could reserve half of the harvest for experimentation. These experiments were for

more than just pure curiosity, though. Despite weeds not having any special effects, be it on their own or as processed goods, they tasted and smelled excellent. For the sake of my taste buds and enjoyment, further research was crucial. If I succeeded at making herbal tea leaves, I'd be able to drink affordable and delicious tea anytime, anywhere. This *definitely* called for more experimenting!

Truthfully, I really wanted to drink coffee in-game, but unfortunately, I hadn't heard any rumors of its discovery yet. If only I had a coffee plant, I could grow it myself—making my own coffee with the beans I harvested sounded lovely. For now, though, it still seemed like a distant dream.

"Let's see, how do you make herbal tea leaves...?"

Despite any impressions I might have given to the contrary, I was in fact an avid herbal tea drinker. Besides herbal teas, I enjoyed coffee and black tea as well. While I'd never attempted to make them from scratch, I was well acquainted with how they looked and felt.

"Going by common sense, you just have to dry them, right?"

Should I try drying them with Alchemy? After all, I'd failed miserably when I tried to dry medicinal herbs in the sun. I felt like that was how you usually made tea leaves, though...

"Hang on a second."

I recalled the time I had fresh herbal tea when I went all the way to Daikanyama to meet one of our clients, a nasty sales manager. We'd gone to a fancy little café that I'd most likely never have visited on my own, where they poured hot water over freshly picked herbs. I remembered it clearly, as I had been completely blown away by how good it tasted.

"Guess I'll try that first."

I boiled some water in my pot before adding a sprig of chamomilé. If I remembered correctly, the staff at the cafe added the herbs to a glass pot filled with hot water and left them to steep for a while. Recalling the steps to making the fresh herbal tea I had before, I turned off the heat and waited for a while. Within minutes, the water gradually turned green.

“Chirp?” Rick peered into the pot, fascinated by its contents.

“Don’t touch it, it’s hot.”

“Chirp.”

“Did it work, though?”

Name: Weed Water

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 2★

Effect: None. Edible.

Nope. Sadly, I’d failed at making herbal tea. Judging by its name, it didn’t sound particularly appetizing either, but...

“Wonder what it tastes like?”

“Chirp?”

Rick stared at me with a bewildered expression on his face, as if to say, *Ew, you’re actually drinking* that*?* Ignoring his appalled look, I took a swig of the sickly green water.

“Bleugh!” I sputtered.

“*Chiiirp!*”

Yikes! The weed water I spat out hit Rick right in the face. He covered his eyes with his small front paws, rolling about on the table until he rolled right off it, having gained too much momentum.

“You okay, Rick?!”

“Chirp!”

Clearly, he wasn’t, as he continued to roll around on the barn floor. I whipped out a glass of water from my inventory and splashed Rick’s face with it, determined to wash him clean.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Riiick!”

After repeating the process a few times and drenching Rick's entire body, he finally seemed to calm down.

"You okay now?"

"Chirp..."

Perhaps "calm" was not the right word. My poor, soaked squirrel appeared to be sulking.

"Sorry," I apologized. *Come on, don't look at me like that.*

"Chirp chirp!"

"Pfft!"

The little rascal! He shook his whole body dry and sprayed me, right in the face! As a result, my face was covered with droplets of water.

"Rick..."

"Chirp."

He looked the other way and pretended to whistle, as though this had been a complete accident. I grumbled inwardly, but I supposed it *was* my fault this had happened in the first place.

"C'mere, you."

"Chirp!"

I let him off the hook, settling for simply ruffling his fur. *Let's see how you like that!* But first things first, I had to figure out what to do with the weed water.

"What should we do with this abominable concoction...?"

"Chirp..."

The taste was truly horrendous—absolutely disgusting. It was like someone took all the grassiness and bitterness from the chamomilé and distilled that. It was just as bad as those gag-worthy spinach-flavored rations. I repeated the experiment, this time with basilil, only to end up with the same result. All I managed to produce was a greenish, foul-tasting water. It looked like making fresh herbal tea wasn't an option.

“Chirp...”

Seeing Rick keeping his distance from the weed water, I wondered if I couldn’t use it as a weapon instead. Perhaps I could deal some serious damage to a large monster if I threw it into their mouth?

“Or it might just go berserk and trample me to death.”

I decided to stash it away in my inventory, just in case.

“Guess I’ll give up on making fresh herbal tea and stick to dried tea leaves.”

This too was a straightforward process. All I had to do was apply Drying, an Alchemy art, to the herbs.

“Dry!”

The instant I used the art, the herbs I had placed in front of me began to dry up, and I was left with a shriveled-up husk of them in no time. They looked exactly like the tisanes I’d bought from Ryver’s herb shop.

```
Name: Herbal Tea Leaves (Chamomilé)
Rarity: 1 / Quality: 4★
Effect: None. Edible.
```

“All right, it worked.”

“Chirp!”

Now I knew that if I wanted to make herbal tea, I just had to dry some herbs. The only downside was that the quality was pretty low.

“Let’s compare it with the tea I bought.”

I made both teas the exact same way using water from the well, curious to see how much they would differ...

```
Name: Herbal Tea (Chamomilé)
Rarity: 1 / Quality: 3★
```

Effect: None. Edible.

Name: Herbal Tea (Chamomilé)

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 7★

Effect: None. Edible.

Time for a taste test. I decided to try the tea made with the leaves I had dried first.

"...Mm, tastes good," I commented after a sip. It tasted just like the herbal teas I was used to drinking. Next up was the store-bought tea. I took a slurp of it.

"Hm?"

It tastes a bit different...I think? The seven-star tea did seem a bit more fragrant, but I wasn't too sure. To be honest, I could hardly tell the difference.

"Want some, Rick?"

"Chirp."

Rick stuck his nose into the teacup on the table and began drinking. Seeing a squirrel drink tea from a teacup seemed like something out of a fairy tale, and I couldn't resist taking a screenshot. After comparing the two herbal teas, Rick crossed his arms and appeared to ponder his options.

"Chirp... Chirp chirp!" he squeaked after some thought, pointing at the herbal tea with the seven-star rating. Just how poor were my taste buds, anyway?

"Wait, you can drink herbal teas, Rick? Even though you can't drink juice?"

"Chirp."

It looked like he was fine with herbal teas. Given that they didn't have any effects, it probably wasn't that different from drinking water. *Whatever.* Seeing as I couldn't really tell the difference, this meant I didn't have to care about the quality of my herbs! Talk about a silver lining.

"...Well, that's about it for herbal teas."

The next thing I wanted to try making was the potpourri I had seen at the florist. Come to think of it, though, how *did* one go about making potpourri? In the end, all I managed to do was waste my tulips; the only thing I had to show for my efforts was my dried wild strawberries.

```
Name: Dried Herbs (Wild Strawberries)
Rarity: 1 / Quality: 3★
Effect: None. Edible.
```

The wild strawberries had transformed into dried herbs instead of herbal tea. I figured I would have a taste, seeing as they were edible.

"How about you, Rick?" I asked, offering him a strawberry.

"Chirp!" Rick thrust out his paws in a clear *No!* He didn't seem to be a fan of wild strawberries. Weird, considering how he was fine with herbal tea... Puzzled, I popped a dried wild strawberry into my mouth. Hmm, I could only taste the faintest hint of sweetness. However, the scent wasn't bad; it was sweet and acidic, like a blend of strawberries and citrus. Like Spade said, it would probably taste great in herbal teas or cookies, and seemed highly versatile.

"This is worth experimenting with."

"Mm-mm!" Olto greeted me as he entered the barn, followed by Sakura.

"Oh, are you two all done?"

"Mm!"

"...!"

The two of them nodded, beaming, apparently having finished their work on the farm. Just in time too; I was also done with experimenting for the time being.

"All right! Time to go exploring!"

Now that I had Rick and Sakura and was more capable of fighting, I wanted to

get some mulch and water pumice from the Western Forest.

“You guys ready for an adventure?!”

“Mm!”

“...!”

“Chirp chirp!”

I pumped my right fist in the air excitedly, and my companions followed suit. *Gosh, these guys are the best!*



Sakura and Olto engaged in friendly conversation on the way to the Western Gate, trailing a few steps behind me.

“Mmm.”

“...”

From the way they toddled after me, you’d think they were brother and sister. Rick, meanwhile, was curled around my neck like some sort of fur scarf. Although it was a tad too warm to be wearing one, he was just so soft and fluffy, and I loved the feeling of his tail swishing across my skin. I could have stayed this way forever.

On the way to our destination, however, we were met with blatant stares from other players. I thought it might just be my imagination, but some of them were pointing at me too.

“He...on the first day...”

“Silver-Haired’s a Tamer...”

“Multiple titles? Seriously...?”

“Omigosh, a gnome! *wheeze*”

I strained my ears to listen in on their conversations. Sure enough, they *were* talking about me. So the rumors hadn’t subsided yet... Well, it was *only* the tenth day in-game. If, as the Japanese proverb said, it really did take seventy-five days to quell a rumor, I still had sixty-five more days of this to endure.

“Let’s pick up the pace, guys,” I urged. I figured there’d probably be fewer prying stares once we were in the forest.

As I suspected, the forest was almost devoid of other players. Those who had been leveling up and making good progress in the game had long moved on to the next town, while those who remained behind were mainly concentrated in the northern and southern areas, which were more advanced. Therefore, the Western Forest was fairly sparsely populated at this point. There were probably a few players around, but the odds that I would cross paths with any of them in such a wide space were slim.

“Phew, looks like the coast is clear.”

“Mm.”

This was where our adventure *really* started. It was time to head to the stream, which I’d only visited once on the first day.

“We’re gonna try to gather as much stuff as we can on the way to the river. Rick, I’ll leave the nut collecting to you.”

“Chirp chirp!”

From his place on my shoulder, Rick raised his arm in a cute salute, then scampered off into the woods, most likely off to forage some nuts. The four of us headed deeper into the forest, stopping to collect medicinal herbs and nuts on the way.

“Wait, I know this sound...” I gasped. Halfway along our route, I heard a rustling in the grove behind us. I turned around to see three Fanged Rats just poking their heads out of the trees.

“Everyone, get ready to fight!”

Up until a few days ago, I would have died the moment I encountered these creatures, but not anymore!

“Olto, Sakura, you two tank! Rick, attack the enemy!”

“Mm-mm!”

“...!”

“Chirp!”

Of course, I wasn’t going to let everyone else do all the work. I chanted the incantation for my newly acquired Aqua Ball and unleashed my magical attack. Now that I had a proper party, fighting was much easier. Our attacks struck easily while Olto focused on creating a diversion. Thanks to him, we managed to win the battle with very little damage to our side. Even Olto, who had taken the most blows, suffered only minor injuries, as he had been concentrating all his efforts on defending. He didn’t even need a healing item.

“Well done, team!” I crowed. Since I had stocked up on medicine and potions, as long as I didn’t die instantly, risking a respawn was unlikely. Losing any more battles seemed out of the question, at least for now.

“Heh heh heh, I’m no longer the man I once was,” I said, chuckling.

“Mm-mm.”

“...♪”

“Chirp.”

Regardless, Sakura still did most of the heavy lifting, as Olto was only capable of tanking and Rick guerrilla warfare. Meanwhile, Aqua Ball was *my* only form of attack. Truth be told, Sakura was carrying this party on her back as our tank and main attacker. We would’ve been doomed without her.

“Hmm, we gotta balance out our team more.”

Ideally, I wanted Sakura to focus on detaining the enemy with her whip skills and status ailment inflictions. However, given that Rick could only deal so much damage in one blow and I was incapable of consecutive magic attacks, it’d take too much time to defeat our opponent if it was just the two of us. What we needed was a frontline damage-dealer—a close-range combatant.

“If we’re talking close-range melee monsters in this area, it’d have to be *them*.”

By “them,” I meant Wild Dogs, those blasted creatures who had taken my (respawning) virginity. Aside from tree nymphs, which were considered rare, there were six types of monsters available in the Town of Beginning’s neighboring areas: Fanged Rats, Gray Squirrels, Snakes, Rock Ants, Rabbits, and Wild Dogs. Out of those six, Wild Dogs appeared to be the only suitable choice for the role. It was either tame one of those, or buy a monster from the guild.

“Well, guess I could try taming them if I run into a lone dog or two.”

If there were more than two of them, I’d have to abandon ship, since there was no way I could be sure that I wouldn’t kill them.

“Here, Wild Doggy. Come out, come out, wherever you are. Just not more than one at a time, please...”

However, it seemed that the greater your desire for an encounter, the less likely you were to find one. In the end, we didn’t run into any Wild Dogs until we finished searching along the river, when suddenly we encountered a pack of

four.

“Crap! Get ready, guys! Shit’s about to get real!”

This was no time to be conserving my MP. I unleashed Aqua Ball after Aqua Ball while Sakura and Rick attacked the Wild Dogs, sustaining damage all the while. With our combined efforts, we somehow managed to defeat the pack. Even Olto, whose HP plummeted to the red zone during the fight, held up as a meat shield until the end. Once the battle was over, I gave everyone medicine for the first time that day.

“Dang, I’m totally out of MP.”

Even if I did run into another dog, I no longer had enough MP to tame it. I probably still had a few shots in me, but it’d likely take a lot more tries than that to successfully tame a monster.

“Oh well, it is what it is. Let’s go home for today. Besides, it’s not like we’re returning empty-handed.”

“Mm-mm.”

“Chirp.”

“...!”

Online Forum [Farming Rocks!] A Farming Thread for Farmers by Farmers

This is a thread where people who own farms in LJO can exchange information.

From topics concerning large-scale farms to small home gardens, all questions are welcome here.

Please make it clear if your post contains unverified information.

While we're grateful for actual farming tips, we're not sure how practical they'll be in the game.

98: Charm

So we don't know what kind of changes will be made to Selective Breeding yet.

99: Tsugarun

Well, they did say they were implementing the changes to make farming more popular, so it probably won't affect its usability negatively. After all, there are only thirty full-time Farmers at the moment.

Even if you include those with Farming skills, there are still less than a hundred players. There are farms begging to be bought in every town.

100: Thomas

True, Selective Breeding's hella hard to use. Can't wait for the update.

101: Tagosack

I saw the orchard in the Town of Beginnings that everyone’s been talking about.

It really did have green peaches, as well as walnuts and blue acorns and some kind of weird tree I didn’t recognize.

102: Charm

How was it? That orchard belongs to a player, right? I wonder how they’re growing those trees—I’d love to grow some fruits too. Plus, I’d like to know what that mysterious tree is.

103: Tsugarun

You can grow trees from saplings as long as you have Arboriculture. Arboriculture’s a higher level skill derived from Farming, though. I *could* obtain it if only my Farming skill was like, thirteen levels higher.

104: Terrill

I checked out the orchard too. I didn’t see any players, but I did see a young boy plowing the fields like the reports mentioned. Who *is* that boy? An NPC?

105: Tsugarun

If he is, that opens up a lot more possibilities. If players can hire NPCs that have skills they don’t possess, like Arboriculture or Hydroponics, we can cultivate a wider range of crops.

I bet that old geezer who looks after the fields in one of the Zone Three towns has an EX skill. He just strikes me as the type.

Does this mean I can start up an apple orchard anytime as long as I have an apple sapling?

106: Tagosack

Don’t think he’s an NPC since his marker was blue.

From what I could gather, he’s probably a tamed monster—a gnome, I think.

According to the Tamer megathread, Silver-Haired’s first monster was a gnome.

107: Thomas

A gnome, huh? Come to think of it, one of my friends started up a farm with their gnome during beta. I don’t recall gnomes having Arboriculture in their initial skill set, though.

108: Charm

Maybe Silver-Haired kept grinding until it learned that skill?

109: Thomas

I doubt it. My friend’s gnome was over level 20 at the time, and it still hadn’t obtained Arboriculture.

No matter how much of a head start you get, it’s unlikely that a monster who’s been farming for only half a day would level up that fast in the official version.

110: Tsugarun

Might be a new skill that was added at the start of the launch.

111: Terrill

It’s possible.

112: Tagosack

It might not be, though, right?

It *could* be that he hired an NPC with an Arboriculture skill, and I simply didn’t notice when I passed by.

113: Thomas

Another thing: for some reason, Silver-Haired had a crap ton of weeds on his farm. What for?

114: Tsugarun

For leveling up his Farming skill, I guess? Maybe he didn’t have enough medicinal herbs, so he made do with planting weeds instead.

Weeds are a pain in the ass, aren’t they? Leave them for a few days, and they grow back with a vengeance.

115: Tagosack

That might be so, but... Would someone with a farm of that size really do something so pointless?

He must have some kind of reason, although I have no idea what.

Can’t we ask Silver-Haired himself?

116: Charm

Who’s Silver-Haired, by the way?

117: Terrill

No way, don’t tell me you DON’T know.

He’s one of the three unique titleholders, aka the legendary player who achieved three respawns right off the bat LMAO

He’s a silver-haired Tamer and widely known for having a

gnome as his first monster.

118: Charm

The dude really has no privacy, huh lol

Aren’t the devs of this game pretty strict about that sort of stuff, though?

119: Tsugarun

These aren’t details that someone searched for trying to drag him out into the open, but info that got leaked through various channels bit by bit. The devs have no control over it. I doubt they’ll actively try to put a stop to it unless Silver-Haired files a complaint.

Anyway, ever since those players who were harassing him got banned from the game, very few people have tried to ridicule him face-to-face. Besides, most players seem to have a favorable opinion about him these days since people with a different play style tend to stand out and attract a certain amount of followers.

120: Tagosack

Regardless, I’ll have to be careful when approaching Silver-Haired. Who knows, someone might make another GM call. I’d rather die than make the same mistake as those losers.

121: Charm

I’d kill for some info, though. Good luck!

122: Tsugarun

Good luck!

123: Terrill

Don’t actually get reported, though, okay?

124: Thomas

And make sure to bring back some news!

125: Tagosack

I’ll think of something. Y’all could help me out a bit...

The day after we fought the Wild Dogs and narrowly escaped death, I started my morning by concentrating my efforts on farming and crafting.

I spent another busy morning perfecting my honey carrot juice and asking Olto to propagate the green peaches I harvested. Things were only going to get harder from here, though—today was the day I would tame a Wild Dog. Depending on my luck, I might very well have to fight another pack like the day before.

“Meds, ready. Cooking, done.”

What I really wanted was mana potions, but unfortunately, those weren’t available in the Town of Beginnings. My only option was to conserve my MP while fighting, although that meant drawing out the battle and sustaining more damage. In order to make up for that, I needed plenty of recovery items. Thankfully, in my case, I was able to make them myself, so I didn’t have to spend as much money as other players. While ideally I would be making my own mana potions, I had been unsuccessful in obtaining the ingredients for them so far.

“Never even seen anyone selling mana plants.”

I probably wouldn’t be able to get my hands on any until Zone Three, and anyone who did obtain mana plants was likely to use them for themselves rather than sell them in the Town of Beginnings. *Oh well, such is life.* I just had to be careful when fighting.

“Watch out, Wild Dog, I’m comin’ for ya!”

Yesterday’s fight with the pack of four had made me realize just how crucial it was to acquire a frontline attacker. Considering my current level, I wanted to tame one and level it up as soon as possible, meaning I had to tame a Wild Dog by the end of the day no matter what.

“But first, the Farming Guild.”

I hadn’t intended on accepting any quests today as I had more pressing matters to attend to, but it seemed like going to the guild wasn’t something I could avoid. As it happened, someone appeared to have bought a plot of land almost adjacent to mine. While I had no idea who this person was, they were

currently occupying about three slots with some medicinal herbs and unfamiliar weeds, and the sight had made me uneasy.

At the moment, there were still roughly ten spaces between our farms, but what would happen if someone bought a farm right next to yours? Generally speaking, you wouldn't be able to expand your farm any further. Even if I wanted to, I'd have to buy land from another location, away from my current farm. I wasn't very keen on that idea, not to mention it sounded inconvenient.

Given that this was still the first town, I wasn't about to build a megafarm or anything; however, I did want to expand it a bit further, as I intended to make this place my home base for the time being. Therefore, I wanted to know if it was possible to reserve plots of land.

"Welcome," the receptionist at the Farming Guild greeted me.

"Hi. I wanted to ask you a few questions regarding farms..."

After questioning the old man for a while, I found out that plots of land couldn't be reserved or paid for in installments. *What do I do now?* I fretted. I currently had around 28,000 G, which was enough to buy four 6,000 G-grade plots of land, but...

At the moment, I was making about 7,000 to 9,000 G a day by selling regular and various status ailment potions to Alyssa. While this was nothing compared to what top players made by selling the items they got from slaying monsters on the frontlines, it was more than enough to get by in the Town of Beginnings. By expanding my farm, I'd be able to earn even more money and easily recover initial costs. This was all thanks to Olto's hard work at growing high-quality crops. Still, 24,000 G was a lot of money...

In the end, I decided to purchase four 2,000 G plots of land. I could always level up the soil grade later; for now, I could use them for growing weeds. The important thing was that I secured additional space for farming.

On the way home, I stopped by Ryver's stall to deliver the blue and red sage as promised. Thanks to Olto, I had managed to harvest them in one day, although apparently weeds only took two days to grow even without any special effort.

“Thank you! That’s enough to last me a while!” Ryver thanked me profusely as he accepted the herbs from me. “Here’s your reward.”

“Thanks. Um...” I hesitated.

“Hm? What’s the matter, sonny?”

“N-Nothing. Don’t mind me.”

Although I got my reward, the quest chain seemed to have ended. *Too bad.* It might have been a tutorial-type quest for players who obtained Plant Knowledge. Still, I had managed to buy oregarno, muggywort, cosmos, and hydrangea seeds, so I decided to be content with that.

“Might as well sow these seeds before I head into the forest.”

I handed them to Olto, who took care of them in a matter of minutes. They would likely be ready for harvest tomorrow.

“Let’s go tame some Wild Dogs!” I exclaimed. With all of my tasks completed, it was time to head into battle. Or so I thought...

“Mm-mm-mm!”

“What’s up, Olto?”

“Mm.”

My plans were thwarted by Olto, who clung to my right leg tightly, immobilizing me. All the while, he kept on pointing at the barn.

“What about it?”

“Mm-mm!”

“All right, all right. Quit tugging.”

Olto tugged at my robe, trying to drag me to the barn. Thankfully this was just a game, or the fabric would have been stretched out otherwise.

“Mm-mm!”

He seemed extremely anxious; this appeared to be no trivial matter. I could think of only one thing that could possibly be so important as we hurried to the barn.

“Could it be? Is it what I think it is?”

I flung open the door to the barn, chest pounding in anticipation. There, I discovered that my hunch was correct.

“...I knew it!”

“Mmm!”

I was greeted by the sight of a cracked egg, the one that I’d purchased from the Magical Beasts Guild not too long ago. I had placed it in an incubator inside the barn, and it seemed like it was finally about to hatch. Cracks were beginning to form around the yellow egg in the incubator, as though it were about to be sliced into rounds. The crack already ran halfway around the egg—it looked just about ready to burst. The egg had been perfectly fine this morning, which meant that it had progressed to this stage within the four hours or so that I’d harvested my crops, concocted a few items, and gone to buy more land.

“It’s about to hatch, isn’t it?”

“Mm.”

“...♪”

“Chirp!”

Rick and Sakura had also joined us, and were staring at the egg with a look of wonder and anticipation. They seemed to understand that our little family was about to grow. Change of plans—I decided to stay here for a while and watch over the egg instead. I figured it’d be a shame if I wasn’t here to witness its birth.

“I know animals like birds tend to imprint after they’re born, but what about tamed monsters?”

“Mm?”

“Do you do that too?”

“...?”

“Chirp?”

My companions cocked their heads to one side and looked at me

questioningly. As adorable as that was, unfortunately they didn't seem to know anything on the subject.

"Which one is it gonna be?"

Since this egg was a cross between a Little Bear and a Honey Bee, the resulting offspring would most likely be either one of them, at least under normal circumstances.

"Whichever it is, it'll likely be a welcome addition to our party."

A Little Bear would be great as a heavy-hitting frontline attacker, while a Honey Bee would make a good turbo guerrilla attacker. Either one would make up for our lack of combat power.

"Can't wait for it to hatch."

"Mm."

Depending on what I got, I wouldn't have to bother taming a Wild Dog anymore. I was determined to wait it out. My three companions were just as captivated, pressed up against the incubator.

"Guess I'll experiment a bit in the meantime."

I sat on a chair and took out the various types of herbal teas that I'd been experimenting with since yesterday, as it had struck me that I could try mixing several tea leaves together like the ones sold in real life. At the moment, I had chamomilé, red mint, blue mint, basilil, and wild strawberries; red and blue sage were a no go, as I only had enough left for propagating after delivering the rest. I used my Alchemy skills to dry these herbs, then mixed them together and began trying each tea blend one by one.

Since this was a game, I could test as many combinations as I wanted without getting full. No wonder stuffing yourself in VR was some people's recommended form of dieting. After trying out several kinds of tea blends, my favorite combination ended up being chamomilé, red mint, and wild strawberries:

```
Name: Herbal Tea Blend
```

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 5★

Effect: None. Edible.

I made several of these aptly named but unoriginal-sounding items. Now I could drink herbal tea whenever I desired.

“Mm-hm, tastes good. I’m glad I bought a teacup.”

Although the teacup was just a cheap, low-quality one I’d bought from the general store, it felt different drinking herbal tea from it, even if it didn’t affect the taste in any way.

“Hmm, wonder what kind of monster will hatch?”

Swirling the tea around in my cup, I glanced at the egg in the incubator, which had continued the hatching process in the meanwhile. Even now, the cracks continued to spread gradually across the surface. Looking at the steadily cracking egg, I imagined what kind of monster was soon to be born.

One hour later, I had wrapped up my experiments with herbal tea and was in the middle of dehulling acorns to soak in water. If this were real life, it was recommended that I soak them for a day. I wasn’t sure about in-game, though.

The egg was about ninety percent cracked through and looked very much on the verge of hatching. I checked the in-game forum for advice, but people were still debating whether it was necessary to be present at the moment of birth. Some players said it didn’t matter, while others argued that it could affect the monster’s favorability score, which was rumored to exist as an Easter egg. I was of the opinion that it was better to be present unless you were in a hurry to be somewhere else.

“Mm!”

“What? Is it hatching?”

Olto’s voice brought me back to reality. I turned my attention to the egg and saw that the cracks had run all around it. The sound of the shell cracking grew louder and more urgent, and a bluish-white light spilled from between the

cracks. The next instant, the barn was filled with a dazzling light, reminiscent of a disco ball, and the egg and incubator glowed brightly.

“Gah! Too bright!”

I instinctively shielded my eyes with my hands. It was just like when Sakura was born, except the light was even more blinding at close range. I covered my eyes, heart thumping in anticipation of the monster I was about to meet. What would it be like? A bee, a bear, or something else entirely? The light, which genuinely seemed hell-bent on blinding me, finally subsided. Seriously, they didn’t have to be *that* dramatic. Or did this mean I was getting a unique specimen?

“Man, that was bright...”

Once the light had faded, the eggshells and incubator transformed into particles of light and disintegrated. All that was left in their place was a single monster.

“...It’s a bear...”

Was it a Little Bear, though? It couldn’t be. According to top Tamer Amimin’s website, Little Bears resembled brown cubs and were more on the realistic side. However, the bear that was gazing up at me now with small, round eyes was covered with bright yellow fur. By yellow, I didn’t mean it looked like a tubby bear about to ask for honey, but an actual stuffed toy. I was now face to face with a yellow plush toy too comical to even be called a teddy bear.

In terms of size, it was slightly bigger than Olto—over a meter in height. While it was a bear, I didn’t feel like it could be a frontliner. I mean, this was a *teddy bear* we were talking about.

“*Your Monster Taming ability has leveled up.*”

“*Your Command ability has leveled up.*”

My skill levels had increased despite not having done anything; apparently, you could gain XP just from hatching eggs. Then again this was, in a sense, one of the most major events for a Tamer. This meant my Monster Taming ability was currently at level 10. Additionally, I could command one more monster now, meaning I could now own a total of five tamed monsters. On top of that,

reaching level 10 meant unlocking a skill called Monster Heal, a type of recovery skill that could be used on your tamed monsters. This ability would further strengthen Sakura and Olto's defenses.

"Growl?"

Whoops. Right now, the yellow stuffed bear in front of me was more important.

"Hey, can I pet you?"

"Growl."

The bear tilted its head towards me, making it easier for me to pet it. I gently stroked its fur, which felt exactly like a plush toy—soft, and a different sort of fluffiness than Rick.

"Looks like we got a new furry friend."

"Grooowl."

As adorable as it was, I was a bit worried about whether it could actually fight, so I decided to assess it first.

Name: TBD / Race: Honey Bear / Base Level: Lv. 1

Master: Yuto

HP: 27/27 *MP: 18*18

Strength: 10 *Endurance: 8* Agility: 5

Dexterity: 8 *Intelligence: 4* Sanity: 3

Skills: Cuteness, Gluttony, Smelling, Cultivation, Claw Attack, Climb, Poison Resistance, Sweet Scent, Beekeeping

Equipment: None

It turned out to be a creature I'd never heard of before. A Honey Bear? Was it because it was a cross between a Honey Bee and a Little Bear? The devs clearly had a model in mind when they came up with this character, a yellow bear that was capable of beekeeping. Whatever I did, I had to avoid clothing it in red at all

costs. That being said, its skills weren't bad. It had the stats and abilities to be a frontliner, not to mention it was capable of crafting too.

"Growl?" The Honey Bear approached me as I was checking its stats.

"Hey, what's up?" I asked.

"Growl growl."

"Mm-mm."

"...!"

"Chirp chirp."

My tamed monsters appeared to be trying to tell me something, especially the Honey Bear. It placed its teddy-bear paws on my hand and gazed up at me in earnest appeal.

"Hm? What is it?"

"Growl growl!"

Seemingly frustrated at my cluelessness, the bear pointed at itself with its sharp claws and jumped about agitatedly.

"Growl!"

"Hmm..."

After pointing at itself again, the Honey Bear used both paws and mimed drawing a square. Wait, I recognized this gesture: Sakura and Olto had done the same.

"You want me to open my status window?"

Ah, I get it now.

"You want me to name you, is that it?"

"Growl!"

Come to think of it, this Honey Bear didn't have a name yet since it wasn't a unique monster. Up until now, I hadn't had to name any of my companions, since they had all miraculously turned out to be unique specimens. This was about to be my first christening.

“Hmm, let’s see...”

What now? I pondered. I had thought of several names beforehand, ones that would be suitable for either a bear or a bee, but I hadn’t expected to get such an adorable-looking teddy bear. The name Akakabuto, a reference I had reserved in case I got a bear, no longer seemed quite fitting.

“Teddy, Winnie, Christopher...”

None of them sounded right. I was starting to get confused, which was clouding my judgment. *Calm down,* I told myself. *When in doubt, stick to the basics.* Instead of aiming for something unique, it was better to go with something simple and cute that fit the person’s image.

“...Got it. I now dub you Bear Bear!”

The bear growled happily in reply. Hey, they seemed to like it. Couldn’t you have come up with something better, you say? *No need to sweat the small stuff—naming is all about inspiration, anyway. The best kind of name is the one that I like!* After all, *I* was the one who’d be using their name most.

“Good teddy. Welcome to the family, Bear Bear.”

“Grooowl.”

I patted their head, then proceeded to stroke them all over. Bear Bear didn’t seem to mind—welcoming it, even—standing there and letting me do as I pleased. They were just so fluffy! And such a different texture from Rick too. Rick’s fur was short and velvety, while Bear Bear’s fur was coarser and felt more like a towel. What the two of them did have in common, however, was the fact that they both smelled like sunshine. Forget the popular myth that sunshine is just the smell of dead bugs—that didn’t matter in-game.

“Hup!”

“Growl?”

Finally reaching my limit, I rolled Bear Bear onto their side. Bear Bear looked at me curiously, showing their stomach.

“Gah, you’re too cute!” I squealed, burying my face into their yellow belly fur, unable to contain myself anymore.

“Growl growl?” Bear Bear murmured as I huffed their fur.

“Man, this is total bliss...”

This was way more addictive than I thought. I was starting to get how furries felt.

“Mm.”

“...”

“Chirp.”

Shoot, I got carried away! Olto and the others were staring at me as though seeing me in a new light. So much for being their master...

“R-Right then! I don’t know much about Honey Bears myself, so let’s go gather some info, shall we?!”

“Mm...”

“...”

“Chirp...”

Unfortunately, I had failed to redeem myself. *Come on, guys, don’t give me that look!* I pleaded inwardly, cursing them for having such advanced AI.

Chapter Two: Life with Bear Bear

“Right, let’s get going,” I announced, traipsing through town with my tamed monsters in tow, willfully ignoring the withering looks they were still casting towards me. *Where to, though?* I had been so eager to escape the awkwardness that I had completely forgotten to pick a destination.

“When in doubt, start with the forums.”

I opened Amimin’s basic forums, which could be accessed from within the game. To my surprise, there was an entry for Honey Bears. It so happened that even Amimin, one of the top Tamers in LJO, had only discovered this monster the day before yesterday. It seemed that she had successfully hatched a Honey Bear egg before I did and had since uploaded its info to her page. The entry also mentioned Beekeeping, which apparently required an item called a Beehive for activation. However, the only way you could obtain said item was by crafting it with Woodworking skills or buying it from one of the towns in Zone Three.

“If I remember correctly, Sakura has Woodworking skills...”

“...?”

“Do you know how to make a beehive, Sakura?” I asked.

“...”

Judging from the way she was shaking her head, I was guessing that was a no. Going to Zone Three this instant wasn’t an option either. I would have to buy a beehive from the Farming Guild or a player-run stall, or have someone with Woodworking skills build one for me.

In case you were curious, by the way, here was a breakdown of Bear Bear’s skills:

Cuteness: Has a slight probability of preventing opponents from taking action.

Gluttony: Is able to recover HP slightly by eating. Needs to eat twice a day.

Smelling: Has a good sense of smell. Grants bonuses to actions related to scent.

Cultivation: Is able to grow plants other than trees.

Claw Attack: Is capable of attacking with claws.

Climb: Good at climbing trees and scaling cliffs.

Poison Resistance: Increases resistance to poison.

Sweet Scent: Is able to emit a pleasant smell that attracts other creatures.

Beekeeping: Is capable of making honey by using special equipment.

It appeared that Bear Bear had inherited Cultivation, Poison Resistance, and Beekeeping from their Honey Bee parent, and Smelling, Claw Attack, and Climb from their Little Bear parent. Honey Bears apparently couldn't inherit Honey Bees' stingers, though. There really was no point in Bear Bear having a stinger, but it was still kind of cute to imagine Bear Bear shaking their butt with one.

Since Sweet Scent would be able to augment their Beekeeping skill, I had high hopes for Bear Bear. I had to make sure I didn't forget to feed them, though—thanks to their Gluttony feature they would require twice the food. They would likely be a boon to my farming as well, with their Cultivation skill aiding in growing flowers for honey production.

"Speaking of, forget the beehive—we've gotta get you equipped!" I exclaimed, giving Bear Bear a once-over.

"Growl?"

At the moment, Bear Bear was stark naked. While small animals like Rick might not require much, a creature of Bear Bear's size could probably be clothed in the same manner as a human.

"Let's go to Lewin's," I suggested, hoping he might have some ready-made

stuff that fit Bear Bear. The five of us headed to Lewin's Arms and Armor Shop.

"Hi," I greeted the blacksmith.

"Hey. I see you're really making a name for yourself, Silver-Haired!" he replied cheerfully.

"Huh?! Not you too!" I groaned.

"Ha ha, just kiddin', Yuto. So, what'll it be today? Weapons? Armor?"

"Armor. Do you have anything that might fit my buddy here?"

"Hmm. Never seen this creature before."

I was none too surprised at the reaction. Honey Bears had only been discovered recently and were pretty much considered a new species, still relatively unknown among non-Tamers.

"Any requests?"

"Hmm..." I pondered. *Not particularly.* It wasn't as if I had enough money to be choosy, so it was more a matter of picking something I didn't hate from the items within my budget.

No, hang on a sec. There *was* one thing that I absolutely refused to compromise on.

"Just no red, please."

"Ya *don't* want red? Ya got a problem with that color?"

"I do. Think about it: a red shirt on a yellow bear? That's... W-Well, there's gonna be all sorts of problems. Anyway, I'm fine with anything as long as it's not red."

"Gotcha."

After mulling over my words, Lewin displayed a set of three items before me.

"How 'bout these? They go with the color of your robe."

The set consisted of the following items: a dark, cobalt-blue jacket, a red-and-green tartan-check shirt, and a dark-gray ascot. Since the shirt and tie would be considered accessories, they would be fine for even Bear Bear to wear.

“Bit of a bad history to this set, but its stats are pretty decent. I’ll give ya a discount to make up for it, so how ’bout it?”

“What do you mean by ‘bad history’?”

“Some schoolkid asked me to make this for ’em, but they had to cancel their order after stuff happened.”

“What sort of stuff?”

“...Well, first, they got fooled into spendin’ a heckload of money on a certain crafty female player. Then, they fell for the false rumors she spread about a certain Tamer and ended up joinin’ in a mob that pursued him, which ultimately got ’em banned from the game. Talk about a shit show.”

Ahem. That sounded awfully familiar...

“Th-That’s terrible,” I stuttered.

“Ha ha, I’m not tryna take a dig at ya or anything,” Lewin chuckled. “After all, you were a victim in all that too.”

“So that *did* get the rest of them banned...”

I had no idea the fallout from that fiasco had spread that far! However, there truly was no malice in Lewin’s expression; he seemed to be telling the truth about considering me to be a victim as well. Still, that didn’t make me feel any less guilty. Ultimately, Mirei and the players who she deceived had only themselves to blame, I had still played a small part in the hullabaloo... I hadn’t even stopped to consider that my actions could cause that sort of inconvenience to unrelated parties.

“...I’ll buy the whole lot.”

“Whoa, hold up. I haven’t even told ya anything about its abilities or price yet.”

“I know, but...”

“Like I said, it’s not your fault. There’s no need for ya to feel guilty, got it?” Lewin sighed exasperatedly before proceeding to the explanation.

Name: Dog Jacket+

Rarity: 2 *Quality: 7*★ Durability: 150

Effect: Defense +16, (Strength +1).

Requirement: Strength 6 or higher.

Weight: 3

Name: Dog Shirt+

Rarity: 2 *Quality: 7*★ Durability: 150

Effect: Defense +7, (Strength +1).

Requirement: Strength 4 or higher.

Weight: 1

Name: Dog Ascot Tie+

Rarity: 2 *Quality: 7*★ Durability: 150

Effect: Defense +4, (Strength +1).

Requirement: Strength 4 or higher.

Weight: 1

"Nice. I dig them."

Regardless of how they had come to be, they would genuinely make excellent armor. After all, their stats were much higher than the robe I was wearing.

"This is incredible," I gushed.

"Thanks. They're my pride and joy." Lewin grinned happily.

"What's this (Strength +1), though? Do you gain more strength just by wearing it?"

"That's a set bonus. Since I made these as part of a series, you get a bonus effect when you wear all three items at the same time. That's a total of

Strength +3.”

“Strength +3? That’s a pretty big deal.”

That was an extremely useful bonus effect for a vanguard to have.

“Initially, I would’ve sold this set for 27,000 G, but ya can have it for 13,000.”

“Seriously? That’s less than half price.”

Regardless of its backstory, wasn’t that *too* big of a discount?

“Better than lettin’ it collect dust. Besides, it’s not like I’m losin’ money either.”

“Given these stats, I’m pretty sure more than a few people would be interested in buying it.”

“Perhaps, if you just look at the stats. This wouldn’t be a bad outfit choice for the Martial Arts Tournament either.”

“Martial Arts Tournament...? Oh, yeah. It’s right around the corner, isn’t it?”

“Doesn’t sound like you’re interested.”

“Not really, since I’m not taking part in it.”

The Martial Arts Tournament was an upcoming LJO event. While the details had yet to be made public, it was currently something of an open secret, as a number of NPCs, especially fighter-type characters like adventurers and sentinels, had been talking about a martial arts event recently. According to the rumors, the tournament was scheduled to be held on the 15th, and would be open to both players and NPCs. This was the general consensus about the rumors online, which I agreed with.

Apparently, many players were reconfiguring their skill setup and arranging new weapons for the event. As the game lacked a PvP system, this was pretty much the only time players would get to fight each other. Understandably, fighter-types were revved up for the occasion, though interest dipped among players like me who didn’t specialize in fighting. As one of the bottommost players, the chances of me winning were highly unlikely—the most I was planning on doing was watching a video recording of the final match.

“I suppose that none of my crafter friends *have* been very enthusiastic about the event. I’ve been pretty busy, though, since lots of people have been wantin’ to buy new armor for it. I got ten people waitin’ for custom-made orders at the moment.”

“All the more reason why this set should sell, right?”

“The size is the problem. Not many people want to buy kid-size stuff.”

Although the size of armor could be adjusted automatically, there were limits to how much an item could shrink or expand. Each character had different sizing options available to them from a wide range of sizes, including children’s sizes, S, M, L, XL, beast-size, and so on. In my case, I was able to wear S-and M-size clothing. Out of all the available sizes, kid-size items were among the least demanded, probably because they only fit really young players or small monsters.

“I see. Well, that’s good news for me, though... You’re sure about this?”

“I *want* you to have it.”

“Okay, I’ll buy it then!”

All this for less than half the price? I’d be mad to pass up an opportunity like this. After paying Lewin, I immediately equipped Bear Bear with their new gear.

“Let’s see, I think I can access them from my status window...”

After pressing a few buttons, I was able to equip Bear Bear automatically. Thank goodness for that; I would have been at a loss if I’d had to tie an ascot myself.

“Looking sharp, Bear Bear,” I said in praise.

“Growl.”

Overall, Bear Bear gave the impression of a British gentleman. *What’s that now?* A *real* gentleman wouldn’t be butt naked from the waist below? You’d just have to ignore that, since Bear Bear was apparently incapable of wearing pants.

“They’re great, both in terms of ability and appearance. Better than my gear, in fact.”

“Growl.”

“How ’bout this for ya, Yuto?” Lewin suggested, pulling out another dog shirt. “You can wear it under your robe since it’s an undershirt.” Unlike the one Bear Bear was wearing, however, this one didn’t have a plus sign in its name, which probably meant it hadn’t been modified. As it happened, its dull gray fabric hadn’t been dyed, and its stats were pretty low too. On the plus side, it was dirt cheap—only 800 G.

“I’ve already spent a lot of money, so what’s another 800...? Okay, I’ll take that too.”

Name: Dog Shirt

Rarity: 2 *Quality: 4*★ Durability: 150

Effect: Defense +5

Requirement: Strength 2 or higher.

Weight: 1

“Thanks a bunch.”

“By the way, I’m also looking for a beehive. Do you happen to know where I can get one?” I asked Lewin.

“A beehive, eh? That’s outside my area of expertise... Why dontcha ask at the guild first?” he replied.

“Guess that would be smart. Thanks for everything.”

“See ya around.”

“Growl growl.”

“You too, Bear!”

I had a feeling that Lewin was actually really fond of animals, judging from the way he looked at me and Bear Bear. As a fellow animal enthusiast, I could feel it in my gut. Bidding farewell to Lewin, suspected animal lover, our group headed to the Farming Guild.

Unfortunately, I had no luck obtaining a beehive there either. It wasn't that I lacked the necessary funds—my guild rank simply wasn't high enough yet to buy one. I needed to raise my rank two more levels, which wasn't something I could do immediately. It looked like my only option was to find a player who was selling beehives.

"If I remember correctly, Sawyer's shop is somewhere nearby."

Sawyer was a young-looking elf Alchemist who I'd befriended a while ago. Even if he didn't possess Woodworking skills, he might be able to introduce me to someone who did. I headed to the square where his stall had been last time, and sure enough, there he was.

"How's it going, Sawyer?" I greeted him.

"Hi, Yuto. Not too bad, I guess," he replied. As always, I was stricken by how youthful he looked. In terms of appearance, I was no slouch myself, but I was no match for him. How *was* he so charming? Did it have something to do with his personality?

"I'm actually looking for something, and was wondering if you knew anything about it."

"What is it?"

"A beehive. Do you know where I can get one? It's for my bud here. They have Beekeeping skills."

"Growl!" Bear Bear greeted him, paw raised.

"Is that a new monster? What a cutie!"

Sawyer had a look of pure contentment on his face as he patted Bear Bear on the head. Seeing a handsome young lad snuggling an animated plushie sure made a pretty picture. However, he soon turned to me apologetically.

"Sorry. While I do have Woodworking skills, I can't build a beehive yet."

Not to worry. I had expected that much.

"In that case, do you have any Carpenter or Woodcutter friends?" I asked, changing tactics.

“I’m actually curious too. I’ll ask around. Give me a second.”

To my surprise, Sawyer accepted my request right away. I felt a pang of guilt, as though I were taking advantage of him.

“Hello? It’s me... I was wondering... Yeah. Uh-huh...”

Sawyer spoke with someone over the phone. He seemed to have called one of his friends.

“She said she’ll come right away.”

“Really? You sure?”

“Mhm. She’s also interested in beehives.”

Sawyer’s friend appeared to be a female player. We chatted and petted Bear Bear while waiting for his woodworking friend. After a while, I noticed a woman heading straight towards us. She was a human girl, with her hair in a green ponytail and a childlike smile on her face, dressed in casual attire with minimal equipment. Were all crafter-types this lightly equipped? Not that I was one to talk.

“Hey, Sawyer! Is that the guy looking for a beehive?”

“Yup. Yuto, meet Ashihana. She’s a Woodcutter.”

“Hi, I’m Ashihana! Pleased to meet you!”

“Hi. I’m Yuto, a Tamer.”

Despite greeting me, Ashihana’s gaze was focused entirely on Bear Bear, her eyes never once wandering from them the whole time we exchanged words.

“Growl?”

“...!”

The moment Bear Bear tilted their head, Ashihana’s body twitched as though she had been struck by lightning. Then, she squealed.

“Eek! This bear’s *adorable*!”

It looked like Bear Bear had stolen Ashihana’s heart. She stared at the snuggly creature, palms pressed against her cheeks.

“What’s their name?” she asked.

“It’s Bear Bear,” I answered.

“What a lovely name! Nice to meet you, Bear Bear!”

“Growl.”

“Gosh, you’re like a stuffed toy!”

Although Ashihana was trying her best to hug Bear Bear, the harassment block prevented her from doing so since we weren’t friends. An invisible wall stood between the two, denying her access.

“Stupid wall!”

“Now, now, Ashihana.” Sawyer tried to calm her down to no avail.

“Grr! Dang it!”

After figuring out that her attempts to touch Bear Bear were futile, Ashihana stomped her foot on the ground in frustration.

“Grr! Hey, Yuto!”

“What’s up?”

“Let’s exchange friend codes. You don’t mind, do you?”

This woman wanted to be friends with me, a total stranger, just so she could hug Bear Bear. Oh well, I guessed I didn’t mind. Although she was a bit of a weirdo, she didn’t seem like a bad person, and besides, I didn’t have many friends yet.

“Okay.”

“Thanks! Here’s my code!” she said, shooting it over at lightning speed.

“Gotcha,” I said, checking the code.

“Hurry up, will you?!”

“Jeez, be patient. There, all done. Happy now?”

“Eeek! You’re *sooo* fluffy, Bear Bear!”

“Growl!”

The moment I accepted Ashihana's friend request, she threw herself at Bear Bear and began patting them all over, squeezing them like a stuffed toy. I could see Bear Bear blinking in astonishment at the sudden ambush.



And what was I supposed to do with my extended right hand?

“...”

“S-Sorry, Yuto. She’s not a bad person, and her skills are top notch, but... Well, she’s just very true to her feelings...and lacks self-restraint.”

“No need to apologize. You did nothing wrong.”

Besides, did he just say her skills were top notch?

“Is she a famous player?”

“Yes. Not as famous as you, though.”

“Say what?”

“Hm? I said, she’s not as famous as... Oh, my bad. Ignore what I said.”

Sawyer seemed to get the hint, as he quickly changed the subject and began telling me about Ashihana instead. At any rate, the only reason I was well known was because of that incident and my notorious title; Ashihana, on the other hand, appeared to be a famous player, even among other woodworkers. Apparently frontliners were always flocking to her with requests for custom-made weapons.

I had no idea she was such an outstanding player. Seriously, though—me, a more famous player than Ashihana? Preposterous. Sawyer *had* to be mistaken, right?

“Bear Beeeear!”

“G-Growl!”

Five minutes later...

“Satisfied?” I sighed.

“Yup!” Ashihana nodded vigorously in reply, her face aglow.

“Growl!”

Surprisingly, even Bear Bear seemed happy. They seemed to enjoy all the physical attention.

“Can we get down to business now?”

“You want a beehive, right? Sure thing. I’ll make one for you.”

Whoa, what?! I hadn’t expected her to agree to it so easily.

“You know how to make one?”

“I’ve yet to make one, but I know I can. I’m pretty sure I saw the instructions for it among the recipes I learned recently.”

Things were going way smoother than I expected.

“I’ll make the bestest beehive you’ve ever seen, Bear Bear!”

Aha. That explained her determination. I was still left with one problem, though.

“How much will it cost?”

At the moment, I only had about 6,000 G. I hated to think how much it’d cost to order a custom-made product from a top player...

“You on a budget or something?”

“Kinda. Just made a pretty hefty purchase. If you can wait a couple of days, I can get you about 20,000 G.”

“I see... I’ll be honest with you, you’re going to need more than that.”

Figured as much. She *was* a top Woodcutter, after all.

“It doesn’t have to be anything fancy, so can’t you make a cheaper one?”

As long as Bear Bear could use their Beekeeping skills, that was good enough for me. However, Ashihana seemed incensed at the suggestion.

“No way! I take pride in my work. I refuse to settle for less!”

Seeing her play with Bear Bear, I had assumed her little more than a hyper, bear-loving girl, but surprisingly enough, she appeared to have high craftsmanship standards as well. It seemed like I would have to give up on requesting help from her this time. As though reading my mind, Ashihana quickly interrupted me before I could speak again.

“Hold up! Not so fast! I *will* make Bear Bear’s beehive!”

“But I told you, I don’t have enough money.”

“I know, but...!” Ashihana clung to Bear Bear and shook her head emphatically. I was at a loss. I wondered what I was supposed to do here, when...

“How about you obtain the necessary materials yourself, then? You can get a discount if you bring your own ingredients,” Sawyer suggested.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Ashihana, you were saying you wanted to look for wood near the Town of Beginnings, right?”

“Yup, since my Logging skill’s over level 30 now!” she replied. “Considering how many discoveries have been made in the Town of Beginnings lately, I figured I might be able to find something new too!”

Level 30? Top crafters sure were amazing.

“I was thinking of gathering new materials myself. Care to join us, Yuto?”

“Thanks for the invite, but I’m not much of a fighter,” I refused. “My monsters aren’t that strong yet either.”

“Then we’re in the same boat,” said Sawyer.

“You’ll be fine as long as you’ve got me!” Ashihana crowed. “I’ll take care of the enemies around the Town of Beginnings with one fell swoop of my ax!”

Joining them didn’t seem like a bad idea if fighting wasn’t going to be an issue. To be honest, I could see no disadvantages to going on an item-gathering tour with an experienced player.

“You sure you don’t mind, though, Ashihana? I feel like we’ll be getting more out of it than you.”

“Heh heh heh. I get to go gathering with Bear Bear...”

If anything, it seemed to be a befitting arrangement for Ashihana. *Wipe your drool though, girl!*

“What if we can’t find any good materials?”

“You can pay in installments, then! I’ll lower the price as much as possible for

my dear Bear Bear—let's say about 35,000 G."

"That much?!"

"I can guarantee the quality, though! You should be able to use it for a lifetime, so consider it a bargain in the long run!"

That was far more expensive than any equipment I owned. However, she was probably right about the quality, given her credentials.

"...Fine. Offer accepted."

"That's settled then."

"When shall we leave? Now?"

Ashihana seemed to be the type that acted as soon as she put her mind to something. Sawyer and I, on the other hand, had preparations to take care of.

"Now is too soon... How about in three hours?"

"Works for me. What about our party, though? I have four tamed monsters, so I'm already a five-member party. Depending on the skills you guys have, I'll switch out which monsters will accompany me."

Sawyer was most likely a rear guard, but how about Ashihana? Since she mentioned having an ax, she could be a frontliner, which meant I'd likely have to leave Olto behind. However, Ashihana shook her head.

"We can form a team."

"A team?"

What was that again? I was pretty sure I'd heard that term somewhere...

"Right, you wouldn't know since you're a solo player."

Teams referred to joint parties formed by two separate parties. *How was that any different from raids?* I asked Sawyer, who explained the difference in the following terms: unlike raid parties, which could be formed of roughly a hundred members and enabled players to receive item drops individually, item drops for teams were distributed per party. One of the biggest disadvantages of teams was that they made the game's difficulty scale, increasing boss HP as well as raising the encounter rate, while decreasing monster drop rates greatly. Just

because there were two parties didn't mean the drop rate doubled.

"We can form a team consisting of you and your monsters, and me and Ashihana."

"What happens to XP in that case?"

"When we form a team, our XP gets divided in half first and allocated to each party. After that, it gets redistributed among party members, depending on how many there are."

For example, if we defeated a monster with 100 XP, my party and Sawyer's party would get fifty points each. After that, each member in my party would receive ten points each since there were five of us, while Sawyer and Ashihana would receive twenty-five each since they were a two-person party. At first glance, it looked like Sawyer's team had the upper hand, but in reality, I was actually getting fifty points in total while they only got twenty-five each, since my monsters' XP pretty much counted towards my XP as well.

"Hmm, isn't this kinda unfair to you guys?"

It wasn't as if they hadn't already worked this out themselves, though, so I supposed it was all right as long as they hadn't any complaints. At the very least, I was determined to do my bit in battles and gathering. If it turned out that my party was benefiting too unevenly, I could always share some item drops with them later or something.

"Okay, let's go as a team, then."

"Yay!"

"Shall we meet here in three hours?"

"Sure thing."

Awesome. I was about to head on an expedition with an experienced player.

"Looking forward to it."

"Growl!"

Our team had gathered in front of the Western Gate three hours later on the

dot.

“Yoo-hoo.”

“Looks like everyone’s here.”

Both of them were dressed differently from when we last saw one another. When I asked why, they replied that they had separate outfits for crafting and fighting. Apparently, the gear they wore when they crafted items improved their Dexterity. So this was what it was like to be a dedicated crafter. I had to admit, I was impressed. They were the polar opposite of me, a half-assing bastard who couldn’t even tell if he was a Tamer or Farmer.

Ashihana was still dressed in dull colors, although this outfit seemed much more stylish: a long brown tunic adorned with red and white Nordic patterns. To finish off the look, she had a brown leather belt around her waist and a large backpack on her back. While she gave the impression of a glamorous hiker, her outfit seemed to have a much higher defense than my robe.

Compared to Ashihana’s gear, Sawyer’s clothes were a bit plain. He was dressed in a dark-green robe that one might imagine an elf wearing. It wasn’t entirely boring, however; the yellow embroidery on his sleeves and collar gave it a bit of flair.

“Your monsters are all so cute. You’ve got great taste, Yuto!” Ashihana cooed, gazing at my monsters with adoration.

“It wasn’t like I did that on purpose.”

I did get her point, though, now that she mentioned it. I couldn’t have asked for a cuter group of companions than two children and two animals. So what if they weren’t very intimidating? They were adorable, and that was what mattered.

“Hey! Aren’t you going to introduce them to me?” Ashihana whined impatiently.

“All right, all right. This is Olto. He’s a Gnome.”

“Mm!”

“This here is Sakura, a Tree Nymph.”

“...♪”

“This is Rick the Gray Squirrel.”

“Chirp chirp!”

“And as you already know, this is Bear Bear, a Honey Bear.”

“Growl!”

Each time I introduced their names, my tamed monsters raised their hands as if to grab Ashihana’s attention. Ashihana squealed with delight and hugged each one of them in turn, breathing heavily and looking them over from head to toe. It was a bit scary—cringey, if I was being honest.

“They’re all...so cute...” she panted. “I can almost feel a nosebleed coming on.”

“Please, Ashihana! Control yourself! You could get reported for harassment!” Sawyer fretted, trying to tear Ashihana away from Bear Bear, who was held firmly in her grip.

“I’m changing jobs. I want to become a Tamer,” she sobbed.

“Come on, don’t make rash decisions.”

“Exactly. Lots of people will be sad if you quit being a Woodcutter, Ashihana.”

“B-But!”

“Why not settle for learning the skill Tame?”

“Ugh... Fine. Hey, Yuto,” she said.

“What’s up?”

“Have you set up camp in the Town of Beginnings?”

“I guess so. For now, anyway.”

“Got it.”

Got what? I wondered, confused.

“She might just choose to settle down in this town,” Sawyer muttered under his breath, though I wasn’t quite sure that I heard him right.

Despite having a somewhat difficult time putting up with Ashihana's free-spirited ways prior to departure, things were relatively smooth sailing once we set off. Venturing into the Western Forest, my group foraged for nuts and plants while Ashihana and Sawyer gathered wood. Unfortunately, Ashihana seemed to have no luck finding the rare wood she was after, looking crestfallen each time she felled a tree. I, meanwhile, was on the hunt for new weeds, but could only find ones that were already rampant in town and served no real purpose.

When it came to battles, Ashihana was a pro. It didn't matter how many enemies there were—true to her word, she defeated them all within seconds. It wasn't for nothing that she was a well-known player. I did notice while she was fighting that the visual effects when monsters died changed depending on what weapons you used or what sort of damage you dealt. For example, when you killed a monster in one blow with an ax, they literally were sliced in half. Thanks to her battle skills, we were able to obtain monster drops with ease, though I felt a bit guilty being so reliant on Ashihana. In order to assuage some of my guilt and keep her entertained, I had offered up Bear Bear as a sacrifice. *Sorry, buddy.*

"Bear Bear."

"Growl."

"Beeear Beeear."

"Grooowl growl."

Ashihana carried Bear Bear everywhere we went. Bear Bear didn't seem to mind, though, so I decided to let them be for a while longer.

In order to test Bear Bear's capabilities, I asked Ashihana to hold back on killing one of the monsters. The results weren't bad at all. During battle, sharp claws sprouted from Bear Bear's cute teddy-bear paws, dealing a decent amount of damage to their opponent. While Bear Bear wasn't a fast runner, they had a hoplite's strength—the frontline attacker we had all been waiting for. Battles were about to get ten times more exciting.

"Way to go, Bear Bear!"

“Growl.”

Leaving the fighting to Bear Bear and Ashihana, the rest of us concentrated our efforts on gathering materials. Presently, we arrived at the river in the Western Forest, in search of more items.

“I’m counting on you, Rick, Olto, and Sakura,” I said to my monsters.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Mm-mm!”

“...!”

My companions replied in unison before scattering off in different directions.

“Growl.”

Bear Bear was walking behind me, apparently acting as a bodyguard of some sort, which was highly reassuring. Since I didn’t have to constantly be on my guard like before, I was able to gather items with surprising efficiency. While I had yet to discover any new finds, there was no such thing as too much mulch or water pumice. After searching along the riverbank for some time, Ashihana suddenly came to a halt.

“Something wrong?”

“I’m less than twenty percent full. Not looking good.”

In LJO, players received a notification once their HP or hunger status dipped below a certain number. Ashihana had apparently received one.

“I’d like to take a break too. I’m running a bit low on MP.”

“There aren’t any safety zones nearby though, are there?”

Safety zones referred to areas within the playing field that were safe from monsters. They came in various shapes and forms, such as a mountain cabin or sacred tree stump. Safety zones allowed you to rest or log out of the game safely and increased the amount of HP or MP you automatically recovered while there. On the other hand, if you logged out of the game in a non-safety zone, your avatar remained in that spot and was open to attack, meaning unless you were incredibly fortunate, you’d respawn the next time you logged back in.

If it was just a matter of eating, we could munch on food rations while walking around, but we couldn't simply sit down and rest anywhere we wanted. However, Ashihana cackled fearlessly, seemingly unfazed.

"Mwa ha ha. Never fear—we have *this*!"

"What's that? A straw mat?"

The item Ashihana was flourishing before us looked like an ordinary straw mat; the only noticeable difference was that its edges were decorated with a pretty fabric.

"Not just any old straw mat! It's my pride and joy, created by using Woodworking, Handiwork, and Sacred Magic!" she proclaimed proudly.

Name: Protective Straw Mat

Rarity: 4 / Quality: 6★

Effect: Creates a safety zone for 30 minutes. (Uses remaining: 2/3)

As impressed as I was that she was already able to create items with a rarity of 4, I was equally amazed by this straw mat's effects. It basically allowed you to rest and log out of the game anywhere you pleased. Ignoring my look of surprise, Ashihana spread out the mat on a grassy patch beside the riverbank.

"Come on, time for a short break."

"Thanks. Won't it be a tight squeeze, though? I doubt it'll fit a party of six."

The only reason our situation worked out was because my monsters were relatively small. Rick wouldn't take up any space as long as he was on my shoulder, and Ashihana had Bear Bear on her lap. It looked like we would all be able to fit after all. If not, I could always carry Olto.

"Well, the whole point of this mat was so that I could nap anywhere I wanted. That's why it's only big enough for me to lie on."

"I see."

Made for napping, eh? It did seem like the perfect size for her to sleep on.

“If you made it double this size, though, I bet everyone would want one.”

“No thanks. If I do, I’ll end up having to make the same item over and over again and won’t have time for anything else. I’ve already sold the recipe to the Quick-Eared Cats, so I’m sure people will start mass-producing them eventually.”

“You’re not very ambitious, are you? Or is it just that you’re true to your desires?”

“Who cares? Hurry up and let’s take a break. This thing’s only effective for thirty minutes.”

“What happens once the thirty minutes are up?”

“You automatically expend one use and it gets extended for another thirty minutes. I can only use it two more times, though, so let’s not waste them.”

Thus, it was decided that the six of us would sit in a circle on the mat and replenish our energy stores. I was surprised to find that despite being crafter-types, Ashihana and Sawyer were both eating food rations. Unlike me, they didn’t seem to care much about the type of food they ate. *I could never,* I thought to myself while munching on a cookie and bringing some water in a pot to a boil. I, for one, was going to make herbal tea and enjoy a pleasant tea time. To set the mood, I had already purchased a cheap teapot. It didn’t improve the taste or anything, but regardless, I transferred the freshly brewed tea from the stove to the teapot and poured myself a cup of tea. I also gave Olto some juice, Rick some blue acorns, and Bear Bear a Honey Cookie.

“Mm-mm!”

“Chirp!”

“Growl!”

“...♪”

Although Sakura wasn’t capable of eating, she seemed to enjoy watching her siblings delight in their food. What an excellent big sister she was, I thought, deciding to dig into my meal as well.

“Mm, tasty.”

Drinking herbal tea in the great outdoors had its own perks. While the tea did nothing to recover my hunger status, the cookie did, and I was perfectly satisfied with my afternoon tea in the forest. As I was sipping my herbal tea, I realized that Ashihana and Sawyer had their eyes fixated on me for some reason. *Do they want some?* I wondered.

“H-Hey. Did you make those yourself?” Ashihana asked.

“These? Yeah, they’re all homemade,” I replied.

“Wow! Juice and cookies?”

“Never seen herbal tea either.”

The two of them gazed in wonder at the food I had fed my tamed monsters. I hadn’t thought they would be so clueless, but perhaps this was the reality for players who didn’t possess Cooking skills. Even though you could buy food in town, you didn’t actually need more than food rations unless you intended on having nice lunches in-game. Taking pity on them for not knowing some of life’s finer pleasures, I decided to offer them some herbal tea.

“Want some?”

“Yay! Yes, please!”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. Besides, I’d like to know what you think.”

First, I poured them both some herbal tea. I had anticipated this sort of thing happening, which is why I had extra teacups lying around. ...Okay, I lied. The only reason I had extra was because I’d bought two sets of four.

“Mmm. Smells lovely.”

“Yum! This is probably the first time I’ve had anything other than water or potions to drink in this game.”

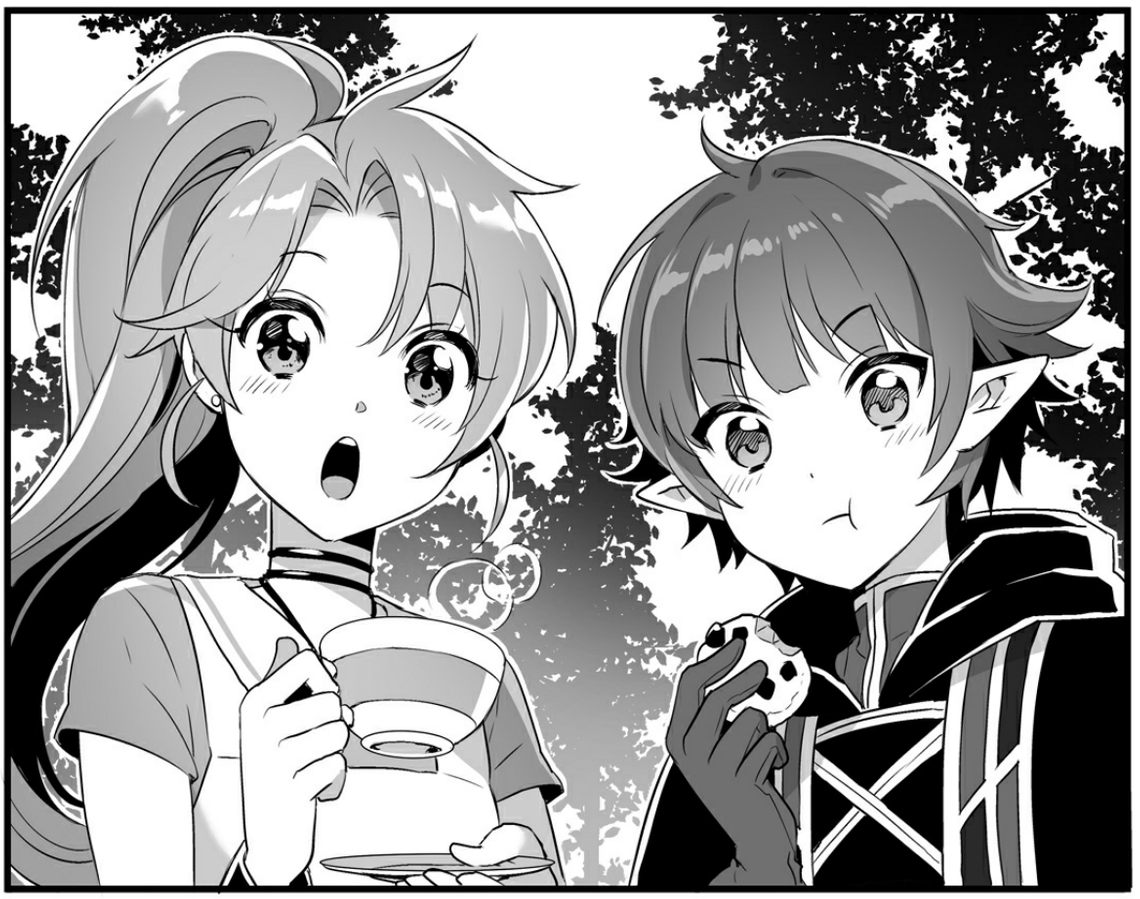
“Have some cookies too.”

“If I may. I’ll take this one here.”

“Whoa! Is this cookie for real?! It’s *super* tasty!”

“It really is. It’s fantastic.”

Awesome. I was glad to hear that both my recipes were a hit.





“Wow. I’ve seriously been missing out! I’m *definitely* going to start looking for real cuisine from now on. I’d thought that eating was just for satisfying my hunger, but no more!”

“Same. There are all sorts of food stalls in town—I’m willing to shell out a bit extra if it means having a decent meal.”

My two companions gobbled up the food I gave them, raving. Dang, I hadn’t expected such positively glowing reviews.

“Hey, are these for sale?” Ashihana asked.

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“I want to know if you sell these cookies and herbal tea anywhere. Or, like, at your own stall, perhaps?”

“Sorry, no, I don’t mass-produce these or anything.”

“I see. That’s a shame...”

I couldn’t help but feel a bit giddy at their looks of genuine disappointment. That meant they really did like my food.

“I can give you two some herbal tea leaves instead.”

To tell the truth, I had gotten carried away and made a ridiculous amount of tea blends. Since the blends were made from weeds, it was unlikely that they would fetch a decent price, and so I had just been stashing away all of my concoctions in my inventory. I could always make more if I wanted to, so I didn’t mind sharing some with them. They seemed to really enjoy it, after all.

“Really?! I’d love that!” Ashihana squealed with delight.

“Aren’t they valuable, though?” Sawyer asked hesitantly.

“Not at all. Thanks to you guys, I haven’t had to do much work today. Consider it a token of gratitude.”

“Thank you so much.”

“Thanks!”

After a pleasant afternoon tea break, we resumed our search for materials.

“Found something. It’s a green peach tree.”

“It doesn’t seem to have any fruit.”

We had crossed the river and made our way deeper into the forest, arriving thirty minutes later at the hill where the green peach tree grew.

“Shame. Would’ve loved to make some peach juice!”

“Since we’ve come all the way here, we might as well get some wood.”

Ashihana and Sawyer both took out their axes and swung at the green peach tree trunk. It was an odd sight to me, with my lack of Logging skills; despite all the chipping away they were doing, the tree appeared unscathed. Regardless, that was apparently how this stuff worked. When a player possessed Logging, a target-shaped cursor would appear on the trunk of a tree they could fell, and once they swung their ax at the node, the wood would automatically be added to their inventory. Once a player had successfully gathered the maximum amount of wood, the Logging node would become invisible to them for a certain amount of time. I supposed that made sense, as there wouldn’t be enough wood left over for other people if players went about cutting down trees for real.

“Didn’t know you could get wood from green peach trees too.”

“Their wood is too pliable to be used for armor, but it’s okay for making staffs or wands. Can’t say its stats are that good, although there aren’t that many green peach trees to begin with. The wood sells at a decent price on the market. Why don’t you get some too, Yuto?”

“I’d like to, but no one in my party has Logging skills.”

“It’s a useful skill to have, you know.”

“I bet, considering you have Woodworking skills.”

“Don’t any of your monsters have Woodworking? If they do, it’d be useful for leveling up their skills.”

“Hmm, you have a point.”

Sawyer's words had given me something to consider. It was true that Sakura possessed Woodworking, and it would be great if she could craft various things with the wood I gave her. She'd probably gain a lot of XP from it to boot...

"Hmm. I was planning on learning another type of magic and allocating the rest to my stats, but... Logging, eh?"

"Well? What do you say, huh?" Ashihana badgered me. She seemed awfully happy for some reason.

While I had already previously made up my mind to acquire Logging, I was a little annoyed that I now felt coerced into it.

"I don't mind learning it, but I don't have an ax," I retorted in a feeble attempt at resistance. However, the reply came swiftly.

"Here, take this," Sawyer replied, handing me a small ax, which, according to my Appraisal skill, was a Logging ax.

"You're well prepared, aren't you?"

"Consider it a gift."

"Nuh-uh, I'll pay for it."

"Don't worry about it. Its durability has already gone down half, and besides, it's a beginner's item. It only cost me 400 G."

Still, I felt bad accepting an item entirely free of charge, seeing as my party was already benefiting a great deal from this material-gathering tour. The least I could do was pay— *No, wait a second.* I *did* have something Sawyer might like. Since it was roughly the same in terms of value, we could make it a trade.

"In that case, I'll give you this."

"Is this...a bookmark?!"

Right you are, Sawyer. The item I had presented him with was the bookmark I'd bought at the florist. I figured he'd be interested in it, given his quest to make grimoires, and I was right—in fact, he was more than a little intrigued, eyes glued to the item, practically spellbound.

"A pressed-flower bookmark... Wow!"

“Glad you like it.”

“Thank you. The fact that bookmarks exist must mean there are books too, right?! It might be a key that’ll lead me to grimoires.”

Surely, it wasn’t *that* amazing... I felt a twinge of concern at how big of a deal he was making out of such a cheap item.

“Where’d you get it?” Sawyer asked.

“I got it from a florist.”

“A florist? I don’t recall seeing one.”

“Want me to take you there sometime?”

“Really? That’d be great!”

Could Sawyer enter the shop, though? I wondered. It’d be a bit of a drag if the only players who could gain access were those who possessed Plant Knowledge. Perhaps we could try visiting the shop as a party, on the off chance that having one party member who fulfilled the requirements would qualify the rest. If that didn’t work, we could always rethink our strategy.

“Right, Logging it is.”

I immediately used up some of my bonus points to acquire Logging so that I could obtain wood while we were here. However...

“Huh?”

The Logging cursor didn’t appear on the green peach tree. What was going on?

“You got the skill, right? Here, let’s change the party lineups.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your Logging skill needs to be at a relatively high level for green peaches,” Ashihana explained. “Um, mind adding me to your party?”

I did as Ashihana said and added her; instantly, a gathering node appeared on the trunk before me. The node was indicated by an ax icon displayed in the middle of a target-shaped orange marker. Now that Ashihana was in my party, I could see the cursor as well. It appeared that different trees required different

skill levels for gathering wood, and green peach trees required a high-level Logging skill, i.e., Ashihana's level. This meant that I wouldn't be able to fell green peach trees on my own, but no matter. I wouldn't even have made it this far without help in the first place!

"All right, let's give this a shot."

I swung the ax I got from Sawyer at the cursor in front of me. The next instant, the green peach tree was engulfed in light, and the Logging node vanished. Although there wasn't even a scratch on the trunk to indicate that I had done anything, I had apparently succeeded at gathering wood. The whole process was a bit of a letdown. Upon checking my inventory, however, I discovered a new item labeled "Wood (Green Peach Tree)." It only had a one-star rating, probably due to the fact that my Logging skill was so low, but it seemed good enough for testing out Sakura's Woodworking skills.

As soon as I was done gathering, Ashihana left my party so as not to siphon any of our XP, should we end up having to fight monsters all of a sudden. She really was a considerate person.

"Woot, let's keep the momentum going!"

I surveyed the area in search of other trees I could gather wood from and found one tree with an indicator. As far as appearances went, it resembled the various miscellaneous trees in the forest, but because I'd obtained Logging, I could now distinguish the trees that I was able to fell.

"Looks like this one's a sawtooth oak."

I decided to gather wood from it. I repeated the same steps I had performed on the green peach tree; the sawtooth oak glowed, and I was left with "Wood (Miscellaneous, Sawtooth Oak)." Miscellaneous, huh? Did that mean this was in the same category as weeds? Oh well, I supposed it was good enough for grinding fodder, plus it wouldn't deal much of a blow even if I did mess up. As I was checking my inventory, Ashihana yelled in amazement, looking thunderstruck.

"Hey! What did you just do?"

"I just felled a tree, that's all."

“B-But how?”

“What do you mean, how? I just swung my ax at the Logging point like you normally do.”

If anything, she should know better than I did.

“That’s not what I meant. I’m asking how you felled a tree with no Logging node!”

“No Logging node?”

“Exactly. Besides, it clearly looks like a random tree... Hup!” Ashihana heaved, swinging her ax at the sawtooth oak.

“Thought so. I can’t gather anything from it.”

“But look,” I said, showing her the wood I just gathered.

“‘Wood (Miscellaneous, Sawtooth Oak)’? It may be low quality, but I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

Ashihana was supposed to be one of the top Woodcutters in this game. Could she seriously not have seen this wood before? Considering her Logging skills were far higher than mine, there could only be one logical explanation.

“Hey, Ashihana. Do you know a skill called Plant Knowledge?” I asked.

My guess was that like weeds, you couldn’t tell apart the miscellaneous brush in the forest unless you possessed Plant Knowledge. Ashihana, Sawyer, and I were a team, not a party, which meant we were unable to share our gathering skills with one another. Even just now, when I gathered wood from the green peach tree, Ashihana and I had needed to form a party first in order for me to be able to do so. Additionally, since she had left my party immediately once I’d completed my task, she probably hadn’t noticed that I had spotted a new Logging node thanks to my Plant Knowledge skill.

“Plant Knowledge? Never heard of it,” she replied.

“Me neither,” Sawyer chimed in.

“Do *you* have that skill, Yuto?”

“I sure do.”

As soon as I'd explained the skill's effects, the two of them eagerly began peppering me with questions.

"Yuto! Have you really filled out the Miscellaneous section in your encyclopedia?"

"Y-Yeah."

"Who knew weeds each had their own names?! Does the same go for trees?"

"Yep. Not all trees have Logging nodes, but that tree over there's a sawtooth oak, and that one over there's a mizunara."

This was just a guess, but I had a feeling that not all trees could be felled due to their quality or whatnot. Even in real life, not every tree in a copse was suitable for lumber, as some were crooked or hollow inside. Plus, if you could gather wood from every single tree in the forest, that would give woodworkers an unfair advantage in the game.

"From my experience with weeds, though, I doubt you can make anything worthwhile with kindling. That herbal tea you drank was made from weeds, but it didn't do anything to satisfy your hunger, did it?"

"No biggie. I'm just thrilled to find something new. Besides, I'd rather have wood that smells nice or looks pretty instead if I were to build furniture for my home."

Good point. Those details were probably more important for ordinary furniture. In order for Ashihana and Sawyer to understand the effects of Plant Knowledge, I had them take turns joining my party. This turned out to be a success, and the two of them eagerly assessed the weeds on the ground. Immediately after, they came to me with a request, looking the most serious I had ever seen them.

"Yuto. I'm willing to pay however much you want, so could you, um...tell us how to obtain Plant Knowledge?"

"I'd like to know too. Of course, I won't press any further if you want to keep it a secret, though."

"If you're willing to tell us, I'll make the beehive for free, plus whatever else I

can do!”

“Same here. I can only pay about 20,000 G, but I’ll do anything—just say the word!”

No freaking way. As thrilled as I was at the prospect of getting a beehive for free, was this information really *that* valuable? I felt like they were offering me far more than was necessary for this tidbit, and anyway, I had no intention of keeping the details all to myself. If anything, I was surprised that they didn’t know about this skill yet: I had thought it was common knowledge.

“I don’t mind sharing, but it might be a bit difficult to acquire.”

I then proceeded to explain the sequence of events that had led to me obtaining the skill. From what I surmised, unlocking the Plant Knowledge skill required you to grow and harvest weeds voluntarily, although in my case, Olto had planted those herbs for me as a means of filling up the empty slots on our farm.

“Sounds kind of time consuming,” Sawyer murmured.

“But it’s doable! I’m buying some land the minute we get back to town!” Ashihana said, determined.

“For sure.”

The two of them seemed totally set on buying farms now. I decided to ask them something that had been bugging me for a while.

“I was wondering...is it impossible to gather wood without a Logging node?”

In the case of weeds, you could still propagate or modify them once they had been picked, regardless of the lack of gathering nodes. In a similar vein, wouldn’t it be possible to do the same with kindling trees?

After explaining my train of thought to them, Ashihana seemed to ponder the possibility. Sawyer, on the other hand, seemed skeptical.

“Actually, there was a player who tested your theory. It’d be easy to make large-scale items if you could use wood from all the trees in the forest, so they went ahead and tried cutting down various trees. Unfortunately, the only thing they ended up with was trash.”

Ashihana, however, seemed highly motivated, as though someone had lit a fire under her. Facing the sawtooth oak I had just gathered wood from, she began swinging her ax at it with all her might, the dull *thwack-thwacking* of the blade against wood echoing throughout the forest. While joining the same party would enable her to obtain brush wood today, we obviously couldn't stick together forever. She probably wanted to test if it was possible to obtain kindling wood without Plant Knowledge.

What surprised me was that unlike trees with Logging nodes, the surface of the trunk was actually marred. I supposed that was because the tree was considered an object. Even more surprising was the fact that after a short, several-minute break, the tree's appearance was restored to normal. It looked like objects had the ability to automatically repair damage. Thanks to that, Ashihana had to start all over again; after thirty minutes or so, however, she succeeded at cutting down the tree, and the sawtooth oak collapsed with a thud.

"How'd it go?"

"I did it! I got wood, and apparently I unlocked a new skill!"

After perusing her list of obtainable skills, Ashihana announced that Plant Knowledge had become available to her. This was completely unexpected. It seemed like simply felling trees wasn't enough—you had to find a tree that you could gather wood from and cut it down yourself. At this rate, it might be possible to obtain Plant Knowledge by experimenting with other plant-related skills.

"All right! Plant Knowledge, here I come!"

"Not so fast!" Sawyer interrupted.

"What is it, Sawyer? I'm trying to have a moment here."

"We're in the same party, remember? If you acquire Plant Knowledge now, I'll be able to see the Logging node as well. Can you wait until I cut down a tree myself?"

"Okey-dokey."

And so, after waiting for the felled sawtooth oak to regenerate, Sawyer took

his turn hacking away at it. Unfortunately, due to his Strength and Logging levels being lower than Ashihana's, the process took him considerably longer. Meanwhile, we spent a reasonably productive time defeating monsters that approached us and observing Ashihana teach Sakura an impromptu Woodworking class. I even managed to level up once.

Olto also gathered some ores for me. Since I didn't possess Digging, I had been utterly oblivious to the fact that there were several mining spots along the riverbank, and Olto managed to obtain some low-quality bronze ores from the strip mine located there. There was also a mining spot halfway up the cliff where the green peach tree grew—the very same cliff from which I had once plunged to my death. Normally, this mining spot could only be accessed via climbing or by dangling a rope from above, but Olto was able to reach it easily by creating footholds with his Earth Magic. Even Ashihana was taken by surprise. Aside from bronze ores, we were also successful at obtaining a rare type of ore called a water ore, which was probably due to Olto's Luck. There had been rumors that you could get water ores from this spot, but the chance was so low that many considered the tales to be false.

After one hour of continuous hard work, Sawyer finally succeeded at gathering wood from the sawtooth oak tree.

"I did it! I did it, guys! I got the skill!"

Good for you, Sawyer. I applauded him silently as he pranced about in delight, a sight befitting his boyish elven appearance. *No!* I willed him to stop. *I'm not interested in young boys! Quit acting cute!*

"What's wrong?" he asked curiously.

"Uh, nothing," I replied, hurriedly changing the subject. "Is Plant Knowledge not a widely known skill?"

"Not at all. I'd never heard of it until you told us. Let's see... According to the data the devs collected, only three players had obtained that skill as of the 9th."

Only three? That was a lot fewer than I'd thought. Why didn't the others post about this in the forums, though? Not that I was one to talk, but still.

“I wonder. Maybe like you, they didn’t think it was that important. After all, even if they happened to fulfill some kind of requirement and obtained the skill by accident, the only thing it does is teach you the names of weeds.”

“This skill would probably be meaningless to them unless they possessed Woodworking or Farming. Either that, or they’ve decided to keep it a secret.”

That seemed plausible. Even though I didn’t really care for that kind of stuff, I wouldn’t be surprised if some players decided to keep valuable information to themselves.

“What are you going to do, Yuto?”

“Huh? Me?”

“Do you want to keep it a secret? Or do you want to post about it?”

“Wait, why are you asking *me*? Do whatever feels right to you.”

“Listen, *you’re* the reason we were able to acquire Plant Knowledge in the first place! It wouldn’t be right to ignore your wishes and do whatever we want!”

Was that how things worked? I thought it was only fair that information spread once you let go of it.

“I don’t mind either way. What do you two wanna do?”

“Us? Hmm... Shall we keep it to ourselves for now?”

“Yeah, probably. That might be better since it was Yuto who found this info.”

I probably should’ve worded it differently, as they clearly sounded hesitant. While the decision had been made passively, our consensus was that we would refrain from posting in the forums for now.

“Okay, we’ll keep it our secret for the time being, then.”

Seeing that Sawyer and Ashihana regarded it as a valuable piece of information, I decided not to post about it yet. However, I did tell them they were free to share it with whomever they wished, as they couldn’t very well keep this info from their friends or party members.

After that, the three of us got carried away, gathering wood from the brush.

For me, this helped to level up my Logging skill and acquire woodworking materials for Sakura, while Ashihana and Sawyer were simply glad to obtain new types of wood. We walked around the forest, cutting down every tree in sight, grinning from ear to ear. The three of us must have felled nearly fifty trees altogether.

“Shall we return to town after one last tree?” Sawyer suggested.

“Sounds good,” Ashihana agreed. “I’d like to see what I can make with this wood.”

“How about that one, then?” I pointed to another sawtooth oak, which we fortunately passed by on the way back to town. I thwacked my ax into the oak with the ease of a skilled worksman, already used to the process after countless fellings.

However, we soon discovered that something was amiss. We would’ve been fools not to notice, as the tree trunk began glowing with a white-hot intensity, as though it were trying to blind us on purpose.

“What’s going on?”

“M-My eyes!”

“I-It’s too bright!”

All of us shielded our eyes instinctively, unable to withstand the glare. If only this game would ease up on the lighting effects!

“Mm-mm!”

“Growl?”

“...!”

Olto had covered his eyes with his hands. Sakura had her eyes shut tight too, standing behind Bear Bear and covering their eyes with her hands, protecting them from the glaring light.

“Ch-Chirp!” Rick squeaked.

Poor Rick. He had been foraging away from the group and had just returned when the light happened to hit him directly, forcing him to shield his eyes and

flail about on the ground. Why did this scene seem so familiar? *Oh, right.* The same thing had happened when I spat weed water all over his face. To think he'd end up in this unfortunate situation two days in a row... He didn't secretly have a skill called Misfortune or some trait that gave him a tendency to get his eyes injured, did he? Even if he did, though, there was nothing I could do about it.

"Chiiirp!"

"...!"

Seeing Sakura rush to his aid, I decided to leave things to her. He'd only been temporarily blinded by a bright light; surely, it wouldn't take that long to recover.

"What's that weird thing, though...?" I muttered. I was more concerned with the transparent enclosure that had suddenly surrounded us. While I was certain it had something to do with the light, I wasn't quite sure what. Ashihana and Sawyer, on the other hand, seemed to know what it was.

"Yikes! That's a boss wall!"

"Y-You're right! That must mean this is a boss area, then."

The two of them sounded aghast, glancing around their surroundings.

"H-Hey. Do you guys know what that thing is?"

"Huh? You mean you don't?"

Apparently, this enclosure was pretty much common knowledge. After a brief explanation from Ashihana, I soon realized why she'd been so shocked by my ignorance. That wall was commonly referred to as a "boss wall," which separated players from the regular playing field whenever they encountered a field boss. Anyone who had fought a field boss at least once had seen this wall before, and unless you were cooped up in the Town of Beginnings all the time like me, most players would have fought a field boss on the way to Zone Two. According to Ashihana, it was extremely rare to find someone who had yet to see a boss wall at this stage in the game.

"Unless you got off to a late start for whatever reason or have been playing

like a complete psychopath...”

“Psychopath...?”

I would love to play normally like everyone else if I could!

“Oh! Um, don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying *you’re* a psychopath, okay?” Ashihana quickly attempted to console me, regret plastered all over her face. *Save it, Ashihana.* The fact that she was that desperate meant that was how she truly felt about me, right?

“I just think you’re a little odd—or rather, unpredictable, I guess...?”

“Ha ha,” I chuckled dryly.

“That’s enough, Ashihana! You’re not helping at all! You’re just making things worse!”

It’s okay, Sawyer. I knew I was a weirdo anyway. Heh heh...

“Mm-mm!”

“Growl!”

Olto and Bear Bear’s nervous yelps brought me back to reality. That’s right, we had bigger fish to fry.

“What’s up?”

“Mm-mm!”

“Growl growl!”

They seemed to be freaking out. Now that I thought about it, we *were* in a boss area.

“If this really is a boss area, that means...”

“*Meep!*”

“I-I knew it!”

What was I saying? *Of course*, there’d be a boss!

The ground shuddered, and an enormous earthworm cried pitifully and burst out from below. Even though we couldn’t see it in its entirety, it was still well over five meters long. For some reason, its head was sporting a miniature tree

of unknown origins, roughly thirty centimeters in height, earning the creature the aptly chosen moniker “Shrub Worm.”

“Meep!”

Despite it being a worm, the creature had a rather cartoonish appearance, and wasn’t as gross as I’d expected it to be. Its skin wasn’t slick like a regular earthworm’s either, but dry, as though it were made out of cloth. It also had round eyes and a half-moon-shaped mouth on its face that looked like they had been scribbled on with a pencil, lending it an almost cute expression. While it certainly didn’t look threatening, it was still huge, and a boss at that. There was no way it was weak.

“W-We gotta get outta here!” I stammered.

“We can’t! Once you’re in a boss area, you can’t leave!” Ashihana said matter-of-factly.

Typical! Like most other RPGs, it seemed like fleeing from a boss battle wasn’t an option.

“W-We’ve no choice but to fight!” Sawyer stuttered.

“Sawyer, Yuto, you two get back! We don’t know how strong this thing is yet.”

“Got it... I don’t have any data, but given that it’s a boss from around here, you might be able to take it on alone no problem. We’re counting on you, Ashihana.”

“Leave it to me!”

Ashihana and Sawyer were already responding swiftly to the situation. I, on the other hand, was freaking out for a different reason.

“Huh? You mean you’ve never seen that creature before?”

“Nope. I’ve never heard of a boss appearing in such an early area in Zone One!” Sawyer replied.

“Me neither!” Ashihana chimed in.

That meant even they didn’t know this monster’s attack patterns or weaknesses!

“Meep meep meep!” the worm squealed.

“It’s coming!”

“Ugh, damn it! I’m not prepared!”

“Get back, Yuto!”

“You don’t have to tell me!”

If I were to get hit by that monstrosity, I’d be dead in an instant.

“Bear Bear, Sakura, Rick, I’ll leave the attacking to you guys!”

“Growl!”

“...!”

“Chirp!”

I figured things would go more smoothly if I left all the work to them.

“Olto, you’ll have my back, won’t you?”

“Mm!”

My tamed monsters all nodded in unison, understanding their jobs perfectly. *Talk about a reliable bunch!* I decided to attack the worm with my Aqua Ball, being careful not to attract its attention too much.

“Hiyah! Ax Bomber!”

The first of us to attack was Ashihana, swinging her ax horizontally at the creature and unleashing a massive ax art with a blue visual effect.

“Meep meep!”

“What the—?! This thing’s hard as a rock!”

Ashihana had apparently intended it as a killer move, but it only made a tiny dent in the Shrub Worm’s life meter.

“Meep!” the Shrub Worm squealed pathetically. *It’s gonna strike back!* I thought, bracing myself. However, the boss ignored Ashihana, and instead, I heard a scream rise from beside me.

“Aaargh!”

My eyes darted in the direction of the sound in time to see a reddish-brown object send Sawyer flying. It was the worm's tail, which seemed to be connected to its body underground.

"Y-You okay?"

"For now. That hit alone depleted half of my HP, though."

Sure enough, Sawyer's HP had plummeted to the yellow zone. Despite not being a fighter-type, he still had to be far more powerful than I was. And yet, one blow had been enough to drive him into a tight spot...

"If I'm not careful, it might be a one-punch knockout for me."

Should I withdraw a bit farther? I wondered. If I did, though, I wouldn't be able to patch everyone up... As I was torn between what to do, Sawyer urged me to step back.

"If you die, your monsters will drop out of battle too! We *have* to avoid that at all costs!"

While that was true, I doubted my companions were actually contributing much to the fight, given how much lower their skill levels were compared to Ashihana. At best, they could only be a minor nuisance to the boss.

"If Bear Bear disappears, Ashihana will lose the will to fight!"

Ah, so that was what this was about. Bear Bear vanishing before her eyes could indeed cause Ashihana to lose motivation. While there was a slight chance that it might spur her on instead, it was almost certain that she'd be caught off guard and become open to attack.

"Yuto, your priority is to avoid that thing!"

"G-Got it!"

After recovering his HP, instead of backing down, Sawyer stepped forward. Wasn't he getting a bit too close to the creature? Although I'd had him pegged as a rear guard like me, he seemed to be well outside the ideal attack range for his specialty, which turned out to be fire magic. It'd probably be better if he backed up a bit... The next instant, Sawyer launched a magical attack, then immediately threw something at the Shrub Worm.

“Meep meep!”

A small explosion went off by the Shrub Worm’s head; immediately after, the monster lost a few life points. Sawyer appeared to have attacked it with whatever he had thrown. While not as powerful as his fire magic, the attack had been surprisingly effective. In terms of the amount of damage dealt, Sawyer’s fire magic was the most effective, followed by Ashihana’s ax arts, and lastly, the white object that Sawyer had thrown at the boss monster.

“Meep meep!” the worm shrieked as another explosion went off. Upon closer inspection, the thrown item appeared to be a paper talisman. Yep, Sawyer had a Magic Circle skill. Although I didn’t know the specifics, I had heard that it was a type of skill that enabled you to draw magic circles on scraps of paper and turn them into amulets. It was supposed to be a difficult skill to use at the early stages of the game due to its high cost, but that was indeed what Sawyer appeared to be doing. Since magic couldn’t be used consecutively due to the incantation and recovery, these amulets served as intermediary protection. Overall, he must have dealt nearly twice the amount of damage that Ashihana had. This attracted the boss’s attention, and earned him a few tail slaps; each time, he used an amulet to recover.

“You can even use it as a recovery item? Cool.”

Though expensive, the talismans appeared to be highly useful. I made a mental note to buy some from Sawyer when I had extra money to spare.

“Can you distract it for a while longer, Sawyer?” Ashihana asked.

“I’ll try.”

“Do your best!”

With Sawyer as a distraction, Ashihana was able to get in a clean hit, even though it was usually the vanguard’s job to distract the enemy while the rear guard attacked.

My tamed monsters were also contributing to the battle, however slight that contribution was. Sakura and Bear Bear were attacking alongside Ashihana, while Rick acted as a decoy and Olto protected me. I was also playing my part by unleashing Aqua Balls, even if the effect was negligible—about one-fifth of

the damage Ashihana and Sawyer dealt, I'd say.

So far, we had the upper hand; despite its tough defense, the Shrub Worm's attacks were extremely simplistic. They only consisted of three patterns: headbutting, spewing pebbles from its mouth, and thrusting its tail from beneath the ground. Not only that, but dodging its attacks was a breeze since they were all sweeping, obvious movements. Aside from Sawyer, who was being doggedly targeted, we hadn't sustained too much damage.

"Meep meep meep meep!"

However, the moment the Shrub Worm's HP dropped to twenty percent, it writhed about and stretched towards the sky, unleashing a pathetic bellow.

"Meep meep!"

Its round eyes were now slanting upwards in a furious glare. As if its anger wasn't obvious enough already, a cross-shaped popping vein had also emerged on its temple.

"Be careful! It might change its attack patterns!"

Ashihana's warning turned out to be correct. The worm suddenly burrowed completely underground and began attacking us from below. After a slight vibration, a hole would open up by our feet, from which the worm would burst forth and headbutt or whip us with its tail. Once it had finished attacking us, it immediately burrowed back into the hole. Front or back no longer mattered: the entire area had become its target. On top of that, it seemed to be choosing its prey at random. In the beginning, this wasn't too bad, as we could all attack the creature at once as soon as its head became visible. However, the more holes there were in the ground, the more difficult it was to guess which one it would emerge from, and the battle gradually became more one-sided.

"Hiyah!"

"Meep!"

"Damn it! It escaped *again*!"

To make things even more difficult, the creature was incredibly swift, ducking back underground at tremendous speed. We were unable to use arts that

required a long activation time or spells that required chants against it.

“Missed again.”

“Me too.”

Even if we tried to predict where it’d emerge from next, there were just too many holes to make an accurate guess. In the end, the only effective means of attacking the monster was Ashihana’s ax, as Sawyer had apparently used up all of his paper talismans ages ago.

“Ugh! I can’t bring it down at all!” Ashihana grumbled.

“If anything, we’re being driven into a corner,” Sawyer added.

“What should we do?”

“Since its weakness seems to be fire, it’d be best if I could get in a clean hit...”

“I see.”

Sawyer’s fire magic was far more effective at dealing damage than my water magic. At first, I thought it was simply a matter of him having higher stats, but it also seemed to have something to do with the creature’s weakness. Given that it had a tree sprouting from its head, it was probably a plant monster.

“Meep meep meep!”

“Eek!”

“Ashihana! Ack!”

The Shrub Worm’s tail had sent Ashihana flying. Distracted by the sudden ambush, Sawyer had also received a body slam. Although they both had only fifty percent HP left, we were left with very few means of recovery. We had just used potions, medicine, and medicinal herbs, all of which had cooldowns, and Sawyer was out of recovery amulets. We couldn’t have him wasting his magic on healing us either, since that would probably leave him without enough MP left to attack afterwards.

“Yikes! Wh-What should we do, Sawyer?!”

“Don’t you have anything, Ashihana? Any special moves you’ve been keeping from us?”

“Nope! How about you, Yuto? Don’t you have a secret weapon or something?”

“S-Secret weapon...?!”

Don’t ask me! I’m no use when it comes to fighting!

“How about you, Sawyer?!”

“I-I don’t... Hey!” Sawyer yelled, pulling a black object out of his inventory. “I totally forgot about this!”

The item was none other than a bomb.

“I got this from an Alchemist friend who specializes in bomb-making! It was so long ago, I’d completely forgotten about it!”

“Is that one of Pyro’s creations?” Ashihana asked.

“Yup!”

Sawyer’s friend was apparently known as Pyro. *Talk about a threatening nickname!* Judging from their reactions, however, this bomb seemed to be the real deal, and a mighty powerful one at that.

“This might just work!”

“Go for it, Sawyer!”

“Will do!”

“That’s the spirit! Blow it to smithereens!”

Ew, no, don’t do that.

“Meep!”

“Mm-mm!” Olto groaned as he flew through the air, struck by a headlong dash from the worm.

“Olto!” I gasped. While the blow hadn’t been enough to kill him, he seemed to be suffering a concussion.

“Bastard! How dare you!” I seethed.

“This is our chance, though!” Sawyer exclaimed, running towards the Shrub Worm, which had shown its face. Before he could throw the bomb at it,

however, the creature unleashed a new attack on him, blowing him off his feet.

“Meep!”

“Argh!” Sawyer screamed. The worm had spat some sort of sticky substance all over him.

“You okay, dude?!” I asked, rushing to his side.

“Uh... Ah...”

“He’s paralyzed!”

The mucus attack seemed to have a paralyzing effect, as Sawyer twitched all over, unable to move an inch.

“Looks like we’re outta options... I’m taking this, okay?”

It was all up to me now! Snatching the bomb out of Sawyer’s hand, I stepped forward, aiming to throw the weapon at the Shrub Worm. Or at least, I had planned to...

“Gah!”

Why, *why* did I have to trip at a time like this?! Even worse, the bomb had slipped through my fingers! This was all the Shrub Worm’s fault for thrashing about and ruining the terrain. There were pot holes and large rocks everywhere. Sure enough, my foot had gotten stuck in one of the holes dug up by the worm’s tail. The bomb flew out of my grasp and arced through the air in a totally unintended direction.

“Crap!”

The bomb missed the Shrub Worm and fell into a hole in the ground by its side.

“Aaaaah!”

All I could do was scream and watch as the disaster unfolded before my eyes. The bomb was swallowed up by the empty hole, then went off with a loud explosion, followed by a fiery-red column of fire.

“Meep meep...!”

“Huh?”

For some reason, the Shrub Worm squealed and slithered out of the hole. Even though I still couldn't get a full view of it, more than half of its body was now visible—it had to be at least ten meters long. Additionally, it seemed to be heavily wounded.

"G-Got it. The explosion must have reached the worm because the holes were connected."

You didn't need to be a genius detective to figure out that all of the holes were probably interconnected underground like a maze. The explosion must have traveled through one of the tunnels and wounded the Shrub Worm.

"Look, over there! That might be its weak spot!" Ashihana pointed out.

"You're right, it could be!" Sawyer agreed.

Not only had we wounded it and dragged it out into the open, but we'd also discovered a strange glowing spot in the middle of its body. Our eyes were also drawn to its peculiar shape. While the creature was shaped like a regular worm up until that glowing point, from there onwards, its body unraveled into several strands of thread interlaced with one another like a roughly woven bamboo basket. After that, its body resumed an ordinary wormlike appearance again. The "basket" contained some sort of glowing crystal from which yellow light gleamed through the gaps. The crystal remained afloat by some sort of mysterious force, and no matter how hard the worm thrashed about, it stayed firmly in its place in the basket. I was momentarily riveted to the spot by the mesmerizing sight.

"Let's get 'em!"

At Ashihana's voice, I snapped back to attention. Like she mentioned, there was a strong possibility that this crystal was the worm's weak point, considering how it usually kept it hidden underground. Sakura and Bear Bear, who had been standing nearby, pounced on the beast at once.

"Growl growl!"

"...!"

"Meep meep!"

The glowing crystal definitely seemed to be its kryptonite, as even my monsters were able to shave off roughly ten percent of the worm's HP. If Ashihana had used her arts, she might have been able to end things then and there. However, before Ashihana could attack, the Shrub Worm burrowed deep inside a hole.

"Damn it! It got away! Don't you have any more bombs, Sawyer?"

"I don't. Sorry..." Sawyer mumbled apologetically, having recovered from his paralysis.

"In that case, think we can draw it out with fire magic?" Ashihana asked.

"Good idea. I'll try."

Having said that, Sawyer fired a shot inside the hole the worm was hiding in. Unfortunately, the worm showed no signs of popping out again. My guess was that the explosion from the bomb earlier had just happened to hit the worm's weak spot, which was why it had immediately jumped out. Fire magic alone seemed to have no effect on the creature. We were back to square one.

"Guess it's downhill from here."

"That's not good at all."

We might seriously be done for this time. That had probably been our one-in-a-million chance. It was unfortunate that we hadn't been able to defeat the boss while the tide was in our favor.

"Think you can go underground, Sawyer?" Ashihana asked.

"You're asking the impossible!"

She did have a point, though. If we could go inside, we might be able to attack its weak spot directly. However, the hole was way too small for us to enter. Even on the off chance that we did, there was nowhere for us to run. We'd only end up being attacked by the Shrub Worm and respawning.

"No chance of us fitting in there..."

However, right after I'd uttered those words, I noticed Rick speeding past me, making a beeline for the hole in the ground.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Rick! What’re you doing?!”

Despite my protests, Rick showed no signs of slowing down. He then dove out of sight into the Shrub Worm’s underground tunnel.

“RICK!”

Could you blame me for screaming? Rick had just entered the underground maze, home to that colossal worm. If it so much as thrashed about, Rick would get flattened like a pancake and die, not to mention he’d probably end up being swallowed whole if he faced that thing head-on.

“Riiick! Is he gonna be okay?”

I knew what he was trying to do. He had overheard what I’d said and decided to attack the Shrub Worm’s weak spot directly. Although I wasn’t entirely sure if he could find his way through that labyrinthian underground tunnel, I had to have faith in him and chant my incantation. *Is he* really *going to be all right, though?* I wondered, chanting my spell aloud while waiting for Rick to emerge, heart in my mouth. Despite my worries, Rick seemed to be far more reliable than I thought.

“Meep meep meep!”

“Finally!”

Before long, the Shrub Worm emerged from its hole, writhing in agony. Rick appeared to have succeeded at attacking its weakness. However, after all that thrashing about, what had become of my poor squirrel...?

“Chirp.”

“Whoa! When did you get here?!”

Before I knew it, Rick was at my feet, wiping the sweat from his forehead with a look of satisfaction. While I’d been worried sick about him, he had apparently escaped from an entirely different hole the one he’d entered.

“You’re all right!”

“Chirp!”

“Good, let’s join the others!”

“Chirp!”

I unleashed the spell I’d been holding. In this game, players were unable to move while chanting an incantation. Once the incantation was complete, however, you could hold it for about ten seconds while you widened your range. Aiming carefully, I fired an Aqua Ball at the beast. Rick charged at the creature once more and slammed his body into its weak spot.

“Growl growl!” Bear Bear roared, slashing at the worm’s weak point repeatedly with their claws.

“...!”

Sakura attacked the worm ruthlessly with her whip.

“Take *that*!”

“Meep meep...”

Ashihana’s ax arts delivered the final blow to the creature, bringing the fierce battle to an end. The Shrub Worm fell to the ground, uttering one last pitiful shriek before vanishing into particles of light.

“We did it!” Ashihana whooped.

“I seriously thought we were done for. We owe it all to you, Yuto.”

“Nah, don’t thank me. Rick did all the hard work.”

“True! Thanks, Rick!”

“Chirp chirp!”

I was just glad we were able to be of some use. After the Shrub Worm vanished, the transparent wall that had been surrounding us melted away. The potholes also vanished along with it, and the ground was smoothed over once more, returning to its pre-boss battle state.

“Looks like we’re back,” Ashihana commented.

“I kept thinking we were gonna die... We’re lucky to be alive.” Sawyer sighed. He was right. Though we had all managed to avoid respawning, it had truly been a close call. I went weak at the knees with relief as that fact truly dawned

on me, sitting down.

“Phew,” I sighed.

“Mm-mm!”

“...!”

“Olto, Sakura, you two did great.” I patted them on the head as they rushed to my side, their cute little faces scrunched up in joy.

“Growl!”

“Chirp!”

“Haven’t forgotten you guys either,” I assured Bear Bear and Rick, who had come running up to me, determined not to miss out. Obviously, they had also played a huge part in the fight. While I was rewarding my tamed monsters for their hard work, Ashihana and Sawyer looked at their screens. I assumed from the whoop of joy they both let out that they had finished checking the boss drops they’d acquired.

“I got fangs, hide, wood, and an item box. All with three-star rarities too!” Sawyer exclaimed delightedly.

I understood where the hide and fangs came from, but *wood*? As I puzzled over this mystery, Sawyer showed me the item in question. It was a small piece of wood about thirty centimeters in length, probably originating from the small tree that had been sprouting from the Shrub Worm’s head. Since it had a rarity of three stars, it was most certainly one of the rarer finds in this area.

“I got wood, mucus, an item box, and *this*!” Ashihana beamed. Digging through her inventory, she flourished a yellow crystal the size of a basketball that looked exactly like the Shrub Worm’s weak spot. “How about you, Yuto?”

Prompted by my companions, I opened my status window and checked the boss drops I had acquired.

“Let’s see... I got some Shrub Worm mucus, two pieces of Shrub Worm Wood, and a random reward box.”

The crystal Ashihana had obtained was probably the boss’s rare drop. Random reward boxes referred to magical boxes whose contents were

unknown until you opened them, which could sometimes be acquired from special boss battles.

“What are you guys doing with your reward boxes?” Sawyer asked us. “I’m opening mine right away.”

“Me too!” Ashihana replied.

“In that case, I think I’ll open mine now as well.”

Sawyer was the first to open his box, which contained a plain brown necklace that looked as though it was made of several clumps of dirt strung together. It appeared to be an accessory that was resistant to earth magic. Sawyer seemed to be moderately satisfied with his reward. Ashihana was the next to open hers; out of her box came a rolled-up piece of parchment.

“Yay! It’s a skill scroll!”

“A rare drop *plus* a skill scroll? You must be lucky today, Ashihana.”

Scrolls were magical items that contained skills or recipes that could be learned once opened. I recalled Sawyer telling me that he made and sold recipe scrolls, but was still unable to make skill scrolls himself. According to him, however, it was highly unlikely that *players* would be able to create such advanced items in the first place, which meant that the only places you could obtain skill scrolls at the moment were from boss drops or treasure chests. As Sawyer said, Ashihana was undeniably on a roll.

“Let’s see what’s inside... It’s a Soil Exploration skill!”

“Sounds pretty cool.”

“It does. A brand-new skill—lucky me!”

“It’s your turn next, Yuto.”

At Sawyer’s urging, I opened my random reward box to find...

“Breath of the Earth? What’s that supposed to be?”

```
Name: Breath of the Earth
Rarity: 1 / Quality: 10★
```

Effect: Can’t be sold or given away.

It looked like a clump of soil, or rather, a ball of dirt. And yet, it had a ten-star rating, no effects to speak of, and couldn’t be sold or given away. I was baffled.

“Hey, what do you think this is?”

“Hmm...”

“Never seen anything like it.”

Even Ashihana and Sawyer seemed puzzled by the exact nature of this item.

“How about you guys?” I asked Olto and co.

“Mmm?”

My tamed monsters were also at a loss. It was a complete mystery, then...

“Could it be an event item?” I wondered out loud.

“Could be, although it’s hard to say,” Ashihana replied.

“It might be some sort of household object,” Sawyer offered.

“Guess it’s possible.”

Was it only for decorative purposes, then? It seemed a bit too ugly for that, though.

“Oh well, I’ll figure it out in due time. I’ll put it away for now.”

“I’ll let you know if I find anything about it!”

“I’ll do some digging around too.”

“Good enough for me. I’m just glad that we managed to survive—and we got all these items. And besides, we got the wood, which was our original goal anyway,” I replied, genuinely meaning it. If I had entered the boss area on my own, there was no doubt I would’ve had to respawn. All things considered, I was happy with the results.

“Good point. Well, what do you say? Want me to make your beehive with Shrub Worm wood? I bet I could make something pretty decent with it. The mucus might come in handy too.”

“Hey, that’s a good idea.”

As Sakura was still very much a beginner when it came to woodworking, having a top Woodcutter like Ashihana make my beehive seemed like a way better option. In fact, I would say things were actually in my favor, now that I could ask a professional to make me one of my most sought-after items with top-quality materials.

“Now that all that’s over and done with, shall we head back to town as planned?”

“Sure. No point in us staying here much longer.”

“Agreed.”

On our way back to town, we discussed what to do with the information regarding the boss battle. Sawyer and Ashihana’s guess was that the fight could have been triggered by the number of trees we had cut down. After reviewing our logs and counting how many trees we felled, we discovered that the boss had appeared just after we’d cut down the fiftieth tree—that had almost certainly been the trigger for the boss encounter.

“I’m pretty sure we can sell this info to the Quick-Eared Cats,” Ashihana said. However, there was a slight problem. If we were to sell this info, we would also have to sell the detail about cutting kindling, which would ultimately result in us having to give up the Plant Knowledge tidbit that we had promised not to sell.

In the end, we decided not to sell any information just yet, including what we knew about this boss. While I had no qualms about selling off our findings alongside my Plant Knowledge discovery, Ashihana and Sawyer seemed rather hesitant on my behalf. This meant that we wouldn’t earn any money, but that didn’t really bother me, considering how much else we’d gained. There was absolutely no need to sell any information we wanted to keep to ourselves for now. We encountered several monsters on the way back to town, but we managed to muster up enough energy and defeat them all despite our exhaustion.

“Golly, I’m beat.”

“Me too.”

“Me three.”

My tamed monsters had also collapsed on the ground of the town square in a heap, apparently wiped from the flurry of events. Sakura was sitting in a W position with Bear Bear in her lap and Olto leaned against her back, with Rick curled on top of his head.

“Thanks for everything! I had a really great day today!” Ashihana thanked me.

“Likewise,” I replied heartily.

“I’ll make the beehive as soon as I can! I’ll shoot you a DM when it’s done, ’kay?”

“Looking forward to it.”

“Good. Okay, see ya! Bye, Bear Bear!”

“Growl.”

Before parting, I handed Ashihana the wood and other materials I’d obtained today. According to her, the other parts of the worm could also be used for beehive making. I was already looking forward to seeing the finished product. With that, we bid farewell to Ashihana. She kept on glancing back and waving at Bear Bear until she was out of sight. At this rate, I doubted it would be long before she came to visit me—or more precisely, Bear Bear—again.

“Shall we get going too?” I said, turning to Sawyer.

“Absolutely!” he chimed. I had actually promised to take him to the florist after we returned to town, as he seemed pretty enthusiastic to visit the shop I’d bought his bookmark from.

“I can’t wait to see what the place is like.”

“Don’t get your hopes up too much.”

Sawyer was convinced that the bookmark held some sort of key to making grimoires. The florist I was about to take him to, however, mainly dealt with weeds. To be honest, I didn’t think it could possibly live up to his expectations.

“Come on, let’s go!”

“Hey, quit pulling!”

Damn it. If only he were a cute girl, this would be like something out of a bittersweet teenage love story! *Too bad I'm straight, though...*

"What's wrong?" Sawyer peered at me curiously.

"Nothing!"

Gah, don't tilt your head like that! I screamed silently, grappling with my internal conflict.



Chapter Three: Plenty of Things to Do in Town

“Is that the florist you were talking about?” Sawyer asked, noticing the shop before I could point it out to him.

“Yep. Can you see it?”

“Yes.”

As I suspected, it seemed you could enter the florist as long as you had Plant Knowledge.

“Hi, Spade.”

“Hello.”

Sawyer had no problems entering the shop either.

“Why, it’s my boy, Yuto! Welcome. I see you’ve brought company today!” Spade greeted us jovially.

“Wow, this is amazing!” Sawyer said, gazing around in wonder at the various knickknacks in the shop. As soon as he spotted the bookmarks, he ran up to them and began browsing through, comparing them one by one and nodding to himself. I decided to leave him to his own devices for now.

“I heard ya took care of Ryver’s request for him. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. It was no big deal.”

As I was chatting with Spade, I noticed someone emerge from the back of the shop.

“Are you the otherworldly traveler who solved my nephews’ problems?” the stranger asked me. In terms of appearance, he looked a lot like Spade and Ryver—that is, stern and rugged. Although he appeared to be smiling, his features were way too severe to put me at ease. On the other hand, his voice was soft and gentle. If I were to judge him by his voice alone, I would think him to be a refined gentleman.

“I’m Spade’s uncle, Pisco. Nice to meet you,” he introduced himself, extending his hand towards me.

“Uh, hi. Nice to meet you too,” I replied, returning the handshake. He seemed awfully friendly for someone I had just met. However, Pisco continued to chat with me, unaware of my reservations.

“Considering we’re just now making each other’s acquaintances, it may be rather presumptuous of me to ask this of you, but would you consider doing me a favor?”

A new request? This was unexpected. When I dropped by the shop this morning, nothing had happened. What changed?

“I actually run a lumber yard. Usually, I go and cut the trees myself, but...”

Having said that much, Pisco raised his right arm to show me. Now that I had a closer look at it, I could see that it was wrapped in bandages.

“As you can see, I’ve been unable to do so since I injured myself.”

“So, you want me to cut down some trees and bring them to you?”

“Exactly.”

It looked like Logging skills were essential to trigger and fulfill this quest.

Delivery Quest

Requirement: Deliver ten pieces of Wood (Miscellaneous, Sawtooth Oak).

Rewards: 400 G, brushwood crockery set.

Time Limit: Four days

One of the rewards was a set of crockery—a welcome household addition for my family of five. I didn’t have ten pieces of Sawtooth Oak, though. According to my inventory, I only had eight. Regardless, I decided to accept Pisco’s quest, confident that I could easily obtain the remaining pieces if I went to the Western Forest. Even if I took today off, I could surely complete the task within

the specified time frame.

“I’ll do it,” I told Pisco.

“You will? Thank you! So, would you like to complete the quest now?” he asked me all of a sudden.

“Huh? What do you mean? I only have eight pieces of wood at the moment.”

“But you have ten between the two of you.”

As I puzzled over the meaning of his words, I realized that Sawyer and I had formed a party without being aware of it. After Ashihana left our team, our group now consisted of six people, automatically registering us as a party instead. It seemed that I had accepted Pisco’s quest as a party rather than a single player, which explained some things.

“In that case, I’ll provide two pieces,” Sawyer offered, apparently having received the “Quest Accepted” notification as well. I hadn’t noticed him leave the bookmark section; he was now standing behind me.

“You sure?” I asked.

“Of course. I have more than enough anyway. Oh, and I don’t need the reward either—you can have it.”

“Now, just a minute...”

“No, really...”

“But...”

After some discussion, it was decided that I would take the crockery set, and the monetary reward would be split evenly between us. To be honest, I didn’t even need the money as long as I got the crockery. As for Sawyer, he was more than satisfied with his discovery of the florist and lumber yard. After receiving the sawtooth oak from Sawyer, I handed them over to Pisco along with the pieces of wood I had.

“Here you go.”

“Much appreciated. That’s ten pieces of sawtooth oak, safely delivered!”

There was a *Ding!* and the blare of a trumpet notified us that we had

completed our quest. All right, I now had some tableware! I immediately checked my inventory and selected the set that I'd just received as a reward.

"Nice, I dig it."

The set was probably intended for special occasions, and included wooden plates, cups, knives, and forks for six people. I bet they would be great for eating stews and the like, and I looked forward to using them. In my excitement, however, I had totally forgotten that this was probably a quest chain.

"To tell the truth, I have another favor to ask of you two. Would you be willing to hear me out?"

Apparently, we had fulfilled the requirements for triggering the next quest. Much to our surprise, we received another request from Pisco.

"Thanks to you, I've managed to stock up on the necessary materials. However, that still leaves me with one task. I have to make some wooden crafts, but I highly doubt I can manage that in my current state."

Our next trigger appeared to be Woodworking skills. I had both Sakura and Sawyer to thank for that.

Delivery Quest

Requirement: Deliver two pieces of tableware made from kindling with a rating of eight stars or higher.

Rewards: 500 G, one cherry blossom sapling.

Time Limit: Ten days

The reward for this quest was a sapling, and a cherry blossom tree at that! That meant I could enjoy a flower-viewing picnic with my monsters. *What a dream come true!* However, I wasn't sure if we could fulfill this quest, despite the longer deadline. Would ten days be enough to make something with an eight-star rating...?

"What do you think, Sawyer?"

“Hmm. I think it’ll be pretty difficult. If we’re talking plates made from Begini Cedar, the most I can manage is four stars. Even if kindling turns out to be easier to work with, I’m not sure if eight stars is possible...”

“Gotcha. Think Ashihana could manage it?”

“Maybe. She might be able to pull it off...”

“Let’s ask her, then.”

My friends list indicated that Ashihana was still online, so I pressed the call button. Before long, she answered the phone.

“Yoo-hoo. Hi again, Yuto! What’s up?”

“Thing is, Sawyer and I just accepted a quest together, and we were wondering if you could help us out.”

“Oh? What kind of quest?”

“We’re supposed to deliver two pieces of tableware made from kindling with a rating of eight stars or higher—”

Before I could even ask her if she were capable of making such a thing, Ashihana cut me off.

“Really? I just made those,” she interjected casually. Wait, did I hear that correctly? I could’ve sworn she said she just made them.

“I’m talking about two eight-star pieces of tableware made from kindling,” I repeated.

“Like I said, just made them. I wanted to test how carvable the sawtooth oak was, so I made two plates. Since the wood had no special effects, it seems that the overall quality turned out quite high. I was surprised to get an eight-star rating right off the bat. Want these plates?”

“What? I mean, sure, if you’re willing to part with them.”

“You can have them, then!”

It seemed like there’d be no problems completing Pisco’s second quest either. Although I’d insisted on picking up the plates from Ashihana, she offered to bring them to the florist herself since she was interested in the lumber yard.

While waiting, I decided to inform Pisco of our decision.

"Um, we'll do it."

"Splendid! I'm counting on you!"

Ten minutes later, Ashihana arrived as promised.

"Thank you! You've been extremely helpful!"

Once I handed Pisco the plates, our quest was completed in no time.

"*Your tamed monster Olto has leveled up.*"

"*Your tamed monster Sakura...*"

Whoa, all of my monsters had leveled up too! The XP probably came from our forest expedition and the quests we'd just completed. Not only that, but Olto had reached level 10, and learned a new skill. This skill was called Bountiful Harvest, and was incredibly useful.

Bountiful Harvest: Increases harvesting yield by 30%. Has a fixed probability of further increasing yield, up to an extra 100%.

With this skill, we'd be able to harvest more fruit from our trees. I wasn't sure what the probability was of it doubling our yield, but chances were Olto's Luck would play a part in it.

"You don't mind me taking the sapling, do you?" I asked Ashihana.

"Go ahead," she replied. "No point in me having a tree when I don't possess Arboriculture. I don't need it."

"Okay, I'll take it then."

I handed her the 500 G reward as payment for the plates and took the cherry blossom sapling for myself. Sawyer refused to accept any of the rewards, saying he hadn't done anything in particular. He seemed to be more than satisfied with the amount of XP gained from this quest. Spade and Pisco appeared to be in high spirits as well.

“Ha ha! Y’all are an impressive lot!” Spade chortled. “I’ve certainly taken a liking to you. Please do visit my shop sometime. You’re welcome anytime.”

“I know. Why don’t we throw a party when the cherry blossoms are in bloom?!” Pisco suggested.

That sounded like a fantastic idea. I imagined what it’d be like to have a party with NPCs and my monsters under the cherry blossom tree I grew. Gathering around a picnic with my cuties while the soft pink cherry blossom petals scattered in the wind was a perk that could only be enjoyed in-game. I got excited just thinking about it.

“Sounds great!”

As soon as I’d said that, the following appeared.

Special Quest

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

Reward: Three bonus points.

Time Limit: None

Huh? I had triggered yet another quest which appeared to be part of the quest chain. Apparently the game had also interpreted my nod and exclamation as an affirmative, as it seemed I had already accepted it. While that was all well and good, it would take me some time to complete this task.

“Olto, Sakura. Whether we can have this picnic depends on you two. Can I count on you guys?”

“Mm!”

“...♪”

Both of them tapped their hands on their chests as if to say, “Leave it to me!” *Wonderful.* They really were a reliable duo.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl!”

“Whoa, hey there.”

Just then, Rick and Bear Bear charged at me. The two of them clung to my legs and stared up at me intently, determined not to be left out.

“Don’t worry, I know. Haven’t forgotten you guys. I’m also counting on you to help Olto and Sakura, okay?”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl!”

As I was patting the two of them on the head, I felt something thud against my back. This time, Olto and Sakura were clinging to me—or rather, Olto was. Sakura simply held on to the hem of my robe.

“Okay, okay. Patience, my friends.”

I took turns patting each of them on the head until they were satisfied. They really were a handful, but it was that rambunctiousness that made them so adorable.

“Right then, think I’ll head back to my farm for now...”

“I’m heading back to my shop too. Can’t wait to do more research on these bookmarks!”

“Time to head home!” Ashihana chimed in.

“Thanks for today, you two,” I told Ashihana and Sawyer.

“No problem. I made so many new discoveries today thanks to you! Do stop by my shop again sometime,” Sawyer replied.

“Of course. See you around.”

“Bye!”

“See ya!”

Having completed as much of the quest chain as I could for now, I logged out

for a while before logging back in and resuming farming. The moon provided just enough light to work with, and farming at night had its own perks, what with the hundreds of stars twinkling in the night sky. Gazing at them as I worked made me feel as though I was transported to an entirely different plane of existence.

"Hnngh!" I groaned as I stretched. Although I didn't get backaches in-game, I still couldn't help stretching after standing back up. Funny how old habits die hard.

"I'll obtain Selective Breeding once my Farming skill levels up another rank. Might as well keep at it a bit longer."

At the moment, I didn't have anything to do besides weeding, but it was little things like this that mattered. In the midst of working, a faint glimmer caught my eye.

"What's that?"

It seemed to be coming from the patch where the trees were concentrated. I walked towards the source of light with caution.

"It's coming from the walnut tree."

The walnut I had planted three days ago was already about a meter tall, and one of its branches bore a single glowing yellow-green nut.

"What's this light...?"

What had appeared at first glance to be a faintly glowing firefly, or a pebble painted with glow-in-the-dark paint, turned out to be a walnut, whose wrinkly, brain-like shell glowed bluish-white in the darkness. Because this was a game, there was no husk surrounding the nut that grew on the tree, ripe and ready to be picked. Harvesting walnuts in real life, by the way, was somewhat of an ordeal: you had to wait until the husk surrounding the nut had rotted and remove it. In this game, however, it seemed that you could skip that process. Burying walnut husks in the ground and waiting for them to rot was far too tedious anyway; it was just one of those instances where you had to suspend your disbelief.

Of course, this being a game, there were many other instances like that. It

was questionable, for example, how you ended up with hide and meat in your inventory after defeating a monster when you hadn't even butchered it.

"Don't remember it blooming, though."

Since I hadn't expected to harvest anything from it so soon, I hadn't been paying attention to the tree at all. Usually, it would take a regular player at least a week until their first harvest. In my case, however, Olto possessed Forced Cultivation EX, while Sakura had tree magic. This would have been more than twice the usual speed of growing a walnut tree, but perhaps that was possible between the two.

"Could this be a Glowing Walnut?" I wondered, remembering the story about them occasionally growing on regular walnut trees. During the day, it was impossible to tell whether they were glowing or not, and thus they could only be harvested at night. However, the forests were fairly dangerous after dark, which made them quite hard to obtain.

I hadn't dreamed I'd be able to grow one on my farm, as they were supposed to be pretty rare. After a brief search, I found out that you could harvest nuts from walnut trees even if they hadn't fully matured yet. In the beginning, they only bore one nut at a time, but their yield was supposed to increase as they approached maturation. How incredible was it that my first harvest was a glowing walnut? Was this due to Olto's Luck, or had he picked a special nut for me when he first planted it? Either way, the credit was all his.

"Wonder what it's for. Is it edible? Or do I use it for concocting stuff?"

Name: Glowing Walnut

Rarity: 3 / Quality: 5★

Effect: Ingredient. Recovers hunger status by 5% when ingested.

This was even rarer than green peaches. I made a mental note to peruse the forums later once I'd finished harvesting my crops.

"Better hurry up and get this over with."

At least, that had been my intention. Unfortunately, the universe had other plans for me.

“...Don’t remember planting anything like this.”

I had discovered yet another mysterious crop. Something weird was going on tonight. Where there should have been medicinal herbs was a single unfamiliar red plant. It appeared to be the only strange weed of the bunch, and while it was about the same size as a medicinal herb, its leaves were an entirely different shape, so it didn’t seem like one of the herbs had just suddenly changed color.

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Name: Firestarter Plant
Rarity: 2 / Quality: 1★
Effect: Ingredient.
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I had never seen this plant before. Where did it come from? If this were real life, it could have come from bird droppings or something, but that was highly unlikely in this case.

“Did you plant it, Olto?” I asked him.

“Mm-mm,” he shook his head. If he hadn’t planted it, then how on earth had it ended up here?

I scoured the in-game forums and discovered that firestarter plants could be found pretty much anywhere in Zone Three. Because they were so abundant, they were generally looked upon with disdain. As for their usage, they came in handy when making torches or solid fuel. Many blacksmiths apparently mixed them into their weapons in hopes of giving them a fire attribute, although there had been no successful attempts so far. While I now knew its usage, that still didn’t solve the mystery of how it had come to be on my farm. I would have to do a bit more digging around later.

“Guess I’ll try propagating it for now.”

Even if it were a common plant later on in the game, it was still a valuable

ingredient to me at this stage.

“Can I count on you, Olto?”

“Mm!”

No problems there. He immediately propagated the plant before my eyes, turning it into seeds. I decided to let him take care of the firestarter plant while I mulled over what to do with my glowing walnut. I did my research thoroughly as I didn’t want to waste such a rare item, but was overwhelmed instead by how many uses I found. Besides being edible, it could also be used for luminous paint or lights and lamps.

Not only that, but glowing walnuts were also necessary for rank-up quests in guilds such as the Bandits’ Guild. Rank-up quests were events that occurred when increasing your guild rank to rank 5, and the requirements changed depending on which guild you belonged to. In the case of the Bandits’ Guild, you needed to obtain three glowing walnuts in one night as a solo player to meet their requirements. Despite the name, the Bandits’ Guild wasn’t some type of criminal organization, but a support group for players who had chosen bandit-type character classes such as Thieves. Having to go solo made this a tough challenge, as the forests increased in difficulty at night. The requirement for the Magical Beasts Guild, on the other hand, was to bring three monsters above level 10.

“Hmm. Maybe I’ll save it for now. No telling when or if I’ll be able to obtain it again.”

Right after I stored the glowing walnut in my inventory, I was startled by the sound of a telephone ringing. It was a friend call.

“Incoming call from Alyssa, huh...? Hello?”

“Hey, Yuto. About that trip to the altar... When do you wanna go?”

“When? We’re going tonight, aren’t we?”

Alyssa had called me to ask about our trip to the altar on the next Tree Day, which I had agreed to the last time I sold her information regarding the Dryad. Now that it was past midnight, that day was today, the 12th, Tree Day—the one day of the week the Lakeside Sequoia Dryad descended upon the altar. I

mentioned that I thought we had agreed to go at night, though, to avoid other people seeing us.

“That works too, but I don’t mind leaving before sunrise either. As long as it’s on the 12th and dark enough that other people don’t notice us, I’m game,” she replied. That made sense. Since she’d mentioned going when it was dark, I had assumed she meant after 8 p.m. on the 12th. Now that I thought about it, before sunrise was perfectly fine too. It wasn’t as if I was in a hurry to go anywhere, after all.

“We can leave now if you want.”

“Really? Then let’s do that. I want to verify your info as soon as possible. Also, mind if I bring a few clan members with me? It’ll be a good way to get more data on our offerings.”

“Not at all.”

I was just as curious to find out what you could get in exchange for your offering. If anything, I would have begged her if she hadn’t asked first.

“Thanks. Add two more to the party, please.”

“Got it. Shall we meet up at your stall?”

“Sure. Sounds good to me.”

If there were three of them, that meant I could only bring two monsters with me.

“Who shall I pick...? Rick and Bear Bear, you two come along.”

I needed Olto and Sakura to look after the farm, and besides, I wanted to introduce Bear Bear to Alyssa. Rick was also an obvious choice since he didn’t take up much space.

“Chirp!”

“Growl!”

Bear Bear saluted me, as did Rick, who was standing on top of their head. Seriously, as adorable as it was, *where* did they learn how to do that?

“Anyway, let’s go.”

Just as I was about to head off to the square with my chosen companions...

“Guh!”

...I tripped on something and fell, face-planting into the ground. If this hadn’t been a game, I would most definitely have a nosebleed right now.

“Ouch.”

Okay, it didn’t actually hurt—it was just one of those things I said reflexively. I couldn’t help saying “ow” whenever I sustained damage during battles either.

“What’s the big deal, Sakura?” I asked her, regarding the vine coiled around my leg.

“...!”

She was desperately miming something and pointing to herself.

“What is it? You wanna go too?”

“...♪”

Sakura clasped her hands in front of her chest and nodded. *Come to think of it, the Dryad must be something like her mom.*

“You wanna meet the Dryad?”

“...♪♪”

Sakura nodded emphatically. *Bingo.* Since she was intent on visiting the altar, I might as well bring her with me.

“Sorry, Bear Bear, you’re gonna have to stay.”

“Growl...”

“...”

“Growl?”

“...♪”

“Growl growl!”

Bear Bear deflated, but they seemed to cheer up once Sakura patted them on the head. She really was like a big sis to them. I was glad my monsters got along

so well.

“All right, let’s go.”

“Chirp!”

“...♪”

Alyssa and her friends were already waiting for us when we arrived at the square.

“Evening,” I greeted them.

“Hey there. We’ve been waiting for you,” Alyssa replied.

“Nice seeing you two again.” I turned to address the pair of other familiar faces: Lewin, one of the members of the Quick-Eared Cats and a weapons shop owner, and Maple, the merchant who ran a farming tool shop.

“Likewise. Thanks for the invite.”

“Looking forward to it.”

“Shall we form a party, then?” I asked.

“Hang on,” Alyssa interjected. “I want to know whether we can enter the Dryad’s place separately or not, so let’s remain split up for the time being.”

Ah, so the verification process had already begun.

“Whenever you’re ready, Yuto. Lead the way.”

“Sure thing. Follow me.”

The altar wasn’t too far from where we were, and before long, we had arrived at the bridge that led us to the shrine’s entrance. However, we refrained from ducking under the bridge just yet, lest other players spot us, instead just biding our time—though I suspected that huddling together and chatting on the bridge just made us stand out even more.

“Really? Is it true you can sometimes collect stuff other than honey from beehives?”

“Apparently, yes.”

After about twenty minutes of what turned out to be fairly useful idle

chitchat, our moment finally came.

“The coast is clear.”

Using her Reconnaissance skill, Alyssa confirmed that there was no one else in the vicinity besides us. Now was our chance.

“Okay, let’s go!” I announced, leading the way into the canal.

“We’re really going into the canal, huh?”

“W-Will our feet touch the bottom?”

Alyssa had a grudging look on her face, possibly reluctant to get her clothes wet. Lewin, too, stared at the canal with a stricken expression, looking even more hesitant than Alyssa. Was he afraid of the water or something?

“Don’t worry. It’s only waist high in the deepest spots,” I reassured him.

“G-Guess that’s all right, then...” he mumbled, though he only dipped his toes in, going no farther. It seemed like his fear was genuine.

“Your being a dwarf doesn’t prevent you from swimming or anything, does it?” Although a common trope in many fantasy novels, I was pretty sure that wasn’t the case in LJO.

“Probably not, but I’m hopeless at swimmin’ in real life. Dunno if I can swim in-game.”

Gotcha. If he didn’t possess Swimming skills and couldn’t swim for real, then it was likely that he wouldn’t be able to swim in-game either. Since I was somewhat able to swim even without in-game Swimming skills, your actual abilities probably played a small part in it. It hadn’t occurred to me to consider players who couldn’t swim at all. Now that I thought about it, perhaps some monsters weren’t capable of swimming either.

“Kinda worried about Bear Bear actually.”

After all, Bear Bear was practically a walking, breathing teddy bear. Although I was sure they’d be all right, they looked like they might absorb a lot of water and drown. Rick would be fine as long as he stayed curled around my neck, and Sakura was unlikely to encounter any problems in the canal given that she was about the same height as me.

“This way,” I said, leading our group.

“I’m getting goosebumps,” Alyssa whispered.

“Hey, there’s a door,” Lewin pointed out.

After making sure that everyone was safely under the bridge, I placed my hand on the hidden door. Retracing the steps in my memory, I groped for the keyhole in the darkness. When I found it, I inserted the key, and the door swung open without any resistance. Torchlight spilled from the crack, lighting up the space under the bridge and painting a faint outline of the door in the darkness.

Unfortunately, Alyssa and the others were unable to see this light, and the door still appeared closed to them. According to them, it looked as though I were simply fumbling around in the darkness. Incidentally, Alyssa and Lewin both possessed Night Vision thanks to their race-specific traits, granting them the ability to see things around us as clearly as day. I felt quite foolish.

“Guess simply tagging along won’t do the trick, huh.”

“You *can* see the door, right?”

“Yeah. It looks closed to us, though.”

“Let’s try forming a party then.”

“Me first.”

I did as Alyssa requested and added her to my party.

“Hey, I see it! It’s open!” she exclaimed. The door now appeared ajar to Alyssa too. Did that mean you had to join a party with a member who had the key? Next, I proceeded to add Lewin, then Maple, to my party too.

“Hey, I see it!” Lewin cried out.

“There really *is* a staircase,” Maple said, impressed.

“Good thing there’s light,” Alyssa commented.

“Yeah. It’s still pretty dim, though, so watch your step.”

We descended the stairs and made our way to the altar. Upon reaching the fork in the road, we took the one on the right. Alyssa peered around the corner, seemingly interested in the path on the left.

“Wonder what’s on the other side?”

“There’s a staircase that goes farther underground. I haven’t been down it, though, so I dunno where it leads.”

Lewin, on the other hand, seemed to have an idea.

“Probably leads to the Adventurers’ Guild,” he said. That made sense. Now that he mentioned it, I recalled hearing something about an event that allowed you to enter the altar from the guild.

“I’m curious, though. Who knows, it might have changed since the beta test,” Alyssa murmured.

“Do you wanna check out what’s downstairs after we’ve visited the altar?” I suggested.

“You don’t mind?”

“It’s not as if I have any plans or anything. Just don’t expect me to fight.”

“We’re ex-beta testers, remember? You can count on us.”

Even though it seemed like they were in town most of the time, they apparently swapped out with other clan members now and then to make progress in the game. It should have come as no surprise that their base levels were all much higher than mine. Before we knew it, we had arrived at the entrance to the altar room.

“Is this where the altar is?”

“Yup. Ready?”

The door gave way without much effort. I peered inside the room cautiously to find it much the same as before. Just like the last time, the altar was surrounded by the Lakeside Sequoia’s enormous, sprawling roots.

“Wow. This is it, eh?” Alyssa whistled.

“Hmm. Looks just like the video,” Lewin commented.

“It really does,” Maple chimed in, the three of them looking over my shoulder into the room. They half shoved me as I stepped inside and made my way to the altar. At the moment, there were still no noticeable changes.

“Where could the Dryad be?”

“Um, Miss Dryad? You there?” I called out. Instantly, a beautiful woman bathed in light emerged from the altar, just like on my first visit. I knew her right away—I’d recognize that long, green hair and sensual outfit anywhere—it was the Sequoia Dryad.

“We meet again, adventurer.” She greeted me in a calm manner, smiling serenely at us.

“Um, hi. Been a week since we last met.”

Having observed our exchange, the three Quick-Eared Cats members began squealing and taking screenshots in a frenzy. I had done the exact same thing, so it was totally understandable.

“Whoa, an actual Dryad.”

“She’s gorgeous.”

“We can see her too.”

Although momentarily captivated, Alyssa, Lewin, and Maple immediately recalled their purpose and asked the Dryad if they could make offerings as well.

“Yes, you may. Anyone who was led to this place by the key may make an offering,” she answered. It looked like it wouldn’t be an issue for them.

“Um, what about my tamed monsters?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, child, but I can only offer blessings to people.”

Oh well, I expected as much. If my tamed monsters could make offerings as well, that’d give Tamers way too much of an advantage.

“All right, I’ll go first!”

First up was Alyssa, who placed some kind of scale on the altar. According to my Appraisal skill, it was a Lesser Rex Plate.

“It’s one of the rarest monster items you can currently get, being a rare drop from a Zone Three field boss and all.”

True to her word, the item had a three-star rarity, not to mention it was extremely high quality.

“Are you sure you wanna give up something that valuable?” I asked. It had to be a pretty rare item, even for a high-ranking clan such as the Quick-Eared Cats. However, Alyssa remained unfazed.

“It’s for research.”

Information brokers were truly something else...! They were apparently willing to go the extra mile in exchange for information.

“Very well. Take this blessing, my child,” the Dryad said, bestowing an item upon Alyssa.

“Could this be...an iron ingot?”

```
Name: Iron Ingot
Rarity: 3 / Quality: 6★
Effect: An ingot made from iron.
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Was that it? Really? The powerful-looking monster’s scale had been exchanged for a measly iron ingot. Even though both items had the same rarity, I’d much rather own a Lesser Rex Plate. However, I seemed to be the only one who felt that way.

“Th-This is amazing!” Alyssa yelped.

“Huh? How so?”

“Excuse me?! Don’t you know anything about iron ingots? Only a handful of top blacksmith players have succeeded in creating these, and low-quality ones at that! And here I have one that’s *six* stars! People would kill to have this!”

“Whoa! This is gettin’ good!” Lewin, who was usually a man of few words, yelled excitedly. The ingot turned out to be far more valuable than I thought.

“At the moment, it’s all mainly bronze and copper, so iron’s still pretty rare. If word gets out that ya can get iron ingots here, I’ll betcha a lot of people will want to come. After all, it ain’t somethin’ ya can just shell out for!”

According to Lewin and Alyssa, Lesser Rex Plates couldn’t be used to make

items on their own, nor were they an intermediary item. In short, although they were rare, they weren't very useful. Iron ingots, on the other hand, could be used to make items, and when combined with other ingots, they created high-quality weapons and armor. Therefore, they were incredibly useful as a standalone item. Unfortunately, the iron ores they were made from could only be obtained from rare monster drops in Zone Three, which rendered them highly unattainable at present.

"Aight, I'm next!" Lewin exclaimed, approaching the altar with gusto. "This is my offerin'."

The item Lewin placed on the altar was an ordinary bronze ore, which he'd probably just dug up and brought along for the trip. It wasn't even an ingot. Surely he had something better than that to offer...?

"Really? Are you sure?"

Why wasn't he aiming for an iron ingot? According to him, however, this was also part of the verification process.

"Gotta find out what's the very least ya can get," he explained. That was a valid point. I, too, was curious to see what he would get in return. Unfortunately, Lewin failed to receive any items.

"This is for you."

"Hm?"

The Dryad waved her hand over Lewin, making his body glow for a brief instant. He immediately opened his status window, only to discover that he had received a buff that prevented his hunger status from decreasing for the next twelve hours.

"Well, guess you wouldn't get much in exchange for shitty items," Alyssa declared.

"S'pose that's true," Lewin sighed.

Imagine waiting eight whole weeks to receive a blessing, only to get a measly buff like that. Thank goodness I had gotten a Lakeside Sequoia Fruit. If I hadn't had premium fertilizer on me at the time, I might have ended up just like Lewin.

Neither he nor the others seemed particularly upset, though. Regardless of the results, they seemed happy to have gained new information.

"My turn next," Maple chirped as she approached the altar, ignoring the other two who were still heatedly discussing what types of offerings would yield similar results as Lewin's. She struck me as the sort of person who enjoyed doing things at her own speed.

"Here you go."

Maple had offered the same item that I had: premium fertilizer. I supposed she was trying to find out whether offering the same item would yield the same results or not. Instead of the Lakeside Sequoia Fruit that I got, Maple received a different item—a pretty pink flower petal.

Name: Lakeside Sequoia Petal

Rarity: 3 / Quality: 7★

Effect: Raises the quality of the original item by 1 ★ when fused together. Max. 7★. Boosts mutation rate.

"Looks like yours was a onetime-only bonus, Yuto," Alyssa remarked.

"This is also pretty dang good, though." Lewin sounded awestruck.

"Well, well, isn't this something?" Maple marveled.

It certainly sounded intriguing, as raising an item's quality through fusing became increasingly difficult the higher the quality was. With this item, though, you could cut down on the necessary number of materials for crafting significantly.

I was surprised to learn that the Lakeside Sequoia Fruit with a rarity of eight I had received was a first-time-only reward. Had I really done the right thing by propagating and planting it on my farm? I *had* gotten Sakura as a result, though, so I supposed it had been for the best. *That's right, Sakura.* I had forgotten that she'd wanted to meet the Dryad.

"Go on, Sakura."

“...”

“What’s wrong?”

For some reason, Sakura hid behind me. I craned my neck to see her fidgeting, cheeks flushed pink, evidently embarrassed.

“You wanted to meet the Dryad, didn’t you?”

“...”

“Go on, you can do it.”

I stepped aside and placed my hand on her back reassuringly. Now that I was out of the way, I could tell that Sakura and the Dryad had made eye contact.

“Why, you must be my progeny. How wonderful of you to give birth to a tree nymph. Come here, my child,” the Dryad said, chuckling.

“...♪”

Beckoned by the Dryad’s smile, Sakura stepped forward hesitantly, which earned her a pat on the head.

“Good girl.”

“...♪♪”

Phew, thank goodness they both looked happy, especially Sakura. If anything, she seemed happier than when *I* patted her on the head. While that made me slightly jealous, I soon got over myself after seeing her contented smile. Being doted on by the Dryad, Sakura actually looked her age. While she made a good older sister to her siblings, it was cute to see this childish side of her too. I waited in anticipation for some sort of event to occur, given that this was basically a mother-meets-daughter type of thing, but nothing special happened.

“Please come again, and bring that child with you.” The Dryad spoke to me with a satisfied look on her face.

“Uh...”

“You *will* come, won’t you?”

“O-Of course.”

That was it; their meeting didn't trigger any sort of special event or quest. It turned out that Sakura had simply wanted to meet the Dryad. Oh well, I guessed it was worth the trip, seeing as Sakura was still beaming. Alyssa turned to ask the Dryad, who had returned to the top of the altar, a question.

"Um, can I ask you something? Can anyone visit you as long as they go to Yuto who has the key to this place?"

"That's right." The Dryad nodded in response.

"That's pretty incredible, don't you think? You could turn that into a business."

Of course, she would suggest that—she was a merchant, after all. I had to take my hat off to her ingenuity. However, I doubted I'd be able to run that sort of business. It wasn't really my cup of tea, not to mention it'd take up a lot of my free time. I was here to enjoy the game, not to spend the rest of my days making countless trips between this underground room and town. However, Alyssa's plan turned out to have a major flaw in it, as evidenced by the Dryad's next words.

"Don't forget that you can only register up to five people excluding the owner on one key."

"Huh? Register?"

"Precisely."

Prompted by her words, I took the key out of my inventory and assessed it. There, I discovered that after the words "Owner: Yuto" were the names of the people registered to the key, i.e., Alyssa, Lewin, and Maple.

"All of your names are listed... Can you not remove someone's name once they've been registered?"

"I'm afraid you can't. However, you may register their names to multiple keys, although that doesn't change the number of blessings they can receive."

"That means I can only add two more people to this key."

To be honest, it hardly mattered, seeing as I barely had any friends or other people in mind I planned to bring here. I was just glad that I'd been able to

bring the Quick-Eared Cats members to this place.

The Dryad bid us farewell. “Until next time, I await your visit, adventurers.”

“Uh, sure thing. Thanks a bunch.”

Alyssa and the others remained quiet as I waved the Dryad goodbye, stunned expressions on their faces. The next instant, they all bowed their heads in apology.

“Sorry, Yuto!”

“Didn’t expect things to turn out like this...!”

“I’m so sorry!”

They looked like they were on the verge of getting down on their knees.

“A-Alyssa? What the...?”

“Let me pay you!”

“No, really, there’s no need for that.”

That was the honest-to-god truth, but Alyssa remained adamant.

“I insist. Not only did you give us information, but you suffered a loss on top of that. As an information broker, I can’t let that slide.”

“But you’ve already paid me the remaining 4,000 G for the info.”

“That’s hardly enough!”

“Er, okay...?”

After discussing the matter, I ended up receiving the Lakeside Sequoia petal and iron ingot as additional payment.

“A-Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. You’ve earned it.”

Well, it wasn’t as if I *didn’t* want them, so I decided to gratefully accept the items. I felt like I had gained far more than I’d lost.

“If you say so. Thanks. Now that we’ve visited the altar, do you wanna go check out what’s downstairs?”

“Definitely! Can’t wait to find out what’s down there!”

Like we had discussed beforehand, our next mission was to explore the underground tunnel that likely led to the Adventurers’ Guild. Lewin, equipped with Night Vision, led the way, along with Alyssa, who served as a scout in addition to being a merchant. Maple and I were next, and Sakura brought up the rear. Rick was free to roam around. At the bottom of the stairs, a stretch of road awaited us, one which branched off to the right again after some distance.

“Let’s go.” Alyssa set her jaw.

“Okay,” I replied.

“This is slightly different from the beta test,” Alyssa muttered after we’d turned a second corner.

“What was it like in beta?”

“It was just one long path leading straight to the guild.”

According to Alyssa, there had been no forks in the road during the beta test, nor any monsters or items. However, we had already rounded two corners. That wasn’t the only change either.

“Chirp.”

“Found something, Rick?”

In addition, Rick had collected some items for us along the way. There weren’t many of them, and they were mostly items that you could get near the Town of Beginnings, like red panther caps and edible cruzshrooms and sirishrooms, but there was no doubt that there was a gathering node somewhere in here.

There was one more thing that differed from the beta, which was...

“Hold up. There’s a monster.” Lewin held out his hand to stop us. His Night Vision granted him the ability to see what the rest of us couldn’t in the darkness up ahead. Just as he reported it, several shadows suddenly emerged from the underground passage. They soon came into full view—I traced the outlines of the creatures wriggling their way towards us.

“Rock Ants, eh?”

Although this was my first time encountering them, I had heard they usually appeared in the Southern Forest and Eastern Plains. While they didn't deal much damage, they had pretty high defense, proving to be formidable opponents when attacking in herds. In fact, they were the second leading cause of death for beginners after Wild Dogs, which made them one of the stronger enemies around the Town of Beginnings. Still, they didn't have much resistance to magic, giving magic users an easier time to deal with them. This could be my first-ever chance to shine! *Time to unleash my Aqua Ball!* Or so I thought...

"Hiyah!"

"Rock Ball!"

"Wind Ball!"

Before I could so much as utter a word, the three clan members had already disposed of the ants. Okay, so it was understandable that Maple and Alyssa could use magic. The standard view was that you should be able to use at least one type of magic even if you were a warrior, so naturally, that was to be expected.

What the hell was up with Lewin, though?! Rock Ants were supposed to have a tough exterior and possess resistance to physical blows, and yet he had defeated them in one fell swoop of his mace. Did he have superhuman strength or something? Surely a dwarf couldn't be *that* strong. Noticing the incredulous look on my face, he seemed to deduce what was on my mind and showed me his weapon.

"This here inferno mace is my ultimate creation. It has a fire attribute."

Ah, good old attribute damage. So that was why it worked as well as it did on Rock Ants.

Name: Inferno Mace+

Rarity: 3 *Quality: 8*★ Durability: 233

Effect: Attack +41, minor fire attribute, Agility -4.

Weight: 22

A red stone was embedded in the center of the copper mace. It was clearly a weapon designed for meatheads—I couldn't even lift it off the ground. I supposed you could say it was very dwarf-like. If it was simply a matter of the amount of damage it dealt, there were others that outmatched it, but thanks to its fire attribute, this mace was capable of additional damage. In terms of efficiency, it was probably more effective than other weapons.

"Seems pretty powerful."

"Bah ha ha! Right?"

Was I going to have to sit this one out?

"Nah, it's too early to give up just yet."

I'd likely have a chance to fight too, if more Rock Ants appeared. However, it was only because I was with this OP trio that I dared to dream of such a thing—it would've been quite the opposite had I been alone. It didn't take long for an opportunity to come my way.

"Three in front, one behind us!" Alyssa yelled.

It'd been a one-way street so far; when had this ant snuck around to the back? No, it had to be a new one that had just spawned in—which meant that even places we'd already passed through couldn't be considered safe. Now was my chance to shine!

"...!"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Ah..."

Sakura! Rick! Not you too!

"...?"

"I mean, well done..."

"...♪"

"Chirp!"

Sakura's tree magic and Rick's attack had subdued the Rock Ant, the former restraining the monster's movements and the latter dealing a fatal blow along with Sakura's whip. Although unable to finish off their target in one blow, their excellent teamwork made it possible for them to defeat the opponent. Getting mad at them for stealing my thunder would only make me an asshole, though, so I offered them praise despite my inner turmoil. Sakura and Rick were positively overjoyed, looking even more determined than before.

"...!"

Yikes. I really had to pull my socks up if I wanted to have my moment of glory.

"Th-Third time's the charm...!"

We were attacked several more times after that, and at long last, I was able to join the battle, though my only contribution was to ram an Aqua Ball into a Rock Ant that was already on the brink of death thanks to Rick and Sakura. It may have been overkill, but no matter.

Given that we hadn't encountered any other monsters so far, we could assume that Rock Ants were the only monsters that appeared in this underground passage. We couldn't let our guard down for fear of ambush from above, but Rick's Vigilance protected us from that. He deserved an award for all his contributions in battle—not to mention his foraging efforts, which had now yielded a highly fascinating item.

"Chirp chirp!"

"A white mushroom? Never seen that before."

I assessed the mushroom to discover that it was, in fact, a red panther cap. However, it appeared to be a white variation, and its rarity and effects were slightly different from the standard variety.

Name: Red Panther Cap

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 1★

Effect: Slight chance of poisoning or paralysis when ingested.

Name: Red Panther Cap (White)

Rarity: 2 / Quality: 3★

Effect: Slight chance of poisoning or paralysis when ingested. Boost in mutation rate.

Whilst I was staring at the white red panther cap in my hand, Alyssa called out to me.

“Hey, is that a white variation?”

“You know about it, Alyssa?”

“Yep. You can sometimes find them in caves. They’re said to grow in places that don’t receive much sunlight—kinda like white asparagus. Not much is known about them, though.”

“What’s this mutation rate, by the way? The Lakeside Sequoia petal had the same effect.”

“Oh, that’s...”

Alyssa then proceeded to explain to me that occasionally, you could get special items that deviated from the standard variety during concoction or cultivation. The resulting product was called a mutation, which was what this white mushroom was. While items sometimes mutated into better versions than their original counterparts, they occasionally turned into entirely different objects, so the changes weren’t always positive.

“That means there’s a high chance of mutation if you use this red panther cap in your concoctions.”

“I see. Sounds fun.”

Alyssa also told me not to get my hopes up, since the chances of mutation were fairly weak when the item had a low rarity. In order to get a mutation, you needed to use items, tools, or skills that raised the mutation rate, and concoct high-rarity items over and over again. Come to think of it, I had never once gotten my hands on a mutated item up until now.

Wait a second. That firestarter plant I harvested earlier... Could that have been a mutated medicinal herb? Lo and behold, my hunch turned out to be correct when I asked Alyssa about it. Unlike the white red panther cap, which was a special mutation, the firestarter plant had undergone a regular mutation, which was the same species but one rank higher.

“Hmm. That’s not very impressive.”

“Well, it *is* a firestarter plant.”

While regular mutations were the most likely to occur, the chances of them becoming superior items were low.

“Any other interesting harvests?” Alyssa asked me.

“Hmm, lemme think...”

Had I harvested anything of interest lately? I would have said honey if I’d been able to get some, but...

“Oh. How about this?” I said, pulling out my walnut.

“Wait, is that a *glowing* walnut? You got this from your farm? *Not* from the forest?” Alyssa asked bewilderedly.

“No way! That’s amazing!” Maple gushed. The two women assessed the item in my hand, looking at it in awe, the mutated firestarter plant totally forgotten. According to Maple, she hadn’t heard of any players who had succeeded at harvesting glowing walnuts on their farm yet. No wonder she was so surprised.

“Wow,” she murmured.

“You don’t happen to know how to grow white mutations, do you?” Alyssa asked.

“Not a clue. I’d never even seen one until today,” I replied.

“Figured as much.”

“Actually, can’t you grow them yourself? Won’t they turn white if you keep them out of the sun or something?” I asked Maple. Unfortunately, she was clueless.

“Well...I’ve heard of people trying, but no one’s succeeded so far.”

Regardless of its success rate, Maple taught me how some players were attempting to grow those elusive white varieties. The process required minimal effort: all you had to do was dig a hole and plant the item in it, making sure to block it from the sun. Players had experimented with the depth of the hole and fertilizer as well, but without much success.

“I’ll ask Olto to help me when I get back.”

“Please sell me the deets once you figure it out,” Maple trilled.

“C’mon, even pro Farmers are having a hard time, right? I doubt I’ll have better luck than them.”

“Oh, but I have faith in you.”

“Well, you’ll be the first to know if I succeed,” I promised her. She then gave me one useful piece of advice, which was to pay attention to the quality of water when growing mushrooms. Apparently, water was a crucial element, and using high-quality water increased their yield—purified water always yielded at least two mushrooms per log. That had been a blind spot of mine. I made a mental note to give Olto some purified water once I got home.

Maple also taught me how to change the settings of my inventory, as she had apparently become miffed seeing me accept items one by one from Rick each time he returned with something. I hadn’t known this, but apparently, if you linked your tamed monster via your settings, the items they gathered would automatically be saved to your inventory. Not only that, but any items obtained within the past four hours would be marked as new, which prevented them from getting mixed up with other items already in your arsenal. How convenient was that?!

Time flew by as I chatted with Maple and Alyssa, and before I knew it, we had arrived at our destination. Lewin, being the reserved guy that he was, had been acting as lookout for us the whole time. I felt a stab of guilt at having let him do all the work.

“What a huge door,” I remarked.

“Indeed. It should lead us to the basement of the Adventurers’ Guild,” Alyssa commented.

“Seems like it’s closed for now, though,” Lewin said as he tried to open the door, only to be repelled by an invisible wall. He couldn’t even touch it; it probably only opened during events. Our only choice was to turn back.

“Guess that’s it for today, then.”

“Yep,” Lewin agreed.

“Good work, everyone,” Maple added.

“Hold on. Take this with you,” Alyssa reminded me, pressing the item drops from the Rock Ants into my hands. She still seemed to feel bad about the key. I decided to accept them gratefully, as I wasn’t in the mood to argue with her again. Still, it had been an incredibly fruitful day. I had learned about white mutations and obtained item drops from Rock Ants, as well as gained tons of XP. What more could I ask for?

Online Forum [Famous Players Megathread] Players Currently Rising to Fame, Part 3

This is a thread that discusses players who are already becoming household names due to all the ruckus they've been making.

441: Dog Who Prefers Cats

Parties made up of famous players sure stand out, don't they? Take Bomber, Red Cow, and Mermaid's party, for example.

442: Poof

You're talking about Rikyu, Kurumi, and Filma, right?

Apparently, Rikyu only teams up with people she's friends with in real life. You all know how shy she is.

443: Quagsire

Oh, *those* three XD

Aka, the hot but disappointing trio.

444: Knocker

We got Rikyu, an explosives master with massive social anxiety.

Then we have Kurumi, a cow-human hybrid with the red fro and a hammer for a weapon.

And finally, the mermaid, Filma, who's been seen swimming in the lake countless times for reasons unknown.

They definitely leave an impression, for better or worse!

445: Quagsire

Speaking of trios, what if those three titleholders formed a party?

446: Dog Who Prefers Cats

You mean the Silver-Haired Pioneer, Ruby Red Explorer, and Purple-Haired Adventurer?

Nuh-uh, not happening. They’re all solo players anyway.

447: Quagsire

But see? Doesn’t it make more sense for them to team up at some point *because* they play solo?

448: Knocker

Nah, they’re too different. I doubt it’ll work out.

It’s not that I think they’re incapable of working together, but I don’t imagine their personalities will mesh.

449: Anonymous

Guys, I just spotted a highly unusual party!

450: Quagsire

>448

Fair enough.

451: Anonymous

Believe it or not, I saw Silver-Haired, the Woodworking Goddess, and Bookmaker together!

I mean, I guess it’s not *that* weird that they know each other since they’re all crafter-types, but... I had a good

mind to follow them.

452: Knocker

Interesting. More big names teaming up with each other, huh?

453: Poof

Ahem. In case you guys forgot, Silver-Haired is a Tamer, not a Farmer.

454: Quagsire

He’s pretty much one at this point, isn’t he? Have you *seen* his farm? Puts other Farmers to shame.

Ain’t no one gonna believe he’s not a real Farmer after seeing that lol

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455: Poof

By the way, I finally got the Woodworking Goddess, aka Ashihana, to make me a staff.

Couldn’t tell what material it was made from, though—it simply said Unknown. It’s probably something with a rarity of three stars or higher.

456: Dog Who Prefers Cats

Wow! There are only two types of wood that fit the bill so far, right?

457: Poof

Not necessarily. I should’ve been able to assess it in that case since I’ve seen both kinds already.

458: Knocker

Must be a new type of wood, then. That’s Ashihana for you.

Wonder where she got it from? Could she have found it during her expedition with Silver-Haired?

We might be able to pinpoint the location then.

459: Anonymous

Sorry to burst your bubble, but I doubt it.

460: Poof

What makes you say that?

461: Anonymous

I saw them near the entrance of the Western Forest. No way you’ll find wood with a three-star rarity there, right?

462: Knocker

True

463: Quagsire

Guess it’s a mystery, then.

464: Dog Who Prefers Cats

Well, there’s not much info to go on.

465: Poof

Gotta say, though—Silver-Haired, the Woodworking Goddess, and Bookmaker make an amazing trio.

I’m jealous of Ashihana. I want to be waited on by a pretty elf boy and cute monsters too!

466: Quagsire

You forgot to include Silver-Haired.

467: Knocker

Lmao can’t have any monsters without him y’know

468: Anonymous

Not to mention he had a new monster with him.

469: Dog Who Prefers Cats

What kind of monster? Bet it was another cute one.

470: Anonymous

You got that right lol

It looked like a yellow teddy bear.

471: Poof

No way! I wanna see it! Over and out!

472: Quagsire

So far, Silver-Haired’s got a one hundred percent success rate of getting a cute monster...

473: Knocker

Well, this *is* Silver-Haired we’re talking about lol

“Think I’ll buy a mushroom log at the Farming Guild before I head home.”

After parting ways with Alyssa, Lewin, and Maple, I decided to stop by the guildhall to buy a mushroom log so that I could attempt growing the white red panther cap I’d obtained. Upon arriving, I purchased three logs and some premium fertilizer, which had been recently restocked. While there, I scanned the list of quests to see what was available and found several that could be completed immediately.

The first quest entailed delivering three types of mushrooms. Since I had obtained a number of mushrooms from our underground expedition, I figured I could afford to spare one each. There was also a special quest that required you to show the receptionist a mutated variety—a quest highly similar to the one at the Magical Beasts Guild that involved showing a unique monster to Barbara. For this task, I showed the old man the white red panther cap Rick had discovered.

There was also a quest that entailed showing off a mutated crop from your farm, but unfortunately, I’d already propagated the firestarter plant. *Bummer.* I made a mental note to visit the guild again the next time one of my crops mutated. Fortunately, those two quests had been enough to fulfill the requirements for raising my guild rank, as evidenced by the new mission the old man receptionist was presenting to me.

“Wanna accept this quest to raise your guild rank?” he asked.

I was almost at rank 5; there was no way around it if I wanted to raise my rank. If I recalled correctly, the rank-up quest for the Magical Beasts Guild required you to bring three level 10 monsters of varying species to the guild. Rank-up quests were supposed to be fairly difficult, regardless of which guild you belonged to. I waited apprehensively to see what sort of challenge I’d be given here.

Special Quest

Requirement: Deliver four types of crops grown on your farm with a three-star rating or higher.

Reward: Raise your guild rank to rank 5.

Time Limit: None

Huh? That's it? That was way easier than I'd expected—if anything, I could complete this quest right then if I wanted to. Was it supposed to be difficult to grow high-quality crops under normal circumstances? My ability to easily grow five-star crops thanks to Olto warped my perception of these things.

"Will these do?" I asked the old man.

"Brilliant!" He nodded.

And just like that, with one more special quest under my belt, I was another rank higher. I *was* a Tamer, wasn't I? And yet here I was, a rank 5 Farmer before anything else...

"What's up, sonny? Why the long face?"

"N-Nothing, don't mind me. So, can I like, buy more items now that my guild rank's higher?"

"Absolutely. You can buy higher-ranking farming tools than before, as well as a wider variety of seedlings and seeds."

The old man showed me my list of options, which now included seeds of plants that were obtainable from the playing field, namely medicinal herbs and paralyzing plants. I could also buy three-star edible grass—a slight improvement from the baseline one-star variety that had previously been my only option. Additionally, I could now purchase up to five sacks of premium fertilizer a week.

"You can also set up an honor system farm stand if ya like," the old man informed me.

"An honor system farm stand?" I echoed.

"Yep."

According to Gramps, it was a system that enabled you to sell items you harvested, or processed goods made from said crops. The main difference between regular stalls and farm stands was that you could only sell items you registered at the stand. Players with a guild rank of 5 could register up to five

products. While it was possible to switch out products from time to time, unlike stalls, there was a limit on the types and quantities of items you could sell. At farm stands, you could only sell products related to your farm, which ruled out weapons or monster materials. However, you were free to sell potions made from medicinal herbs grown on your land or wooden crafts made from wood gathered from the trees on your farm. In short, a farm stand was like a vending machine of sorts.

"Does it cost money to use this system?" I asked.

"Nope, no extra fees. Just need to set up the stand in front of yer farm."

What a bargain. It sounded like fun too.

"If I apply for one, can I use it right away?"

"Should be all set and ready to go by the time ya return home."

That settled it: I was going to run a stand. The whole application process was delightfully simple and painless.

"Thanks for all your help."

"Don't mention it!"

And done—my stand had apparently already been set up. *Looks like* someone *isn't fond of hard work!*

I returned to my farm in high spirits to find a wooden stall facing the road in front of my first farm plot. It looked exactly like one of the vegetable stands I was used to seeing in real life.

"Wow. So, I just need to... Ah, looks like I can tweak the settings by touching it."

Accessing the settings allowed me to choose what to sell and set prices for each product. The question was, what did I want to sell? Although I had plenty of food rations and vegetables to spare, I doubted regular players would want to buy them. Potions and medicine seemed like my best bet. I supposed I could sell the potions I usually sold to Alyssa at my stand instead...

Currently, I could prepare five-star low-grade potions, poison, paralyzing potions, hemorrhaging potions, and crushers. While I assumed there was a

demand for these, I wasn't entirely certain. Perhaps it was best to ask someone for their opinion. I glanced at my friends list to find Ashihana online, so I figured I would call her for advice. I didn't have to wait long, as she answered the phone within a couple of rings.

"Hello? What's up, Yuto? I'm afraid you're gonna have to wait a bit longer for the beehive."

"Uh, that's not why I'm calling. I wanted to ask you about something else," I replied, explaining the farm stand situation. Surprisingly enough, her advice was pretty solid. Turned out she was more than just some crazy bear-lover.

"You might have a hard time selling your potions," she answered.

"How so?"

"They're five stars, right? I doubt many people in the Town of Beginnings would need something that high quality. Most players who are still in town are crafter-types or beginners who had a late start."

"I see your point."

"They'll probably sell like hotcakes once you get to Zone Three, though."

Seemed like potions were a no go for players in this area.

"Think vegetables would be better, then?"

"Speaking of, why don't you sell herbal tea leaves?!"

"Who'd want to buy them?"

"I do! I already used up all the leaves you gave me yesterday."

"*What?* But I must've given you at least five sachets."

"Couldn't help myself—they taste too good. Not to mention they're the perfect accompaniment while working. Even better if you sold them with cookies!"

Herbal teas, huh? While I wasn't against the idea itself, I couldn't expect to make much of a profit from it either. At most, I could only sell herbal tea leaves for roughly 200 G—products sold at honor system farm stands could only be up to five times more expensive than the item's base cost, no matter how much

demand there was for the product. Base costs were determined by the system, based on the item's worth and quality.

Herbs were only worth about 10 to 40 G per variety to begin with, being considered weeds. All it took to make herbal teas was drying said herbs, which meant the only manufacturing costs involved were the cost of ingredients. If I were to sell herbal tea blends, I might be able to bump up the price to around 400 to 600 G, as these included several ingredients. However, that seemed far too expensive for a treat that didn't even have any effects. Besides, these were *weeds* we were talking about.

"If you want more tea leaves, I'd be happy to give you some. Wait a minute, though. You and Sawyer both have Plant Knowledge now, so why not make tea yourselves? Sawyer's an Alchemist, so he should be able to dehydrate stuff, right?"

"We tried to, but we couldn't!"

Ashihana apparently possessed Alchemy skills too, and had already attempted drying herbs herself. Unfortunately, both she and Sawyer had been unable to make herbal tea leaves; no matter how many times they tried, they only ended up with trash.

"Why's that?" I asked, perplexed. Sawyer and Ashihana's Alchemy levels had to be much higher than mine. I couldn't see how they could fail.

"This is just my guess, but I think we need Cooking skills," Ashihana answered. It seemed like the tea-making process had a prerequisite.

"Well, why don't you obtain Cooking, then?"

"As much as I'd like to make herbal tea, I don't want to waste my precious bonus points."

So that was why she wanted to buy herbal tea from me.

"Fine, I'll register herbal tea leaves in the shop, then."

"Thanks!"

"Don't expect any cookies, though. I can't make enough to sell."

"Pity. Suppose that is what it is, though."

“I’ll prepare a few herbal tea blends instead.”

I could experiment with a few combinations to see how the smell and taste would differ.

“Let me know which blend you liked best.”

“Roger. Will do!”

After hanging up, I registered the herbs I already had to my farm stand. Not having much else to sell at the moment, I figured I might as well stock the shop with herbal teas. I set the price arbitrarily at 100 G per bag.


Herbal TEA
100G



“Now that that’s done, these are for you, Olto.”

“Mm-mm!”

After setting up my stand, I handed Olto the mushroom logs and premium fertilizer that I had bought from the Farming Guild.

“Got you two sacks of premium fertilizer. I want you to use them on the green peaches and walnuts.”

“Mmm.”

“And here are the mushrooms I want you to grow,” I said, handing him the cruzshroom and sirishroom.

“Mm-mm, mm-mm,” Olto muttered. Instantly, the mushrooms disappeared, leaving a small trace of powder in his palm. I couldn’t help feeling doubtful each time he propagated a mushroom, but he worked cheerfully, humming a tune whilst sprinkling the powder on the log. I supposed that would do it for the edible mushrooms.

“Now, about this last log. I wanna try something different with it.”

“Mm?”

“I wanna grow it in the shade out of the sun’s reach. Can you dig a hole and place the log inside it?”

Olto thumped his chest and nodded in reply, brimming with confidence. Using his hoe and earth magic, he began digging immediately.

“Mm-mm-mm-mm.”

The hole grew deeper and deeper at an astonishing pace. *That’s my man, Olto!*

“Mm-mm-mmm!”

“Good luck.”

Leaving the digging to Olto, I spread out the prized items we had found in the underground tunnel on the barn table. Red panther caps, cruzshrooms, and sirishrooms were all common items that could be purchased in the Town of Beginnings. Red panther caps, once rare, could now be found at stalls regularly,

and though they were not very effective while raw, cruzshrooms and sirishrooms apparently recovered your hunger status significantly once cooked. They resembled shimeji mushrooms and shiitake mushrooms, respectively. I wondered what they tasted like, though?

"Let's fry 'em a bit," I said, browning them lightly in my pan.

Name: Grilled Cruzshroom

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 1★

Effect: Recovers hunger status by 8%.

Name: Grilled Sirishroom

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 1★

Effect: Recovers hunger status by 8%.

Simply frying them had increased their hunger status recovery rate by five percent! They tasted exactly how they looked, too—cruzshrooms like shimeji mushrooms and sirishrooms like shiitake. I bet they would taste great in soups.

I took out the remaining items and laid them out on the table whilst I munched on the grilled mushrooms. Some of our finds included item drops from the Rock Ants. The item we had the most of was ant shells, followed by ant jaws, and lastly, two vials of formic acid, which were rare drops. At first, I didn't think I would have any use for these items, but upon further research, I discovered that they could be used for woodworking. Additionally, you could also sell them for a reasonable price, given that they were the best kind of armor materials you could get near the Town of Beginnings. I beckoned Sakura over, handing her the items so she could improve her Woodworking skills. I could always sell anything that didn't get used.

"Think you can use these, Sakura?" I asked her.

"...♪" She nodded, gazing at the Rock Ant materials with delight.

"Question is, what do I do with *these*...?" I muttered, looking at the white red

panther cap and luminous moss, both items I had never encountered before. I hadn't even realized the luminous moss was in my inventory; Rick had most likely brought it back when I wasn't paying attention.

```
Name: Luminous Moss
Rarity: 1 / Quality: 3★
Effect: None. For decorative purposes only.
```

To my disappointment, the moss turned out to be nothing more than a weed. It didn't even have any effects.

"What a shame. It's so pretty too..."

The glow of the moss was plainly obvious, even in broad daylight. It was hard to believe that something this special had no particular usage. Perhaps I could use it as a lamp, given how bright it was.

"What else can I do with it...? Make a moss ball maybe? Bet it'll look extra pretty."

"...♪"

"You think so too, Sakura?" I saw her nodding enthusiastically in reply. Perhaps her sense of beauty was similar to that of humans. Regardless of its usefulness, it would be nice to have more of these. I made up my mind to give Olto the moss along with the white mushroom once he was done digging.

One hour after being assigned his task, Olto called on me as I was making some herbal tea blends.

"Hey, buddy. Don't tell me you've finished digging the hole already?"

"Mm!"

"That was fast."

"Mm-mm!"

"Okay, okay. No need to pull so hard."

Despite my feeble protests, Olto refused to let go of my robe and dragged me

to the farm, where a great, slanting hole awaited me. It was much deeper than I'd expected, extending far beneath the surface, out of the sun's reach. It looked like some sort of air-raid shelter. That was video-game logic for you—only in games could you dig a hole this deep in an hour or so...

"Mm?"

"Oops, my bad. Mind setting this up for me?"

"Mm!" Olto placed the mushroom log in the hole without any difficulty. Next, I handed him the luminous moss—there seemed to be no problems growing that either. After propagating it, he planted the seeds on the roof of the hole. Since we'd found the moss underground, it made sense that it could only grow in dark places. It looked like I'd made the right choice asking Olto to dig a hole.

Unfortunately, there were also downsides to this decision. First, the hole occupied a three-by-three grid, i.e., nine squares in total. However, the usable width of the hole was only about three squares. On top of that, I couldn't plant any crops above the hole either. Taking up nine squares worth of space but only having three active slots was highly inefficient; it would be unwise to dig any more holes.

"Can you get another white mutation if you propagate this white mushroom?"

"Mmm?"

"You don't know?"

"Mm-mm."

Even Olto seemed clueless. *Oh well.* For now, all I could do was wait patiently for my regular red panther caps to grow and hope for another mutation to occur.

"Look after this patch for me too."

"Mm!"

Chapter Four: The World Is a Scary Place

“Southern Forest, here we come! Be extra careful, everyone!”

“Mm!”

“...!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl!”

After taking care of our tasks on the farm, I set out on my first-ever gathering mission to the Southern Forest with my trusty companions. My goal was to get wood for Sakura and more nuts for making cookies, and maybe even find some new herbs while I was at it, if I was lucky. While the Southern Forest had a higher difficulty level than the Western one, that meant we would probably gain more XP and discover new items.

“I’ll leave the foraging to you, Rick!”

“Chirp!”

“Olto, Sakura—you two back me up, okay?”

“Mm!”

“...!”

“And you, Bear Bear. I’m counting on your strength, got it?”

Olto and Sakura clenched their fists in determination while Rick and Bear Bear jumped up and down excitedly. I was glad to have such reliable companions.

“Charge!” I yelled, entering the forest with gusto. The entrance was pretty much the same as the Western Forest, dotted with the same type of trees. However, true to its reputation, a Wild Dog suddenly appeared before us. This place wasn’t known for its difficulty for nothing. We encountered the creature so soon that Rick didn’t even have time to activate his Vigilance. We were caught completely off guard.

“Grrr,” the beast growled at us.

“Yikes!”

We hadn’t even gotten into formation yet! What now? Was it better to attack or retreat? Just then, Olto stepped in front of me.

“Mm!” He glanced back and gave me a thumbs-up as if to say, “Relax, and leave it to me.” *Gosh, Olto!* I swooned. *You’re the man!*

“A-All right, guys! Let’s bring this mutt down!”

“Growl growl!”

“...!”

Before I knew it, the fight was over.

“Huh? Were Wild Dogs always this weak?”

Now that I had Bear Bear, our party was a lot more stable. They made attacking much more efficient and also drew the enemy’s attention. Fighting had never been easier.

“Good job, Bear Bear! Keep up the good work!”

“Growl!”

After several battles, we emerged more confident and better coordinated. Unless we messed up big-time, it was highly unlikely that we would be in danger of a party wipe. Incidentally, due to our expedited fight time, we were able to gather items more efficiently. I hadn’t realized how much difference a strong team would make. As we were gathering weeds, nuts, and wood, I heard the familiar chime of a bell.

Ding-dong.

“Hey, it’s an announcement from the devs.”

It was probably the usual notice, sounding at noon on the dot. It was by now customary to receive some kind of notification almost every day regarding skill corrections or bug fixes and the like. I hadn’t bothered to read these notices up until now, as there had been very few corrections or updates that concerned me. However, it was probably a good idea to read today’s notice. While I didn’t

care much for the announcement about the Martial Arts Tournament, the other notification seemed highly relevant, which read, *“Regarding Changes and Updates to Selective Breeding.”* Selective Breeding was a derivative ability you could learn once your Farming skill reached level 10. I hadn’t really looked into it as I had yet to reach that level, but I’d heard that it was a skill that allowed you to create new crop varieties by breeding different types of plants together.

“Let’s see... It’s no longer gonna be considered a skill, huh?”

Until now, Selective Breeding was considered to be a skill that derived from Farming. With the new changes the devs were rolling out, it would now be considered a type of agricultural art. In addition, minor adjustments were also being made to its specifications. Thus far, this was how Selective Breeding had worked: Bury whatever items or crops you want to crossbreed next to each other on your farm.

Apply Selective Breeding to the aforementioned items.

Wait a few days for the skill to work its magic.

If you succeed, new crops will start sprouting, and if you fail, the items you buried will disappear.

With the new update, you would now be able to tell whether you had succeeded or not on the spot. If the crossbreeding was a success, you’d receive seeds for your new crops; if you failed, your items would turn into trash. The one trade-off was that the new crop variety would be slightly more difficult to grow. This process was far more user friendly—the previous version had been way too complicated. Anyway, the pros far outweighed the cons.

One of the biggest perks of this update was that your Farming skill level was now directly reflected in your Selective Breeding skill, which meant you no longer had to work on raising your Selective Breeding level independently. Additionally, the more you used Selective Breeding, the more XP you gained for your Farming skill, which made leveling up much easier. Last but not least, there were fewer barriers to experimenting with breeding combinations, now that you could learn the outcome immediately. I was sure tons of Farmers would be attempting to crossbreed all kinds of crops now. While I hadn’t learned the skill yet, I was about to level up pretty soon. Then it would be time to get cracking—

I refused to fall behind!

“Right now, my priority’s the Southern Forest, though.”

As long as we didn’t stray far from the entrance, we were able to deal with consecutive battles without any difficulty. Once Rick and Bear Bear had reached a higher level, we could probably venture deeper into the forest. Our biggest yield so far was the heaping pile of nuts and mushrooms that we’d managed to gather, mainly thanks to Rick. Before I knew it, he’d brought us over twenty-odd items.

“Better roll up my sleeves.”

“Chirp?”

“You may have the upper hand at foraging, but you can’t beat me at gathering wood!”

I flitted from tree to tree with my ax, whacking every Logging node that caught my eye. I didn’t mind that most of the wood I got was brushwood, as this was mostly for Sakura’s benefit and leveling up my Logging skills. Every now and then, I came across other types of wood, such as Begini Walnut and Begini Beech, but unfortunately, they were of the lowest quality. *Should I get a new ax?* I wondered. Even if my skills leveled up, the quality of wood probably wouldn’t improve as long as I was still using a beginner’s ax. Thankfully, I was pretty used to felling trees by now and no longer needed to keep looking down to strike the Logging cursor.

“All I need now is a better ax.”

As I was mulling things over, I heard a loud splintering noise.

“Huh? What was that?”

I quickly scanned my surroundings in search of the source but saw nothing amiss. Where did that noise come from? Seeing my puzzled face, Olto gave my robe two sharp tugs.

“What’s up, Olto?”

“Mm-mm,” he murmured, pointing at my hands.

“What are you...? Huh?! No way!” I yelled, finally realizing what he was trying

to tell me. There was a crack in my Logging ax, and the blade was partially chipped. Not only that, but its Durability had plummeted to zero as well, something that I'd been neglecting completely. I had apparently gotten carried away. Because I had so little experience with fighting, I'd never had to worry about the wear and tear of my equipment, and as a result, had never bothered checking my tools' Durability. While I felt bad for breaking Sawyer's gift, I was glad it hadn't been something more valuable like my armor or weapon. I decided then and there to check my equipment more frequently from now on.

"Can't do much with a busted ax. Guess I'll call it a day..."

"Mmm."

"I'd like to look for a new ax too. Wonder where I can get one."

Upon returning to town, we headed to Lewin's shop first, as I figured that'd be the most likely place to have an ax. Unfortunately, Lewin didn't have any Logging axes that I could use, as they were all far too heavy for me.

"The only ax that might work for ya is this one," he said, handing me a beginner's ax.

"Hmm. I was hoping for something else, though."

Although equipment for beginners had no restrictions and could be used by anyone, they also tended to be mediocre.

"If not this ax, your only other option is to make a new one. Ya could make it lighter by lessenin' its damage per blow and forgoin' other special abilities."

"I see... It must cost a *pretty penny*, though, right?" I said dramatically.

"I ain't playin' along," Lewin replied, frowning.

"Spoilsport," I huffed. Not that I expected him to anyway.

"Hmph. An ax for you won't require too many materials, so it won't cost ya that much. Besides, you've been out gatherin', haven't ya? If ya bring me some items I can use, I can give ya a discount."

Something he can use, eh? I rummaged through my inventory and handed Lewin a pile of items, such as water ores, copper ores, and Rock Ant shells and jaws. Green peach wood was apparently handy to have too. I tried giving him

the iron ingot as well, but according to him, there was a possibility I wouldn't be able to wield it due to its high rank. *Oh well, better luck next time.*

"Aight, I'll give ya a call when it's ready. What do ya wanna do with the leftover items?"

"Hmm, think I'll sell them. I'd like a discount for any items sold."

"Gotcha."

I looked forward to seeing Lewin's creation. Unfortunately, this also meant that I couldn't get more wood until my ax was ready.

"Guess it's back to the farming grind..."

Might as well obtain Selective Breeding today. Only have one more level to go. I made up my mind and headed home, spotting a familiar face outside my farm when I got there.

"Ah, there you are! Yoo-hoo, Yuto!"

"That you, Ashihana?"

Had she come to buy herbal tea *already*?

"That was quick."

"Of course! Anything for tea!"

Herbs didn't have any addictive properties, did they? I supposed they were safe, given that I was fine, but...

"Glad you like them. Leave some for Sawyer, though, okay?"

"Yes, but never mind that... What's up with this pricing?!"

"Huh? Is it too expensive?"

They were essentially dried weeds, after all. Was 100 G too much for such an item? However, Ashihana seemed to think otherwise.

"It's too *cheap*!"

"Really? But they're made from weeds. Besides, they don't have any effects either."

"Still, 100 G is ridiculous."

“You think so? Shall I up it to 150 G, then?”

“Oh, Yuto...” she sighed deeply. Even that was apparently still cheap. But this was simply a treat that had nothing to do with clearing the game. True, there might be a few people like Ashihana and Sawyer who wanted it, but surely it wouldn’t do to set the price too high?

“It’ll sell. I guarantee it!” she glared, inching closer to me.

“Okay, I get the message. Back off, will you?!”


100G

“First things first: you ought to set prices as high as you can. You should also limit the number of purchases if possible, say, around three to five items per person. Otherwise, someone’s gonna buy out your entire stock,” Ashihana advised.

“Come on, you can’t be serious. I’m pretty much in the middle of nowhere. How many players actually pass through this area?” I scoffed.

“Word travels fast, you know? Don’t underestimate the power of networking,” Ashihana cautioned, her expression earnest—dead serious, evidently.

“Hmm. Okay, if you say so.”

Given that Ashihana was the main reason I’d decided to sell herbal tea blends in the first place, it seemed best to heed whatever advice she doled out. After tinkering with the settings of my stand, I was successful in setting a purchase limit. The stand was able to read the buyer’s information during checkout, which prohibited any one player from making purchases over the limit amount on the same day.

“All right. The most expensive one’s 500 G, and the rest are 400 G, minus the last one, which is 300 G.”

The cheapest tea only used two types of herbs, hence the price.

“Sounds about right.”

“Hey, why don’t you buy some before I raise the prices? I’ll change the settings once you’ve made your purchase.”

“No can do. I’m the one who insisted you raise your prices, so I’ve got to set an example!” Ashihana refused adamantly, arms crossed in a defiant X.

“But—”

“Absolutely *not*!”

That’s that, then. She seemed unlikely to budge. Once I’d given in and made the necessary changes via my settings, Ashihana bought one each of every tea blend, wanting to try out different flavors. She would’ve been better off buying them in bulk before I updated the shop’s settings, but she really seemed to

have a strong sense of obligation—borderline stubborn, one might say. I suspected she wouldn't even accept anything for free if offered. *What to do...?* Maybe if I had a valid reason...

"I'll have to pay you a consulting fee, then."

"Huh? A what?"

"A consulting fee. You gave me tons of advice, remember?"

"Knock it off. I don't need any money."

"Don't be like that," I chided her.

"But..."

"It's fine. Besides, It's not like I'm paying you in cash," I said, sending Ashihana an item transfer request. The contents were—you guessed it—assorted tea leaves. She *was* my friend, after all.

"No, really..."

Despite her protests, Ashihana was unable to hide her grin. *Heh heh, you say you don't want it, but your expression seems to suggest otherwise, my dear*... Ahem, definitely got carried away there. Something in her tsundere-like reaction seemed to have awoken the perverted old man in me. Still, what was a little teasing between friends?

"If you really don't want it, then perhaps I'll take it back."

"Huh?"

"I'm gonna drink them now."

"No, wait!"

"What is it?"

"Wh-Who said I didn't want it?! I-If you're willing to give it to me, I gladly accept!"

I had to fight back a grin; Ashihana reacted exactly as I had expected her to. I did my best not to let it show, maintaining an impassive face as I opened up my Trade screen once more.

“All right, here you go,” I said.

“Thanks.”

“I have some cookies too. Want some?”

“I can’t possibly accept *those*!”

“I don’t have enough ingredients to make them in bulk, though, so it’s unlikely they’ll ever make an appearance in my stall.”

“Is that so?”

I had a decent stock of edible grass, which could also be purchased at the Farming Guild. Unfortunately, sourcing honey and nuts was a bit of a problem. Nuts were sold at player-run stalls, and I could almost begin harvesting them on my farm or forage for them if necessary. However, I was having trouble obtaining honey in large quantities. Although products made with honey, such as honey dumplings, were available everywhere, there weren’t many shops in the Town of Beginnings that sold honey as an ingredient. Even at a general store like Alyssa’s, it was usually sold out. If I wanted to save some honey cookies for myself and my companions, there simply wouldn’t be enough left over to sell. While it was possible to make cookies without honey, there was no question they tasted infinitely better with it. To give her a better idea, I gave Ashihana a cookie made only from acorns to try.

“Hmm... It’s *good*, but...!” she mumbled with her mouth full.

“Not good enough, eh?”

“Unfortunately, no. I wouldn’t be willing to pay money for it.”

“I thought so.”

I explained to Ashihana how it was currently difficult to obtain honey in large quantities. As soon as I was done talking, I noticed a glint in her eye.

“You just need honey, right?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Got it! Hang on, I’m going to put a pause on my other projects and get cracking on that beehive, pronto!”

“Hey, no rush. It’s not *that* urgent.”

“Be back soon!”

Hold your horses, girl! I sighed as she waved at us enthusiastically, speeding off in a cloud of dust.

“...Guess I’ll be getting my beehive sooner than I thought.”

I felt like I’d rushed her without meaning to, but the truth was the truth. I hadn’t done anything wrong, had I? After Ashihana left, I decided to work on my Farming skills so I could pursue Selective Breeding. Two minutes into watering my crops though, I received a notification that I’d leveled up. It turned out that my XP gauge had been close to full already.

“So much for psyching myself up.”

On the bright side, that meant the skill was now mine!

“Heh heh heh. Finally, my time has come... Time to experiment!”

I’d already set my sights on what I wanted to grow: Cure Carrots, a type of hybridized crop that I’d seen before at a stall.

“The owner did say they made them with Selective Breeding.”

Even if the skill mechanics had changed with the update, the types of crops you could produce shouldn’t have been affected. A vegetable with healing properties seemed like it would be highly versatile, if I could grow it. If I made a salad with it, I could possibly create an item that recovered both HP and MP.

“For starters, I’ll need... Well, carrots, obviously.”

I pulled out a carrot from my inventory, to which I needed to add a healing effect. Would medicinal herbs do the trick? I had enough of both to experiment with, so may as well see; the proof of the pudding was in the eating.

“Let’s see... Yup, here we go.”

I placed both blue carrot and medicinal herb on the table and activated my agricultural art. An item selection screen popped up, prompting me to choose the two items in front of me.

“Select that and that, and...voilà! Selective Breeding!”

The next instant, light engulfed the carrot and medicinal herb, and the two began to swirl and merge together. Had it worked? ...No, of course not. As if I'd nail it on the first try. The light gradually turned black until smoke rose from the mixture with a small *Poof!* In the end, all I was left with was something resembling a lump of coal.

"So much for that."

I should've known the sailing wouldn't be that smooth from the get-go. Still, I might as well give up experimenting if I was going to let a minor mishap like that discourage me.

"Let's try carrots and potions next."

This attempt also ended in failure. I experimented with several more items that had healing properties, such as medicine and salve-making plants, but none of them bore fruitful results. *Guess I'll have to rely on the forums for this one*, I finally conceded.

"The forum sure is active after the new update."

The Selective Breeding thread was gaining a lot of traction. There, I discovered where I'd gone wrong. Much to my dismay, cure carrots could only be created by combining carrots with cure potions, an item sold at NPC shops in Zone Three.

"Dang it, that means I can't actually make them now."

I had wasted a bunch of precious ingredients, but at least I had fun. I decided to give up on making cure carrots and try out other combinations instead, using the various nuts and weeds I had in my arsenal. Unfortunately, this got me no closer to succeeding. After thirty attempts, all I had to show was a zero percent success rate and a pile of trash in my inventory. By some miracle, however, my final hit-or-miss attempt unexpectedly succeeded.

"N-No way. *This* combination...?"

Who would've expected *spinach* and *weed water* to yield any results? Once the ingredients had merged and the light had dissipated, I was left with an item labeled Unknown Seed. To be honest, I didn't expect much from such a weird combination, but since it *was* my first successful attempt at Selective Breeding, I

decided to take good care of it.

Now that I was on a roll, it was time for more experimenting, this time with cooking. By that, all I meant was checking on the blue acorns that I'd soaked overnight.

"Don't look any different," I said, taking the blue acorns out of the wooden pail they were in. My Appraisal results showed no changes either. My efforts hadn't been in vain, though, as the cookies I made using these nuts had improved in quality by one star, just as I'd expected. To be honest, however, there wasn't a marked difference in terms of taste. It could just be that my taste buds sucked, but the results were pretty much the same with other foods as well. What was important was the fact that soaking acorns had improved their quality, as it seemed like this could apply to other nuts too. For now, I would soak some blue acorns and walnuts in purified water and see what would happen tomorrow.

With that, I concluded my experiments for the time being. I still had a bit of time left until I had to log out; perhaps I would lend the others a hand with farming and then head out on another expedition. Or so I had planned, until I stepped outside the barn and was greeted by a sight that gave me pause.

"What *is* this?"

A strange, oval-shaped object sat in front of the barn. At first glance, it looked like a rugby ball, light-green in color and glowing with an enamel sheen. I had seen an object of this shape and size before.

"C-Could it be an egg?"

While the color was drastically different from the egg Bear Bear had hatched from, the shape was similar. I quickly assessed the object.

Tamed Monsters' Egg

Parents: Olto, Sakura

"Holy cow! Olto and Sakura gave birth!"

In LJO, the story went something like this: while nurturing compatible monsters on the same ranch or home base, their magic sometimes fused together to create an egg. This was probably the devs' way of making things kid-friendly. I remembered this fact clearly due to the lack of any sort of mating or reproductive behavior in the monsters. Olto and Sakura were both humanoid monsters that hailed from fairy-type races; in that regard, you could say they were highly compatible. Additionally, monsters could only breed once in their lifetime. That meant this would be Sakura and Olto's first and last egg. To make up for that, Monster Breeding was apparently more effective than the Summoner-specific system, Monster Synthesis, although I still wasn't clear on the details...

"Wonder what their child will look like?" I wondered dreamily. If it was a gnome, I could think about expanding my farm. If it was a tree nymph, it would stabilize my party even more during battles. In any case, it was a win-win scenario. There was also the possibility that it would be an entirely new species, although my money was on it being another humanoid monster.

"Can't believe I don't even get to watch it hatch."

This was something I learned from the forums; apparently, no one had ever witnessed the moment an egg obtained from Monster Breeding hatched; one moment, there was an egg, the next, there was a new creature. During the beta test, several players had attempted to monitor their monsters for hours on end, but no eggs hatched while they were looking.

"Gotta get an incubator for this baby!"

Leaving the others in charge of the farm, I stowed the egg away in my inventory and rushed off to the Magical Beasts Guild.

"Welcome," Barbara greeted me.

"So you're in charge today," I replied. I was in luck. For some reason, the guild was a lot busier than normal, with five other players present besides me. While that might not seem like a lot, I was usually the only visitor when I showed up, which meant there were six times more people than usual. Out of the five, four of them were women, which was a distinct characteristic of Tamers and Summoners. Most of the players had chosen this class for cute monsters, after

all.

“Hey, that’s...”

I spotted a player carrying a familiar basket on their back. It was the same basket I’d borrowed when I accepted the trash-picking quest a while ago. Perhaps they were a beginner. *Good luck, mate. You’re in for a tedious task.* I silently cheered them on.

“What brings you here today?” Barbara inquired.

“Well, my monsters laid an egg.”

“How wonderful! Congratulations. Would you like an incubator then?”

“Yes, please. Could you show me the ones for personal use?”

“Before that, how about reporting a few quests as complete?”

“Huh?”

According to the list that Barbara showed me, I had two quests I could complete right then:

Special Quest

Requirement: Show Barbara an egg your tamed monsters laid.

Reward: 3,000 G

Time Limit: None

Special Quest

Requirement: Show Barbara an egg born from two unique monsters.

Reward: 30,000 G

Time Limit: None

Thirty-freaking-thousand?! Granted, it was a tough quest to complete. Not

only did you have to acquire two unique monsters, but you also had to obtain an egg from them. As soon as I presented my egg to Barbara, she squealed excitedly.

“Oh, wow! What a marvelous egg!” she gushed.

“Y-You think so?”

I knew that she went gaga over rare monsters, but I didn’t know her love extended to eggs too. Whipping a magnifying glass out of nowhere, Barbara began to examine the egg in earnest. She seemed so engrossed in what she was doing that it didn’t feel right to disturb her. After five minutes, she finally appeared to calm down, returning the egg to me with a dazzling smile as she wiped the sweat from her forehead.

“Phew. It was a pleasure to encounter such a rare egg.”

So even eggs weren’t safe with her. *Never underestimate a true monster enthusiast,* I reminded myself. It had been extremely unsettling to see a gorgeous woman like her nuzzling against a huge egg. But hey, at least Rick and Bear Bear got to level up.

“Well, Yuto, you now have enough contribution points to raise your guild rank. Would you like to take on the rank-up quest?” Barbara offered.

“Like I said, I came here for an incubator. Would that have any effect on it?” I asked.

“Indeed, it does. Once your guild rank reaches rank 5, you’ll have more incubator options to choose from.”

“What? Really?”

“Yes.”

So that was why she suggested I fulfill those two quests before doing anything else. Talk about a considerate AI; she was more than just a mindless robot.

“Can you tell me more about the incubators?”

“Of course.”

Although I wasn’t able to purchase them yet, Barbara kindly offered to give

me a rundown of the items. Once I hit rank 5, I'd have three more available options. Besides the regular incubator and growth accelerator that were currently available to me, I would also be able to purchase an ability-enhancing incubator, a battle skill incubator, and a crafting skill incubator. Memorizing all these names was going to be a chore.

"Man, they cost a fortune."

They were all hella expensive too. All three incubators cost more than double the price of growth accelerators. Ability-enhancing incubators cost 15,000 G, while battle skill incubators and crafting skill incubators cost a whopping 20,000 G. Their effects were well worth the investment, though. Ability-enhancing incubators granted you an initial stat boost of +8 at random. Battle skill incubators gave you a +3 initial stat boost as well as a combat skill. Finally, as the name suggested, crafting skill incubators gave you a crafting skill in addition to the same stat boost as battle skill incubators. While skills were assigned at random, there was no worry of getting a complete trash skill that your soon-to-be-born monster couldn't use.

"They're a great deal, don't you think?"

"Totally. These are infinitely better."

I had one week to do something about my egg before it disappeared. If I raised my rank before that, I could use one of the new incubators. In order to complete the rank-up quest, I had to bring three monsters level 10 or higher to the guild. While Olto and Sakura fulfilled the requirements, Rick was still at level 7, and Bear Bear at level 6. It certainly wouldn't take a whole week to get them to level 10—if anything, I could probably get it done today if I really pushed it.

"Time to get grinding!"

I surprised even myself with how quickly I kicked into high gear once I left the Magical Beasts Guild. Less than thirty minutes later, I set off with my companions to the Northern Plains for Rick and Bear Bear's leveling marathon.

"Our opponents may be tough out there, but it's the best place to earn XP. Let's do our best!"

"Growl growl!"

“Chirp!”

At first, I considered going to the underground passage below the bridge, but ultimately decided against it since there were only Rock Ants there. I would run out of MP in no time if I was the only damage-dealer. We were better off fighting as a team in the fields where we could earn more XP.

“All right, Olto! Hold them right there! Bind them, Sakura!”

“Mm-mm!”

“...!”

“Bear Bear, Rick, finish ’em off!”

“Chirp!”

“Grooowl!”

“Aqua Ball!”

Bear Bear and the others defeated the Wild Dog that appeared, while my Aqua Ball put a Rock Ant at death’s door. We continued to hunt down monsters that way, using copious amounts of medicine and poison as we went.

“So far, so good!”

Though the going was still tough, fighting was much easier than I expected. Now that I thought about it, my stats had already surpassed the minimum threshold, and Sakura and Olto were more than well-equipped for battle. Plus, now that I had items to spare, there was no way our team would get knocked out straight away. Taming one more monster would most likely ease the strain on us, and I still had one available party slot left. However, doing so would lessen the amount of XP each member would receive. Therefore, I decided against acquiring any new monsters until Rick reached level 10, not to mention that failing to tame one would result in a waste of MP.

Since the enemies in the Northern Plains were more advanced than others, Rick and Bear Bear had already leveled up twice. The next time Rick leveled up, I’d be able to fulfill the rank-up quest’s requirements.

“Let’s keep the momentum going, guys!”

“Chirp!”

That being said, it was already evening. If we carried on like this, darkness would soon be upon us. During the night, monsters were stronger and appeared in larger numbers. Lower visibility also meant our chances of getting ambushed were greater. No matter how smoothly things were going at the moment, I wasn’t that full of myself to believe we’d be able to keep fighting after dark.

“Better start grinding someplace closer to town,” I muttered aloud. Just then, I heard the familiar *Ding-dong*! of a server-wide announcement.

“*The raid boss of Zone Four, the Berserker Dog, has been defeated. New system features have been unlocked.*”

Whoa, they’d defeated a raid boss already?! Though I’d heard rumors about raid bosses, I knew next to nothing about them since they were pretty much out of my scope.

“That means the urban areas in Zone Five have been unlocked.”

In LJO, towns were located in odd-numbered zones, while even-numbered areas only had rural villages with small stores and inns. A town as large as the one in Zone Five likely had a greater possibility of having new items and features. The forums were likely to be buzzing with activity for a while, with new information on how to defeat raid bosses popping up and more raid parties making attempts. Not that any of that was any of my business, of course!

“Well, it’s nice to have the game liven up.”

“Mm?”

“You’re right, now’s not the time to be idling about.”

The sun was starting to set. I had to return to the Town of Beginnings as soon as possible. Just as I was about to head in that direction, Rick began to fidget. He seemed strangely restless as he suddenly tugged on my hair.

“What’s up, Rick?” I asked him.

“Chirp chirp! *Chirp!*” he squeaked agitatedly.

“What’s wrong? Something over there?”

Rick moved his tiny paws frantically, gesturing to something in the distance. Though this area might be called the Northern Plains, it wasn’t just one big open field for miles to see. There were hills and depressions, as well as areas where bushes and shrubs were concentrated. From here, I couldn’t see what Rick was trying to tell me, due to the tall grass obstructing our view. Was there something I was missing? As I made a move towards whatever Rick was pointing at, he gave my lips a sharp tug, shaking his head furiously.

“Chirp chirp chirp!”

I had apparently misunderstood him. Was he telling me to run?

“Come on, what is i— No way!”

You blundering fool! After everything Rick had done to try and warn me!

“Screeeech!”

A thunderous roar echoed around us, adding to my already mounting anxiety.

“Run!” I yelled. An enormous Rock Ant, more than three times the size of a regular one, had emerged from the thicket. To make things even worse, it was accompanied by countless other normal-sized Rock Ants. I’d heard rumors about it, but I certainly hadn’t expected to encounter it at this stage!

“So *that’s* a predator!”

Predator monsters were bosses who wandered around the playing field. While there was supposed to be one creature per field, the chances of encountering them were fairly low since they roamed the vast area at random. However, they were extremely tough to beat, and there were even stories of a twelve-person team with an average level of 18 being annihilated by a Zone Two predator. They were far more powerful than field bosses, which made them an utter menace. The predator of the Northern Plains was the Large Rock Ant. At first glance, they simply resembled giant Rock Ants; therein lay the danger. Beginners who underestimated them all met a miserable death. What made this creature so terrifying was its immensely tough defenses, as well as its ability to summon regular Rock Ants and trap players. Messing with them would get you surrounded by ants in a flash, making it impossible to escape. Not

wanting to deal with such a monster, I ran as fast as I could in order to put some distance between the Large Rock Ant and us.

“Run! Faster!”

“Mm-mm!”

“...!”

“Don’t fall behind, Bear Bear!”

“Growl growl!”

Although I’d suspected Bear Bear to be the slowest, they seemed to be doing just fine. Contrary to their appearance, Bear Bear was actually more agile than me. What was I saying? There was no way they’d fall behind.

“Guess that means *I’m* the slowest!”

“*Chirp!*”

“Yeah, I know! You don’t have to remind me!”

Rick, who was perched on my shoulder, slapped my head repeatedly. He was probably urging me to run faster since the predator was right behind us.

“Damn it!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“...Are we...okay now?” I gasped as we walked through the field five minutes later, hyperaware of our surroundings. We were practicing what we had learned from the forums, which was to keep our distance from predators even after shaking them off, as they were not stationary monsters.

“Everyone here?”

“Mm...”

“...”

“Growl...”

“Chirp!”

The others seemed beat, but Rick, who had been riding on my shoulder, was

cheerful as ever. At least we were all together, though. Man, that was scary as hell! Just when I was finally getting used to regular battles too. Clearly, today was not my lucky day, encountering such a monstrosity like that.

“I didn’t bother checking which direction we were running in. Where are we anyway?”

“Chirp chirp!”

“What now, bud?”

“Chirp!”

“Come on, you’ve gotta be kidding me.”

Rick was panicking once again. Could it be that the Large Rock Ant was still after us? I was mistaken, however; a giant black dog the size of a bull suddenly jumped out from the bushes before us.

“Grrrr...”

Just like with the Shrub Worm battle, a translucent wall began to surround us.

“A boss wall? This must be a Savage Dog, then. J-Just my luck to run into a freaking field boss!”

I’d been so busy trying to get away from the predator that I didn’t realize I’d stepped into field boss territory. The fact that the scenery all looked pretty much the same didn’t help either! Though predators were also known as wandering bosses by players, they were classified the same way as unique and rare monsters. That was why I’d been able to outrun the Large Rock Ant. However, the creature standing before me was undoubtedly a field boss. There was no escaping from it.

“D-Damn it! Get ready to fight, everyone!”

Like it or not, our only option left was to face this beast head-on.

“Mm!”

“...!”

“Growl!”

My companions quickly got into formation at my command, no doubt battle

hardened from our previous fights. Olto stood at the forefront as a tank, with Bear Bear and Sakura flanking his sides. Being our guerrilla attacker, Rick hid behind the others, waiting for an opportunity to launch an assault. I got into a magic-firing stance, protected on all sides by my tamed monsters.

"Rrrrr...!" the beast growled, its voice a low rumble that sounded as though it came from the depths of the earth. Its two red eyes glared at us with menace. *Yikes!* This was terrifying, even for a dog lover! However, there was no escaping from a boss. It was either fight and win, or die trying.

"Let's stick to the usual, okay?!"

I was trying my hardest to remember what I'd read about Savage Dogs online. While I'd done preliminary research into the four areas adjacent to the Town of Beginnings, including the bosses of each field, I hadn't really simulated a fight with a Savage Dog, since I'd planned on tackling the field boss of the Western Forest first. If I remembered correctly, chasing it was a bad idea due to its swiftness. It was better to lure it in with a tank and attack it with magic or a bow and arrow.

"Rooooar!"

"D'aah, here it comes! Olto, Sakura, keep it tied down! Bear Bear and Rick, you two follow me."

"Chirp?"

"Growl?"

Although I didn't want them to push themselves too hard, this was an opponent that demanded 110 percent of our efforts. While Olto and Sakura kept the dog at bay, I took out a hunter potion that I'd been saving up for emergencies and poured the contents over Rick and Bear Bear.

Name: Hunter Potion

Rarity: 2 / Quality: 6★

Effect: Grants weapons a minor poisoning effect and slight paralyzing effect for 16 minutes. (30-minute

cooldown)

Status ailments worked even on field bosses, who didn't have a very strong resistance to them. This was still Zone One, after all. Seeing as we weren't heavy hitters, we had no choice but to rely on items like this if we wanted to defeat this bastard. This hunter potion was my last resort. Thank goodness I'd saved it until now instead of using it during regular grinding.

"Good luck! What matters isn't how powerful your blows are, but how many hits you can get in."

"Chirp!"

"Growl!"

Thus began our fierce battle. The Savage Dog's main form of attack was to charge at us, or swing with its fangs and front paws. Since it was one of the earliest bosses, it didn't have too many specialized moves. Still, it was incredibly fast, not to mention each blow dealt a significant amount of damage. Even Sakura and Olto, who were the toughest among us, had nearly twenty percent of their HP shaved off in a single blow. If it had been Rick or me, we'd probably be under fifty percent by then.

I aimed my Aqua Balls more carefully than usual, taking care not to attract the Savage Dog's attention. After all, if I died, it'd be a full party wipe. At the very least, I had to make it out alive. If I had amazing reflexes and actually did martial arts in real life, I might be able to fight with my monsters on the frontlines and sock the boss one. While that had a nice ring to it, it definitely wasn't happening! A total wimp like me couldn't risk putting my life on the line.

Bear Bear and Rick followed my orders, focusing on getting in as many small jabs as possible rather than large, powerful blows, aiming for status-ailment damage. I prioritized healing my monsters with medicine instead of attacking, waiting for an opportunity. As long as I didn't mess up the timing of healing my monsters, we could put up a decent fight, especially as there was only one enemy. However, a minor slipup was all it took to land us in hot water. Unused to concentrating on fighting for so long, I unwittingly made a mistake.

"Grarrr!"

“Whoa!”

I lurched forwards, having gotten annoyed at the monster for dodging my Aqua Ball. Crap, I’d gone too far! The Savage Dog sprang to its feet at once, sprinting across the field towards me, its black body a blur. It slammed into me with tremendous force, sending me flying into the air.

“Guh!”

I felt a great weight on my stomach and chest, and a floating sensation washed over me. Since this was a game, there was hardly any pain, but my breath caught in my throat, and the impact of the blow immobilized me momentarily.

“Grrr!”

The Savage Dog ran towards me again, ready to finish me off. *This is it, I’m done for!* I whimpered, bracing myself. To my surprise, however, the final blow never came.

“Mm-mm!”

“Grr?”

Just as I’d made peace with respawning, Olto jumped out in front of me to protect me, holding off the towering great beast’s fangs with nothing but a hoe. *Krrrrk!* A high-pitched sound like two swords clashing together rang throughout the air, and Olto and the canine came to a halt.

“Grrr!”

“Mm-mm!”

Olto and the dog had planted their feet into the ground and were trying to throw each other off. Both gnome and beast were locked in a glaring match, their faces within a hair’s breadth of one another. *That’s some nerve you’ve got, Olto!*

“Mmm! Mm-mm!”

“Grrrr...!”

Still engaged in a battle of strength with the Savage Dog, Olto turned just his

head my way and mouthed something at me. He was probably telling me to make a run for it or heal myself while I had the chance. *Damn, Olto! What a man!*

“Brr...” I winced as I quickly downed a potion. Having done that, I hurriedly retreated to the rear, as pathetic as that sounded. Here I was, scuttling around like a cockroach while a child protected me—some picture that was. I vowed to be more careful from now on. After enduring several more close calls, an opportunity finally presented itself to us. The Savage Dog, who had been poisoned and was gradually diminishing in HP, had finally ceased moving, thanks to paralysis.

“All right! Now’s your chance, Sakura!”

“...♪”

Until now, the dog had been too swift for Sakura’s tree magic, but now, she could properly take aim at it.

“...!”

Sakura used a double Branch Binder attack, a move that suppressed her opponent’s movements with vines, successfully containing the Savage Dog. The vines wrapped themselves around the beast’s legs, neck, and tail, chaining its body to the ground. Thanks to the added effect of paralysis, the dog seemed unable to move an inch. All we had to do now was attack it relentlessly.

“Get ’em, guys!”

“Growl!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“...!”

“Mm!”

I continued to fire Aqua Ball after Aqua Ball, while Olto, who possessed no other means of attacking, slapped the dog with his tiny hands. Sakura’s whip, Bear Bear’s claws, and Rick’s incisors helped to whittle down the Savage Dog’s HP.

“G... *Grrrrr!*”

However, once its HP dropped to below ten percent, the Savage Dog became rabid and tore the vines off its body, breaking free of its bondage. Now that it was rabid, it could no longer be tied down or contained. A reddish-black aura surrounded the dog as it tossed its head back and bellowed at the sky.

“Roooaaarrr!”

Instantly, a shock wave emitted from its mouth swept across the field, flattening everything in its path. It was a Roar attack, a nasty type of AoE skill. Not only did it deal damage to opponents within its range, but it also had a slight chance of paralyzing them.

“Guh!”

I whizzed through the air, having received the full brunt of the shock wave. I immediately tried to get up and found myself unable to lift a finger. Crap! I’d been paralyzed! On top of that, I had evidently dealt a significant amount of damage with my last Aqua Ball, making myself the next target. I could only lie there as the large black creature charged at me.

“Grarrr!”

The Savage Dog lunged at me, baring its massive teeth. Unless I did something to defend myself, I’d be a goner for sure! Unfortunately, my whole body was paralyzed. Since I was lying on my stomach, I could still get a glimpse of what was going on. Sakura and Olto had apparently been paralyzed too. While Bear Bear was still able to move, they were too far away to help me. *This really is the end!* I despaired silently. The next moment, something unexpected happened.

“Chirp chirp chirp!”

“Grrr!”

Rick had pounced on the Savage Dog from the flank. That’s right—Rick’s red scarf was resistant to paralysis! On top of that, his attack was apparently considered an ambush, perhaps even a critical hit, and the Savage Dog’s life meter plummeted to zero.

“Grrrr...”

“Chirp chirp!”

Rick stood astride the gradually disintegrating Savage Dog, his tail standing on end as he let out a roar—or rather, squeak—of victory. *You cutie pie! Well done!* I wanted to say and hug him, but alas, I remained paralyzed.

Online Forum [New Discoveries Galore!] A Discussion Thread for New Discoveries Made in LJO, Part 4

Feel free to report anything you've noticed, however trivial.

Don't make things up.

Don't assume others are lying.

If possible, include a screenshot as proof.

552: Heartman

So, what you're saying is, I should go to the Quick-Eared Cats if I wanna find out why people have started collecting trash all of a sudden.

553: Hiruma

That particular piece of info seems to be in hot demand, so I'm sure they'll upload it to their forum soon.

If you don't wanna fall behind, though, you're gonna want to buy the info from them.

554: Fuka

Our party's actually started weeding recently!

555: Heartman

I'll pay the Quick-Eared Cats a visit later. I'm curious to know why so many people have been picking up trash and cleaning out the gutters lately.

556: Fuka

Yeah, you do that.

And now, it’s my turn! Believe it or not, I’ve discovered a new job!

557: Hiruma

Great to hear that. Primary or secondary?

558: Fuka

Secondary. It’s a Tamer-derived job called Dark Tamer.

Sounds pretty badass, dontcha think? It’s just hearsay, though, so I dunno the details.

If any of you have the deets on it, please share them!

559: Formaggio

You just gonna leave us hanging there?!

Actually, what kind of other class change options do Tamers have so far?

600: Hiruma

A normal class change would be Journeyman Tamer.

There are also several options depending on what kind of monsters you’ve tamed.

Those who’ve tamed more than three beast-type monsters have the option of becoming a Beast Tamer.

Taming reptiles will allow you to become a Scale Tamer, bugs an Insect Tamer, and birds a Bird Tamer.

At least, those are the ones I know of.

601: Hendrickson

>558

I heard a bit about it from a friend of a player who became a Dark Tamer.

Like other jobs, you can change classes once your Job level reaches 20.

Once you change your class to a Dark Tamer, you'll only be able to tame ghosts, cadavers, demons, and evil spirit-type monsters. The monsters you previously tamed will also disappear unless they fall into one of those four categories.

Additionally, you'll also unlock the negative scoring of your monsters' favorability score.

602: Heartman

What do you mean by that?

603: Hendrickson

Apparently, if you abuse your monsters or ignore them for too long, they'll start to hate you and refuse to listen to you. Worst-case scenario, they'll turn against you and attack you.

Dark Tamers also unlock friendly fire, which enables them to sustain damage from their monsters.

604: Fuka

So there *is* a favorability score. Wasn't expecting to discover that here...

What are the benefits of becoming a Dark Tamer, though? Doesn't sound like there's anything in it for you. Is it really a secondary job?

605: Hendrickson

For one, it gives you a huge overall stat boost.

You also get pretty powerful buffs for the four types of monsters you can tame.

606: Fuka

What’s the prerequisite for changing your class? Taming those four types of monsters?

607: Hendrickson

While I don’t know the lowdown of it, I have a pretty good hunch.

You most likely need to have a low favorability score.

The Dark Tamer in question was notorious for abusing their tamed monsters. Many Tamers witnessed them kicking and punching their first monster, which was a baby chick. Everyone hated their guts.

My money’s on your tamed monsters’ favorability score having something to do with it, seeing how you unlock negative scoring when you become a Dark Tamer.

608: Hiruma

Are there even any monsters Dark Tamers can tame at the moment?

609: Heartman

There are monsters known as Poor Zombies in Zone Three. To be honest, they don’t look very appealing, and they’ll most likely only be useful as tanks.

Highly doubt you could form a stable party with just those guys.

610: Hiruma

Let’s see... Dunno any demon-types.

Evil spirits... Nope.

Ghosts... Nada.

Cadavers... Only Poor Zombies.

That’s about it, right? Being a Dark Tamer is no joke.

611: Formaggio

Actually, I just read on the Magical Beasts thread that there’s been a sighting of a ghost.

612: Fuka

Ugh, no thanks, that’s too spooky for me. Where did they see it? I’ll make sure to avoid that area!

613: Formaggio

They aren’t clear on the details yet. There have apparently been several sightings across Zone One and Two, though.

Physical attacks won’t work on them, so you’ll have to defeat them with magic.

614: Fuka

All across Zone One and Two?! You’ve gotta be kidding me! I quit! Time to yeet myself outta here.

615: Hiruma

Come on, it’s vulnerable to magic, so there’s no need to freak out.

More importantly, there weren’t any ghosts until now, were there? Did they suddenly start spawning?

616: Heartman

That earlier announcement about the raid boss being defeated may have been a trigger.

They did mention something about unlocking new features.

617: Hendrickson

Good point.

Who knows what else might’ve been unlocked?

618: Fuka

Oh, I know!

I saw an unmanned stand in the Town of Beginnings. Never seen anything like it.

619: Heartman

Actually, I heard you can acquire honor system farm stands by raising your guild rank at the Farming Guild.

There are a few of them in Zone Three, although I’ve never heard of one in the Town of Beginnings.

620: Fuka

Well, whaddya know. Think we’ll also be able to buy herbal tea leaves in Zone Three, then?

621: Hiruma

Herbal tea, you say?

622: Fuka

Yep. They were selling them at the farm stand in the South District of the Town of Beginnings.

They’re a wee bit on the pricey side, but they taste amazing!

623: Hiruma

Never heard of that. You say they’re selling these in the Town of Beginnings? Not Zone Three?

624: Fuka

That’s right. Or rather, they were.

I bought one to sample, and when I went back for more, they were all gone.

625: Heartman

What kinda effects does it have? Any notable buffs?

626: Fuka

None whatsoever! Purely for enjoyment. They honestly taste incredible, though!

I can’t believe they sold out that quickly, despite the five-per-person daily limit...

Too bad! Should’ve bought more while I had the chance!

Whoever’s running that stand, hurry up and restock those tea leaves!

627: Hendrickson

Who knew a buffless item could be that popular?

Just how good is it? I’m curious now.

After all, there are loads of people who can’t stomach the taste of herbal tea in real life.

628: Heartman

I’m curious too. I’m in the Town of Beginnings now, so I might as well check out that stand.

629: Hiruma

I’ll look for it too.

630: Formaggio

South District, was it?

631: Fuka

N-No wait, I lied! It tasted horrible! So don’t bother searching for it!

632: Hendrickson

You can set up honor system farm stands on your farm, right? I remember there being an agricultural district just on the outskirts of the South District.

633: Heartman

Bingo

634: Hiruma

There you go.

635: Formaggio

I’ll look up the place immediately.

636: Hendrickson

Super tasty herbal tea, eh? Can’t wait to taste it.

637: Fuka

Waaah! Leave some for meee!

“I seriously thought we were done for, but...we did it, guys! Well done, especially you, Rick! You saved us!”

“Chirp.”

Rick squirmed on top of Olto’s head, scratching his head sheepishly as I praised him. If he were a human, he would probably be saying something along the lines of “Aw, shucks!”



Our hard-fought battle against the powerful opponent had resulted in a level-up not only for myself, but for my monsters. Both my base level and job level had now reached level 10, which meant that I could use my bonus points to obtain a wider variety of skills. I looked forward to weighing my options. With the increase in job level, I had also learned a special skill called Breeding Boost, which improved the chances of my tamed monsters laying eggs.

Name: Olto *Race: Gnome* Base Level: Lv. 11

Master: Yuto

HP: 35/35 *MP: 43*43

Strength: 8 *Endurance: 7* Agility: 6

Dexterity: 13 *Intelligence: 14* Sanity: 10

Skills: Arboriculture, Propagation, Luck, Bountiful Harvest, Heavy Bo Staff Skills, Earth Magic, Farming, Digging, Night Vision, Forced Cultivation EX

Equipment: Earth Spirit’s Hoe, Earth Spirit’s Scarf, Earth Spirit’s Garments

Name: Sakura *Race: Tree Nymph* Base Level: Lv. 13

Master: Yuto

HP: 42/42 *MP: 4444*

Strength: 10 *Endurance: 12* Agility: 7

Dexterity: 8 *Intelligence: 12* Sanity: 15

Skills: Arboriculture, Tree Magic, Photosynthesis, Gather, Regeneration, Endure, Whip Skills, Water Resistance, Charm, Woodworking, Forest Ranger

Equipment: Tree Nymph’s Whip, Tree Nymph’s Garments

Name: Rick *Race: Gray Squirrel* Base Level: Lv. 10

Master: Yuto

HP: 29/29 *MP: 23*23

Strength: 7 *Endurance: 9* Agility: 18

Dexterity: 8 *Intelligence: 5* Sanity: 8

Skills: Vigilance, Collect, Pruning, Jump, Climb, Cheek Pouch, Incisor Attack, Flee (New)

Equipment: Scarlet Bandana

Name: Bear Bear *Race: Honey Bear* Base Level: Lv. 9

Master: Yuto

HP: 45/45 *MP: 32*32

Strength: 15+3 *Endurance: 11* Agility: 8

Dexterity: 10 *Intelligence: 6* Sanity: 6

Skills: Cuteness, Gluttony, Smelling, Cultivation, Claw Attack, Climb, Poison Resistance, Sweet Scent, Beekeeping

Equipment: Dog Jacket+, Dog Shirt+, Dog Ascot Tie+

Out of my monsters, Rick was the only one who had obtained a new skill. Flee was a skill I possessed as well, which made it easier for me to escape from my enemies. Since Rick often went foraging alone, it would likely come in handy for him.

“Looks like I’ve used up all my healing items, though...”

To make things worse, all of us were down to fifty percent of our HP, not to mention our MP was about to run out. While we didn’t have to worry about being attacked by regular monsters in boss areas, the question was how we were going to get home. I wasn’t entirely sure if we’d be able to return to the Town of Beginnings without any means of recovery.

“What now?”

Night had already fallen upon us. The monsters in the area were now several levels stronger and greater in number compared to daytime. Was it possible for us to make it through the Northern Plains in our current state? Given the situation, it might actually be better to move on to Zone Two. I heard there was a safety zone right near the border; perhaps it would be best to head there, log out, and wait until morning. But what if I encountered the nocturnal monsters in Zone Two? How would we fare in our diminished state?

"It's no use. I can't decide."

When in doubt, rely on the power of democracy!

"We'll follow the majority vote! Those in favor of continuing?"

"Mm!"

"Chirp!"

"Growl!"

Everyone but Sakura raised their hand or paw. That settled things.

"Right then, let's head to the safety zone in Zone Two."

"..."

"Don't look so worried, Sakura. It'll be fine as long as we stick to running and don't engage in any fights."

"..."

Ten minutes later.

"Damn it! We were almost there!"

"Booooo."

A herd of translucent, faintly glowing humanoid monsters was floating before us. Simply put, they were ghosts. By the time Rick warned me, we were already face to face with them. They appeared to be incredibly fast runners—or rather, fliers, since they didn't have any legs. We tried to flee from them, but they caught up to us in no time flat.

"What the hell are these things?!"

While entering Zone Two hadn't been part of my plan initially, that didn't mean I hadn't done my research. I'd been especially careful to read up on all the monsters in the area. However, none of the sources I'd read had mentioned anything about monsters that resembled ghosts or spirits. Obviously, there had been no information about actual ghost sightings either.

"Looks like they're called Lesser Ghosts..."

Nope, never heard of them before.

"Whooooo."

It seemed like fleeing the scene wasn't an option. As if fast-moving ghosts weren't bad enough already, they weren't the only threat we had to worry about.

"Grrrr."

Behind the ghosts were two adorable bear cubs growling at us menacingly. They were Little Bears, the same as Bear Bear's parent monster. While they looked cute, they were a force to be reckoned with, their defenses higher than that of Wild Dogs. Together, the three ghosts and two cubs encircled us, blocking our way out. Emboldened by the idea of safety, I'd been too impatient and put us at risk. I should have planned our escape more carefully and asked Rick to be more vigilant on the way. Had I done so, we might have been able to avoid this double-whammy encounter with ghosts and Little Bears. Our only choice now was to fight and win.

"Places, everybody! There's no way outta this. Olto, you block the bears. The rest of you, attack the Lesser Ghosts!"

I decided to attack first to take control of the situation. If we could get rid of the ghosts, our chances of surviving would improve. Or so I had hoped...

"Growl! Growl?"

"Chirp?"

Rick and Bear Bear, who had leapt at the ghosts in front of us, went right through them, unable to deal any damage. The same went for Sakura's whip. Rats! Physical attacks didn't work against them, only magic! While that was

pretty orthodox for ghost-type monsters, I hadn't been expecting to encounter them so early on in the game. I quickly began chanting the incantation for my Aqua Ball, preparing to fire back. As I did so, however, the ghosts concentrated their attacks on me, unfazed by my tamed monsters passing through their bodies. As the one chanting a magic spell, I was now the target of their enmity. Now would be the time to ask for Sakura and Olto's help, but unfortunately, I couldn't utter any commands until I had finished my incantation. My tamed monsters stepped in front of me, intending to shield me from the ghosts' attacks. However...

"Mm-mm?"

"...?"

Being incorporeal entities, the ghosts passed through Olto and the others and swooped down upon me, crashing into my body. Surprisingly, the shock I braced myself for never came. All I felt was a momentary shiver run down my spine, and the next second, the ghosts had passed through me. *Huh?* Was this some kind of fumble on their part? Unfortunately, I soon realized that wasn't the case, as my life meter had been reduced slightly. Apparently, their damage was very real, even if there wasn't any impact. Crap, it was only a matter of time until my HP ran out if the ghosts continued to attack me like that! I started to fear there was a respawn in my near future, when...

"I'll help you!" a girl yelled to me from behind, followed by an alert asking whether I wanted to accept her assistance. While players were usually restricted from taking other actions during spell incantations, this was the one exception. Pausing my chanting, I selected the Accept button.

"I-I accept!"

"Roger that! Circle Edge!"

As soon as the girl shouted her incantation, the swarm of ghosts around me disappeared.

"Huh?"

I was momentarily at a loss, as I hadn't been expecting her to defeat the ghosts that easily.

“Never mind them. You should do something about those Little Bears, pronto!”

“Oh, right.”

I’d almost forgotten we were still mid-battle. Though the ghosts had been dealt with, I still had to take care of the Little Bears. Following the girl’s advice, I defeated the remaining monsters in short order.

“We’re...alive.”

I could hardly believe it.

“You were in a pretty pickle right there.” The girl whistled.

“Thanks.” I bowed deeply at my approaching savior, a lightly equipped girl with fiery-red bunches of hair on each side of her head. The long broadsword in her right hand looked incredibly out of place. I felt a rapier would’ve been a better choice for her appearance, although of course, this being a game, the type of weapon you could wield depended on your overall strength. Judging from her avatar, she looked like nothing more than a high school student.

“Don’t mention it. I’m sure you would have done the same for me. Besides, I’d always wanted to play the hero and help someone in distress.”

In LJO, players were able to intervene in battles under certain conditions, provided it wasn’t a special fight like a boss battle. While they weren’t able to join the other party, they could use their skills, arts, or items to assist them just once. Other than the fact that some pushy assholes demanded an extravagant show of gratitude for their help, there were really no disadvantages to being saved. If, say, you were deliberately reducing your HP to level up your healing magic, you could simply refuse the other person’s offer. Furthermore, accepting their help didn’t reduce the amount of XP or items you could gain either.

On the other hand, there weren’t many benefits for the person doing the helping. The only thing they could gain from assisting another player or party was five percent of their XP—items and money weren’t part of the package. In short, it was much easier and more beneficial to defeat monsters yourself. This was supposedly a measure to prevent low-level parties from depending on stronger parties for assistance. If you depended on high-ranking players to help

you each time you fought, you'd be able to gain XP far too easily in the beginning areas. Intervening in a fight was considered a gesture of goodwill and nothing more.

"I'm Yuto, a Tamer. Thanks for saving my ass back there."

"I'm Akari, a Sword Ranger."

"Was that a type of sword art? It seemed to work against the Lesser Ghosts."

"Oh, that was an effect of my sword, not an art. My Claymore of the Morning Mist has a water attribute."

It was probably the same effect as what Lewin's mace had. That meant you didn't necessarily have to use magic against them; attribute damage was equally effective.

"What're you going to do now, Yuto?" Akari asked.

"I was actually planning on heading to the safety zone. Didn't think I could make it back to town at night as I'm all out of healing items."

"Gotcha. In that case, want me to accompany you to the safety zone?"

"...You sure?"

"Of course. I was just about to head there myself."

This must be a blessing from heaven! I'd been saved from the jaws of death by an angel.

"I'll take you up on that, then."

"Mm!"

"...♪"

"Chirp."

"Growl!"

Olto and the others mimicked me and bowed as well. Akari squealed excitedly.

"E-Eek! That's adorable, Yuto!"

My tamed monsters really were popular with the ladies. Akari's face fell as

she was immediately repelled by a harassment block upon trying to pat Olto on the head, but I was hesitant to send her a friend request just yet. I didn't want her to think I was trying to leech off her or hit on her, so I decided to wait for her to make the first move.

"Shall we get going?"

"Y-Yeah. Let's go."

Ten minutes after Akari saved us, we arrived safely at the safety zone, which was indicated by a large tree with a protective shimenawa rope around it. We had already exchanged friend codes on the way; Akari couldn't contain herself and simply *had* to pat my monsters. Seriously, you would think people like Ashihana and Akari would be more selective about their friends. Not that I minded, though, as I was happy to become acquainted with stronger players. I was just worried about potentially coming off as a playboy.

"Thanks a bunch. You've been a great help."

"Not at all. I'm glad I got to cuddle with such cuties too!" Akari smiled, holding hands with Sakura. She looked truly content, beaming from ear to ear, Rick sitting on her shoulder.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Yuto."

"Likewise, Akari. I'm not familiar with your job, though. Sword Ranger?"

I'd memorized all of the initial job classes, and Sword Ranger certainly wasn't one of them. Was it some kind of rare job that only appeared at random? I was taken aback when Akari informed me that it was, in fact, a secondary job. Apparently, it was a job class you could switch to once your Ranger job level reached 20. No wonder she was so strong.

"Normally, you'd switch to a job called Journeyman Ranger, but Sword Ranger popped up as another option while I was working on raising my sword skills," she explained. Did that mean there were other job options for Tamers too? I had to check out the forums later, although it'd be quite a while before I could change jobs, seeing as I was still at level 10. Sword Rangers were supposedly sword fighters equipped with Rangers' search skills. The only drawback was that

since they couldn't wear heavy armor like regular sword fighters, they weren't really made for fighting on the frontlines.

"I'm actually quite famous, you know? *I'm* the Ruby Red Explorer."

"Huh? You mean, the one with the title?" I asked in disbelief. Akari nodded in reply, grinning.

"You guessed it."

No way! So she was one of the three titleholders, just like me, the Silver-Haired Pioneer. I wasn't sure if *comrade* was the right word, but it was my first time encountering another titleholder. Now that she mentioned it, she did have red hair. Just like I'd gotten my moniker from my silver mane, she, too, seemed to have gotten the title, Ruby Red Explorer, from her flaming-red hair. Akari puffed out her chest, looking smug. I almost forgot, but the other two titleholders had actual noteworthy achievements, unlike my humiliating title. Of course, she had every right to be proud. As I mulled things over, Akari stroked her chin, looking as though she were considering something important.

"A silver-haired Tamer with a gnome..." she murmured. I didn't like where this was going... "Are you the Silver-Haired Pioneer?" Damn, that was quick!

"Wh-What made you think that?" I asked.

"Well, you're exactly as the rumors said."

"Oh yeah?"

Go figure. I guess my cover had long been blown since the incident with Mirei.

"Yeah! I've been dying to meet you!"

"Huh? Why?"

"What do you mean, why? There are only three of us secret titleholders. Of course, I've been curious to learn what the other two are like."

I hadn't been... After all, I was sure I'd just be made fun of. If my title hadn't been such an ignoble one, I might've felt the same way as Akari. Then again, did she actually mean it when she said she was curious about me?

"So, you *are* the Silver-Haired Pioneer, right?"

“...Yeah, you got me.”

“I knew it! This is amazing!”

She seemed genuinely pleased, no signs of mockery. It looked like she really was happy to meet me. Seeing her smile lightened my mood as well.

“Heh heh.” Akari suddenly let out a different sort of chuckle as though remembering something.

“What’s up?”

“Oh, I was just thinking about how all three titleholders are solo players, that’s all.”

“Are you also friends with the Purple-Haired Adventurer then?”

“Yep. His name is Siegfried. He role-plays as a knight.”

Role-playing as a knight, you say? He sounded like quite a character. I was starting to get curious too.

“What’s he like?”

“Like his title suggests, he’s a purple-haired knight. Apparently, he only wears white or silver armor since he’s really into his role.”

“That kind of armor isn’t easy to come by, is it?”

“Not only that, but he also has a *horse*. I heard he used up all his bonus points from the beta test on it.”

“W-Wow, that’s some dedication,” I marveled as Akari rattled off various details about Siegfried. Was it really okay to be sharing all this personal information with me, though? Judging from Akari’s tone, however, I needn’t have worried.

“Sieg’s always playing the hero, and he always tells you his name when he leaves. He’s super famous in that regard. You can easily look up what I just told you in the forums.”

So, he was *that* type of player. As intriguing as he sounded, a white knight with a hero syndrome didn’t exactly strike me as the sort of person I wanted to become friends with.

“By the way, what are you doing after this, Yuto?” Akari asked.

“Me? I’m gonna log out, then return to town in the morning,” I replied.

“I see.”

However, I wasn’t sure if I would be able to return to town safely yet. Even if I recovered my HP and MP, I no longer had any healing items on me.

“Guess I’ll camp here for a bit while I look for medicinal herbs and stuff so I can create potions,” I added sheepishly.

“Don’t you have any on you?”

“I used them all up in the Savage Dog fight.”

“I see... I don’t have a lot either since I don’t really need them in this area.”

Although she’d already advanced to a secondary job class, I was still impressed that she was able to move freely in Zone Two as a solo player. Being a fighter was part of it—the rest probably had to do with her playing skills, which were far beyond my reckoning.

“Wish I could accompany you to town, but I haven’t accomplished my mission yet,” Akari said regretfully.

“What mission?”

Come to think of it, it was unusual for a player of Akari’s class to be in a place like this. Perhaps she was in the middle of a special quest or event of some sort.

“So, I’ve actually been farming the Savage Dog to get some materials for armor.”

“Farming? You gonna, like, create a full-body Savage Dog suit or something?”

Some equipment granted you special skills or bonuses if you acquired it as a set. Did she intend to deck herself out completely in Savage Dog gear? Boss materials had to be pretty difficult to obtain. If she wanted the whole shebang—helmet, body armor, footgear, shield, innerwear, and accessories—she’d most likely need to grind for hundreds of hours to obtain enough materials.

“No, nothing like that,” she answered. I had apparently guessed wrong. “I’m specifically after the Savage Dog Shin Guards. It’s a special type of footwear. I

need four Savage Dog tails for it, a rare drop."

"*Four* rare boss drops?" I repeated. That really was a challenge. Rare drops typically had a drop rate of less than ten percent; for bosses, it was probably even lower. Who knew how many hours she'd have to farm to acquire four of those?

"Exactly. I've managed to collect three so far, including one I bought from another player, but...I'm having a hard time obtaining the last one. I've already fought them about forty times too."

"*Forty?* As a solo player?"

"Yep. Thanks to all that farming, I've gotten pretty good at fighting Savage Dogs."

I bet.

"I'm impressed you can take on a Savage Dog on your own."

"Oh, but it's easy once you get the hang of it. It does speed up the more you reduce its HP, but its defenses also get lower. Sure, it's pretty dangerous right after it unleashes its Roar Attack, but if you're prepared for it, it's a great opportunity. You can even potentially defeat it if you manage to deal a large blow while it's gearing up for an attack," Akari rattled off casually. *Easy enough for you to say; I could never.*

"Didn't you defeat a Savage Dog too, Yuto? You don't happen to have its tail, do you?"

I didn't realize until she mentioned it, but I'd been so focused on getting to the safety zone in one piece that I hadn't bothered to check my drops after the fight.

"Don't hold your breath..."

I'd have to be hella lucky to get a rare drop on my first win.

"...Got one."

Wait, seriously?

"What? You did?!" Akari cried in amazement.

“Y-Yeah.”

I was shocked too. I had to do a double take to make sure I hadn’t mistaken it for something else. Upon checking my inventory, I discovered that I’d obtained two Savage Dog pelts, Savage Dog fangs, Savage Dog claws, and finally, one Savage Dog tail.

“Um, any chance I could have that...?” Akari asked expectantly. *Hmm, what to do now?* I could potentially have a use for a rare-drop item.

“I’ll sweeten the deal, obviously!”

Well, she *did* save my life... Besides, I wanted to get home in one piece.

“Okay, I’ll sell this to you, so could you accompany me back to the Town of Beginnings?”

“You want me to be your bodyguard? Sure thing!”

“Really? You don’t mind?”

“Not at all! No biggie. I was starting to get tired of farming Savage Dogs all day.”

“I see.”

Awesome, that took care of my journey home.

“Is it okay if I log out first and come back at dawn?”

“I don’t mind, but is that time all right for you?”

“It’s totally fine! I’m on summer vacation now.”

Turned out she *was* a student after all.

“Think I’ll log out for now too.”

When I logged in again the following morning, my HP and MP had fully recovered.

“No worries about dying right off the bat now.”

Since I had arrived a bit earlier than our appointed time, it would likely be a while before Akari came online. As capable as she was, I’d still have to do my

fair share of fighting, so I figured I would make some recovery items while I waited for her. At the moment, I only had enough ingredients to make two potions and one medicine, which didn't exactly put me at ease. While I had Monster Heal as a means of recovery for my tamed monsters, allotting MP for that meant I would have fewer chances to use other magic, which was why I was keen on preparing some medicine.

"Wonder if there are any ingredients nearby?"

I used my Appraisal skill to scan the area I could observe from the safety zone for medicinal herbs and the like.

"Rick, Olto, Sakura, I'm gonna need you guys to gather some stuff too."

"Chirp!"

"Mm!"

"...!"

My three companions saluted in acknowledgment and scattered outside of the safety zone.

"Don't push it! Take care of yourselves!" I yelled after them.

"Mm-mm."

"Chirp chirp."

They seemed to be heeding my warning, so I supposed I needn't worry too much. While they were at it, I decided to search the vicinity of the safety zone.

"Growl?"

"Oh, right... You stand guard, Bear Bear. If someone looks like they're in trouble, go save them."

"Growl!"

Bear Bear nodded sagely and drew themself up to their full height, then began craning their neck to observe their surroundings. Phew. That seemed to at least appease Bear Bear. Our search turned up a decent number of ingredients, but only one life sunflower, which meant I could only make one low-grade potion. I'd have to make do with the three salve-making plants I had

found instead.

“First, let’s start with potions.”

I sat down on one of the thick tree roots of the safety zone’s giant tree and took out my concoction kit. The concocting itself wouldn’t be an issue since I had purified water with me.

“Mm-mm!”

“Chirp chirp!”

Having returned from item gathering, Olto and Rick were now playing tag with each other. Now that I thought about it, this was the first time we’d been away from town for so long. Was our farm okay? We’d made sure to water all our crops yesterday, but I was keen on getting back soon to see how they were faring. As I ground my ingredients to a paste, lost in my thoughts, the protective shimenawa rope tied around the tree glowed a faint purple.

“Whoa!”

I nearly dropped my bowl in shock, barely avoiding wasting the few precious ingredients I had managed to obtain for my single low-grade potion.

“Wh-What the hell’s going on?” I stuttered.

“Morning, Yuto.”

Once the light had subsided, I was greeted by the sight of Akari. Apparently, that light had been a signal that another player was about to log in. Come to think of it, this was the first time I’d seen another player log in up close.

“Have you been waiting long?” Akari asked, glancing at my concoction kit. Evidently, she had thought she had arrived late.

“Not at all, I just happened to log in early. Don’t worry about it.”

“Phew, glad to hear that.”

“Thanks for agreeing to accompany me today. Sorry for all the trouble.”

“Don’t mention it. You *are* selling me that tail, after all. Besides, I was planning on returning to the Town of Beginnings anyway to see a friend, so it’s no trouble at all.”

“That so?”

“If anything, I feel kinda bad that that’s all you’re asking of me.”

Guess that makes two of us.

“Are you in the middle of concocting something?”

“I was, but I’ll clean up now.”

“It’s okay. I’ll eat something while I wait.”

I’d fully intended to wrap things up before Akari arrived, but evidently I’d spent too much time on gathering. I decided to take her up on her offer and carry on with my task.

“Sorry. Thanks.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Better hurry up and get this over with. As I resumed grinding ingredients in my mortar, Akari began munching on some sort of dumpling that she took out of her inventory. It looked like a millet dumpling coated with brown sugar, something I had never seen before. According to my Appraisal skill, the item was called a portable dumpling. Was it a recipe derived from food rations? While it looked rather tasty at first glance, Akari’s expression told me that wasn’t the case. The way she grimaced, you’d think she was eating mud.

“Something the matter, Yuto?”

Oops. I had apparently been staring at her without realizing it. Here I was, a grown man ogling at a high school girl whilst she ate. Clearly, that wasn’t a good look.

“Uh, it’s just that I’ve never seen that food before!” I sputtered. Even I could tell how flustered I sounded. Crap, what would she think of me? Thankfully, however, my worries were unfounded, as Akari nodded satisfactorily.

“I almost forgot that this is your first time in Zone Two,” she said.

“Does that mean they’re available from here onwards?” I asked.

“Yep. You can easily buy them in Zone Three.”

So *this* was the kind of food you could get in the more advanced areas!

“Wow! How are they different from food rations?”

In response to my question, Akari offered me another portable dumpling from her inventory.

“...You’ll find out soon enough. Here, take it.”

“You sure?”

“Of course.” Akari smiled as she handed me the dumpling. I noticed a hint of mischievousness in her grin, which made me slightly wary considering her earlier reaction. It seemed rude to turn down her offer, though, so I took the portable dumpling from her and gingerly bit into it.

“...Gah! The heck is *this*?!”

The next instant, my expression contorted into a grimace, much like the one Akari had been wearing. While it wasn’t bad enough to spit it out, it was still pretty awful.

“Ha ha ha ha. Gotcha!” Akari cackled at my reaction.

“They taste exactly the same!” I gagged. The dumpling tasted exactly like basic rations, which were already essentially unsweetened energy bars with an extra kick of bitterness. I supposed it was slightly moister than food rations, though. The closest thing to it I could think of was a sata andagi, an Okinawan donut, devoid of all sweetness.

“People say they’re still better than food rations since they’re not as dry and crumbly. They also recover your hunger status by five percent more, so I prefer to eat these instead.”

“Do you make them yourself?”

“I buy them from NPC shops. I heard that you can buy the recipe for them in Zone Three, though.”

“I’m amazed you can eat this stuff.”

“Really? They taste slightly better than food rations, though, don’t they?”

It was true that while they were both disgusting, the portable dumpling was slightly more palatable than food rations. Still, I could scarcely call it delicious.

“Leaves a nasty taste in your mouth.”

Due to the game’s unnecessary realism, the bitterness still lingered on my tongue.

“This calls for a palate cleanser.”

I took out some herbal tea leaves, added them to some water in a pot, and brought them to a boil. The tea would likely be ready by the time my potion was complete. In the meantime, I nibbled on a cookie to get rid of the bitter taste in my mouth, letting the sweetness coat my tongue thoroughly. That reminded me—I had to feed my monsters too. I took out each monster’s food from my inventory and handed each of them their share. Sakura alone sipped on some water as she basked in the sun, not needing any food due to her Photosynthesis. Akari gazed at Rick and me curiously as we munched on our cookies.

“What’s up?”

“What are you eating?”

Wait, did she not know? Herbal tea I could understand, but surely cookies weren’t hard to obtain? As an experiment, I tried offering her a cookie and some freshly brewed tea.

“Consider these thanks for the portable dumpling.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. They barely cost a thing anyway.”

“Well, if you insist,” Akari said, hesitating as she took the cookie from me. She was probably imagining something similar to food rations. Perhaps she thought I was trying to get back at her with an equally disgusting food item. The minute she bit into the cookie, her eyes widened in surprise. She then stared at the half-eaten cookie before putting the rest into her mouth, nodding a few times. After that, she took a sip of herbal tea, and her eyes flew open once again. It was fun to see her expression change so dramatically. Actually, it was interesting to see how everyone reacted whenever I gave them cookies and herbal tea; it made sharing them all the more worthwhile.

“Y-Yuto! Can I get these in the Town of Beginnings?”

“I made them myself.”

“You did? Really?”

“The cookies aren’t hard to make as long as you have Cooking skills.”

Didn’t Akari know about these cookies either? I hadn’t expected a frontliner like her to not know about them. That just showed how unpopular Cooking skills were. Come to think of it, not many players did choose to obtain Cooking with how easy it was to obtain rations otherwise, not to mention the fact that the skill hadn’t yielded any notable results during the beta test. Most people considered obtaining magic or combat skills a far better use of their bonus points than spending them on learning Cooking.

“I’m sure more players will acquire the skill once the game progresses and they have more bonus points to spare,” Akari said thoughtfully.

“Not for now, though.”

“No, I guess not. But I’m surprised by how good these taste. Maybe I’ll obtain Cooking too.”

“The only ingredients you’ll need are edible grass, honey, and nuts, so I’m sure you’ll be able to get them easily.”

“That’s it? And yet, they taste *this* good?”

Akari seemed utterly amazed. Perhaps this was my cue to preach the benefits of Cooking skills. Not that I necessarily wanted to proselytize—I simply didn’t want it to be seen as some sort of trash skill. Besides, if more people realized the perks of Cooking, more players might choose to acquire it. If that happened, there might be greater opportunities to discover new recipes or food items. I, for one, was keen for that to happen; the more chefs, the more kinds of delicious food. *Time for a little push.* I decided to let her try something else besides cookies.

“Hey, wanna try something else?” I offered.

“Huh? Seriously? I’d love to!” Akari gushed. That being said, the only foods I could make in Auto Mode without messing up were salads, grilled skewers, and

soups.

“All right, I’ll make a soup with purified water, pumpkin, and carrots.”

“A soup, eh?”

“I’ll throw in some grilled skewers too.”

As the name implied, I needed some skewers, so I handed Sakura some wood to make them. Skewers were apparently easy to make, even if your Woodworking skill was at the lowest level. For meat, I chose to use rat meat that I’d gotten from a monster drop. Rat meat could occasionally be obtained from Fanged Rats and Gray Squirrels, although I found it weird that squirrels were considered “rats.”

```
Name: Vegetable Soup
Rarity: 1 / Quality: 4★
Effect: Recovers hunger status by 23% and HP by 3%.

Name: Rat Skewer
Rarity: 1 / Quality: 3★
Effect: Recovers hunger status by 12%.
```

The effects were nothing to boast about, but what mattered was the taste. I bit into one of the skewers, feeling my teeth engage in a tug-of-war chew with the stringy chewiness of the meat.

“Hmm, not bad, I guess.”

To be honest, with food rations being the standard, anything tasted better in comparison. In actuality, the skewers were like dry, overcooked chicken tenders, and the soup tasted like a plain, almost bland vegetable broth. You could say it tasted mildly comforting if you were trying to be nice about it. Had this been a bad idea? I highly doubted I’d be able to promote the perks of Cooking with *these* dishes. Or so I thought...

“This is awesome!” Akari exclaimed as she ate up the food I prepared with gusto. These dishes were apparently a treat if all you were accustomed to was basic rations.

“Glad to hear that.”

“I never knew food in this game could taste this good!”

“Anyone can make them as long as they have Cooking skills.”

“I can?! I’m definitely learning Cooking, then!”

It looked like I’d succeeded in recruiting a new member into the Cooking gang.

“Town of Beginnings! I have returned!” I announced grandly upon our safe arrival back in town, three hours later. Despite my fears of respawning along the way, we had made it back in one piece.

“We made it safely...I guess.”

Akari seemed to have mixed feelings about the situation. She wasn’t cringing at my Anavel Gato impression...was she? No, she was probably disappointed because she scarcely had anything to do on our return journey. For better or for worse, the only monsters we encountered on the way were ones my tamed monsters and I could have dealt with ourselves. Because it was morning, we didn’t even run into any Lesser Ghosts. The truth was, I hadn’t needed her to protect me at all. That seemed to be weighing on Akari’s conscience.

“Hey, you did save us a few times! Remember how you wiped out those Wild Dogs by yourself? That was badass!”

“But you didn’t *need* me, did you? You could’ve won that fight without my help.”

“No, not necessarily.”

“Really?”

It was true that Akari’s presence had made the fighting much easier. Knowing that she had my back had let me attack with more force than usual, which meant that I defeated my opponents at a faster pace and sustained less

damage. Even after hearing that explanation, though, Akari still looked unconvinced, as though she was not certain that the little work she had done gave her the right to accept my rare boss drop. According to her, she was just grateful that I wasn't trying to rip her off, even though I could have easily overcharged her if I wanted to.

We had already settled on a price: 6,500 G. That was by far one of the most expensive items that could be obtained in Zone One. However, if she were to buy the same item from other players or shops, chances were she'd be charged over 20,000 G, and the price had been going up ever since the Quick-Eared Cats started selling the recipe for Savage Dog Shin Guards. Once the group had released the details officially it would only shoot up higher.

"It's fine if you can get them but they're usually out of stock," Akari sighed. It would only become harder to obtain the drops from here on out. "I'm betting you that within the next few days this place is going to be teeming with folks grinding for Savage Dogs."

Aside from being lightweight and strong in defense, Savage Dog shin guards also boosted your Attack and Agility stats, as well as reduced the amount of damage you sustained. That description alone was already impressive. Their stats put them pretty high up on any melee fighter's wish list.

"Savage Dog tails are a compound ingredient that can be used for other types of armor too. That's what makes them so highly sought after."

"Compound ingredient?"

"They're materials that, when added to the armor-making process, give bonuses to normal armor."

Akari broke it down for me: the Wild Dog Shirt I was wearing, for example, was made from four Wild Dog pelts and one ore-type material. Under normal circumstances, you wouldn't be able to add any other materials to the mix. However, items called compound ingredients could be added during weapon- and armor-making processes even if they weren't included in the recipe. In the case of Savage Dog tails, you could expect a boost in Attack for weapons and a boost in Agility for armor. No wonder most people wanted them. I didn't see much use for them myself, however, since they apparently made things quite

heavy.

“Lots of people want to use them for crafting, even if they don’t intend on making shin guards,” Akari explained.

“So that’s why the price has skyrocketed.”

“Exactly. So you see, 6,500 G is actually a steal.”

“But that’s still nearly twice as much as if you sold it to an NPC shop, right?”

“The lowest going rate if you sell it to other players is 8,000 G, though.”

That being said, I’d already kept her tied up for a while, not to mention she’d given me the bigger share of the items and monster drops we obtained on the way home. Honestly speaking, I felt bad. It wasn’t as if I stood to lose anything by giving away the Savage Dog tail anyway.

“Never mind that. After all, I insisted.”

“Hrm, if you say so.”

We completed our exchange once we arrived at the entrance to town, me handing over the Savage Dog tail and Akari the 6,500 G payment. She then got her fill of petting my tamed monsters before setting off to see her friend.

“Hope to see you again sometime.”

“Yeah. Thanks for everything,” I said, extending my hand.

“Likewise! Between the tail and playing with your monsters I couldn’t ask for more!” Akari replied, grasping my hand and shaking it enthusiastically. “See you again, everyone!” she waved, turning back to glance at us every now and then as she departed.

“Let’s get going too, shall we?”

“Mmm.”

“...”

“What’s up? Do you miss her?”

“Chirp chirp.”

“Growl.”

Saying goodbye to Akari seemed to have dealt a blow to Bear Bear and the others. Perhaps encounters like this helped my monsters mature and develop more complex personalities over time. Like they say, it’s important to treasure every meeting.

Chapter Five: Welcome to Silver-Haired's Farm

After Akari and I went our separate ways in the town square, I headed to my next destination. Now that Rick had reached level 10, I could raise my rank at the Magical Beasts Guild. Before that, however, I decided to pay Alyssa a visit, as I wanted to learn more about the Lesser Ghosts I had encountered on the way. This was what information brokers were for, right?

"Good morning."

"Welcome. What's new?"

As soon as I greeted her, Alyssa leaned forward eagerly. *Sorry to burst your bubble, but I didn't come to sell any information today.*

"I came across a new monster, actually."

"You did? Where?"

Upon hearing my answer, Alyssa's expression turned serious.

"Near the entrance to Zone Two, in the forest at the end of the Northern Plains."

"That'll be the Fanged Forest. Did you run into some Lesser Ghosts?"

"Oh, you know them?"

"I sure do..."

Alyssa's cat ears flopped downwards in obvious disappointment. Apparently, that hadn't been news to her, and she had already received multiple sightings of the creatures. Anyhow, she couldn't expect me to bring her fresh information every time.

"As for their characteristics..."

Other players had already sold what I knew to Alyssa, such as the fact that only magic attacks worked against the ghosts and that physical attacks didn't increase their enmity towards you. Fortunately, it was the first time she'd heard

of a sighting in the Fanged Forest, so she exchanged my info for details I didn't know yet. Lesser Ghosts had apparently begun spawning in Zone Two in the last few hours, and their weakness was holy magic. According to her guess, the raid boss's defeat had something to do with it. The new features that had been unlocked apparently referred to a wider variety of enemy monsters. The devs seemed to have concluded that players were getting stronger with the game's progression and had decided to add more formidable opponents.

"That's annoying..." I muttered.

"It does mean new items will become available, though. As a crafter-type, you'll probably be able to reap some benefits too."

"Hope so."

Seriously? There've been nothing but disadvantages for me so far! I'd almost died too!

"Man, just when I thought I could finally enter the battlefield like everyone else..."

To think things had gotten even more difficult...

"Oh well, no use crying over spilt milk."

Pulling myself together, I headed to my next destination, the Magical Beasts Guild, to buy an incubator. That had been the whole point of my little adventure to begin with.

"Why hello, Yuto," Barbara greeted me.

"Hi. I've fulfilled the requirements for the rank-up quest," I reported to Barbara at the counter, having come straight from Alyssa's stall.

"Line up, everyone."

"Mm-mm!"

"...♪"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Growl!"

"Except you, Bear Bear. Wait over here."

“Growl...”

Once my monsters were all lined up, I had Barbara assess them.

“Mhm, mhm. You’ve certainly fulfilled the requirements!”

“Does that mean...?”

“Yes! No problems whatsoever!”

Ding-dong.

“*You have completed the rank-up quest. Your guild rank has increased to rank 5.*”

“All right!”

I could finally buy a new incubator now. It had been a long and arduous journey to this point. After all, I had somehow ended up fighting a field boss. *I wonder why?*

“Can I see the incubator list, please?!”

“Here you go.”

I checked the list of incubators, and sure enough, there were three more incubators available to me now. The Ability-Enhancing Incubator cost 15,000 G, while the Battle Skill Incubator and Crafting Skill Incubator each cost 20,000 G. The Ability-Enhancing Incubator gave you a +8 initial stat boost at random, making it the perfect incubator for raising your monster’s baseline capabilities. It was also a safe choice for when you weren’t sure what sort of monster you’d be getting. The Battle Skill Incubator granted you a +3 initial stat boost as well as a fighting skill, and the Crafting Skill Incubator granted you a random crafting skill in addition to the +3 initial stat boost.

“Hmm, this *is* Olto and Sakura’s egg we’re talking about.”

Therefore, it was highly likely that I’d get a humanoid-type monster—either a gnome, a tree nymph, or something else entirely. In the case of a gnome, though, I wasn’t sure if getting a Battle Skill Incubator would be a wise decision. Would it obtain fighting abilities and become a gnome that could actually fight? Or would it only gain an initial stat boost due to its peaceful temperament? While I was undeniably curious, I didn’t want to take any chances with this egg.

I decided to go with the safest option, the Crafting Skill Incubator. Even if it wasn't a unique specimen, I'd be more than happy to have a gnome specializing in crafting.

"I'll take the Crafting Skill Incubator, please."

"That'll be 20,000 G."

Welp, there goes my money again. Still, I had now successfully obtained an incubator.

"Let's go home!"

"Mm!"

"...!"

I had intended to incubate my egg as soon as I arrived, but my plans were thwarted by a player waiting in front of my farm.

"H-Hey! A-Are you the owner of this farm?" he asked.

"Sorry?"

He wasn't the only one either.

"Are you the person running this farm stand?"

"When will you be restocking those herbal tea leaves?"

"I'd like some herbal tea, please!"

"It's supposed to be really good, right?"

I immediately found myself surrounded by an expectant mob.

"Huh? What the...?"

What was happening? Had I done something wrong? Their expressions were so tense I wondered if they were going to start yelling at me. Upon further questioning, however, I discovered that they bore me no ill will. Much to my surprise, they had simply come to purchase the herbal tea leaves I was selling at my farm stand.

"Go ahead, help yourselves," I offered.

"They're all sold out," one of the people in the crowd replied.

“What? They are?”

“That’s what I’m telling ya,” another person chimed in.

“So please! Hurry up and restock them!”

I quickly checked my farm stand, and sure enough, all of the items had sold out. I had also made a grand total of 8,700 G.

“They’re seriously sold out?”

Amazingly, Ashihana’s prediction had come true. Well, if there was such a huge demand for them, I supposed I might as well get cracking on restocking the shelves. I’d have to make some more, though, since I didn’t have too many premade blends at the moment.

“I’ll restock the shop in a bit, so could you wait about thirty minutes?” I asked the crowd.

“Gotcha!”

“Awesome, thanks!”

“We’ll wait!”

They’re just gonna wait here? I stared agog as the players began queuing up in front of my stand. While I appreciated their patience, the pressure to deliver was immense. First, I would need to harvest some weeds, so I asked Olto and the others to go pick some herbs for me. In the meantime, I headed inside the barn to set up my incubator.

“Hang on... Maybe I should check my Alchemy recipes first. Now that I have an incubator, chances are I might’ve unlocked a new recipe.”

If I remembered correctly, you could use Alchemy skills to create incubators. I pulled up my list of recipes in the hopes that I’d be able to improve the functionality of my incubator.

“Huh... What should I do?”

I found not one, but four recipes that used an incubator. However, the problem was the other ingredients. Each recipe required a Crafting Skill Incubator and an iron ingot, plus a fire, water, earth, or wind crystal, depending

on what you wanted to make. Yes, those crystals—the ones Alyssa was willing to buy for 30,000 G apiece. Thirty thousand was a lot of money, not to mention iron ingots were extremely valuable too. However, I did have four crystals; perhaps it wouldn't hurt to spare one. After all, considering the ingredients I needed, the incubator was bound to turn out amazing.

"This *is* Olto and Sakura's child we're talking about!"

All right, let's do it! There'd never be another opportunity like this—I made up my mind to do the best I could for their egg. That being said, it would likely take a while to get everything ready. I still had to select which attribute crystals to use.

"Might as well restock the herbal tea leaves first."

My inventory was now full of herbs that my companions had harvested for me in the meantime. I took out the herbs and began drying them one by one. Once I'd dried a decent amount, I began mixing them together to create tea blends. At first, I thought of making the exact same ones as before, but decided at the last minute to swap out the wild strawberries for something else, since I wanted to use those in cookies. Although I only had thirty minutes, it was a process I'd done countless times already. With a practiced hand, I continued to dry and blend in the barn, and before long, I had made about fifty bags of tea leaves. I hurried back to my stand so as not to keep the others waiting.

"I'm ba— Huh?"

"Hey. How's it going, Silver-Haired?"

"Oh, *that's* Silver-Haired?"

"Yup. You saw him with a gnome, didn't ya?"

"Wow, Filma! It's Silver-Haired in the flesh!"

"Look, Kurumi! Isn't that gnome adorable?!"

I wasn't concerned that my cover had been blown; I was used to this sort of reaction by now. No, what baffled me was the number of players lined up before my stand. There had been five people when I last looked, but already three more people had joined the queue. Things were starting to get out of

hand. Had someone been spreading rumors again? Nah, it couldn't be. It was probably the result of Japanese people's herd mentality compelling them to stand in line. I bet they had joined the queue out of pure curiosity. Yes, that had to be it.

"Okay, I'll restock the shelves now. It's five per person, so please don't take any more than that."

"Yes, sir," the crowd replied in unison. *Now* that's *what I like to hear.* At this rate, I'd sell out again in no time. More importantly, I only had a bit of herbal tea left for myself! This was a serious matter. Perhaps it was time I considered mass production.

"All right. Once I've tried out the incubator recipe, I'll go buy some more land."

Before that, I had an alchemy experiment to do. I double-checked the recipe, which listed an incubator, iron ingot, and attribute crystal as ingredients.

"Question is, which crystal to use?"

Typically speaking, the crystal would likely give the soon-to-be-born monster an attribute or a skill of said attribute. Currently, my party lacked wind-and fire-types.

"Hmm. Think I'll go with a fire crystal. Seems like it'll be more useful for farm work than wind," I decided aloud, thinking along the lines of slash-and-burn agriculture and greenhouse farming. Once I switched to the new incubator, the monster would probably no longer learn a crafting skill. Still, considering all the valuable items I was about to use, the incubator made with Alchemy skills had to be better. Taking my chances seemed worth it. I was determined to make the best incubator possible, not just for Olto and Sakura, but for their unborn child.

"Alchemy!"

"*Your equipment's level is not high enough.*"

"What?"

No way. Did that mean my simple Alchemy set wasn't good enough? Did I have to buy new equipment? Now that I thought about it, the kit I was currently

using *was* for beginners. It made sense that it couldn't create more advanced items.

"Maybe I should go to Alyssa's."

Her stall was bound to have Alchemy kits. Even if she didn't, I could probably get a referral to a skilled Alchemist or something. Along the way, I decided to stop in at the Farming Guild as well, as it had suddenly occurred to me when I passed by to buy more land for growing herbs. Unfortunately, my guild rank wasn't high enough, and I was only able to buy two plots of land. At my current rank, I could only own up to forty plots and twenty squares per town.

"Guess I gotta make do with what I have for now..."

Perhaps it was time I moved on to the next town. Apparently, you could warp between larger towns for a small fee, so even if I were to buy more land in another area, it wouldn't be too difficult to take care of both farms at the same time.

"For that, I'll need to get proper equipment."

First, I had to make it across the playing field.

"Gotta buy a new Alchemy set too. Let's go round each stall."

My first stop was supposed to be Alyssa's, but her stall wasn't in the usual place in the square.

"Hmm. Is it her day off?"

I supposed I couldn't very well expect her to be in the same spot all the time. When I checked my friends list, I found that she was offline. I cursed myself for not doing so before heading out. *Hmm, what now?* Although I'd be able to buy what I wanted at the Alchemy Guild, I didn't feel like registering for membership just for that purpose.

"I know! I can ask Sawyer."

Since Sawyer was an Alchemist, there was a good possibility he knew where I could buy an Alchemy kit. If anything, maybe I could ask *him* to make an incubator for me. This time, I checked my friends list before making a move, determined not to repeat the same mistake.

“Looks like he’s online.”

I gave him a ring first to see how he was doing.

“Hi. What’s up?” Sawyer answered immediately, his voice echoing from the other side of my status window.

“Are you free right now?” I asked.

“Sure thing. I don’t have any customers at the moment,” he replied. *Excellent.* No, wait, maybe that wasn’t so great for business.

“I’m actually looking for a new Alchemy set. I think I’ve outgrown the basic Alchemy set. I need the next one up. Do you know where I can buy one?”

“Didn’t know you were still using the initial kit.”

“Well, as you can see, I’m not an Alchemist.”

“Still, people usually choose to replace it immediately...”

“Huh? They do?”

According to Sawyer, anyone could buy the beginner’s kit, the level above the simple Alchemy set, at any NPC stall that specialized in such equipment. As such, regular crafter-types usually replaced their kits within the first few days. I had never visited an NPC-run Alchemy shop before, especially since the ingredients that other crafter-types usually bought I tended to gather on my own. Items like water pumice were cheaper at Alyssa’s stall. For similar reasons, I had never bothered using other NPC shops. *I should probably check out the NPC shop offerings sometime,* I thought to myself.

“Why the sudden interest, though?” Sawyer asked.

“Thing is, I want to make an incubator.”

“Really? Did you get a recipe for it?”

“I sure did.”

“If you bring me the necessary ingredients, I can make it for you.”

As we’d already discussed incubators before, Sawyer was quick to catch on.

“Seriously? For how much?”

“Depends on what it’s worth, but... I know, how about a trade?”

“A trade?”

“Yeah. I collected quite a few herbs with the intention of making herbal tea myself, but I can’t unless I have Cooking skills, right? As a result, I have loads left over now.”

Like Ashihana, Sawyer had also attempted to make herbal tea and failed.

“Could you dry those herbs for me? In exchange, I’ll make the incubator for you.”

I decided to entrust him with the task, as he was much more likely to do a better job with it. Besides, making herbal tea leaves was easy.

“Sure, that works. Are you at your shop now?”

“Yes.”

“Be right there.”

I hung up and immediately headed to his part of town, where I found him minding the store. As usual, there were no customers.

“Hi again.”

“Welcome. So, you want an incubator?”

“That’s right,” I answered, explaining the contents of the recipe to him.

“Didn’t know you needed an incubator in the first place. No wonder I couldn’t obtain the recipe for one.”

“Besides the incubator, you’ll need this and this,” I said, showing him the ingot and fire crystal. Sawyer gazed at them with a stern expression. Disdainful wasn’t the right word—*nervous* was more like it.

“Hmm.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Just nervous since they’re all really valuable ingredients.”

Gotcha. Truthfully, both materials were supposed to be incredibly rare at the moment, not to mention the incubator itself was an expensive item too. He was

probably feeling nervous about messing things up, which was understandable. In this game, however, there were no chances of failure as long as you made things in Auto Mode. As such, I wasn't worried about him accidentally wasting my ingredients.

"Well? Think you can do it?"

"Let's see... Oh, I got the recipe. It looks like you can make it with the beginner's kit."

That was good to know. It all came down to how high quality an item he could make in Auto Mode now.

"I'm counting on you."

"I'll do my best. I have to prep the materials first, though, so it'll take at least an hour. What will you do in the meantime?"

"Prep?"

"The crystal needs polishing, and if I heat up the ingot and hammer it, I might be able to raise its quality."

Making herbal tea for Sawyer would take me less than ten minutes. That still left me with plenty of time.

"That's a long wait... In that case, I'll check out the Alchemy shop once I've dried your herbs. Can you tell me where it is?"

"Of course. It's right nearby."

Fifteen minutes later, after drying all of Sawyer's herbal tea leaves, I arrived at the Alchemy shop he had introduced me to.

"Welcome," the owner greeted me.

"Hi, I'd like to buy a beginner's Alchemy kit. Do you have any?" I asked.

"Sure do. That'll be 2,000 G apiece."

Well, that was easy enough. I paid the wizened shop owner 2,000 G in exchange for my new Alchemy set. According to them, I'd need to register at the Alchemy Guild and raise my guild rank if I wanted a more advanced kit than this. Apparently, Ashihana had only just acquired the crafting set above this;

Sawyer had yet to obtain one and was still using the beginner's kit. With that in mind, it'd likely be ages before I could purchase a more advanced kit myself. Since I still had plenty of time left, I decided to check out the Concoctions shop and Cooking shop as well. Sure enough, they sold beginner's Concoction kits and beginner's Cooking kits. I purchased one of each without hesitation.

"There, that's all the crafting kits squared away."

Crafting was about to get ten times more exciting.

"Guess I can start heading back now."

Having accomplished my mission, I began walking back to Sawyer's shop. I arrived back at his stall to find that he'd already completed the incubator-making process.

"Hey, Yuto. Got what you needed?"

"Yep, all thanks to you."

"I'm all done too." He beamed, a look of accomplishment on his face. A cry of surprise slipped out of my mouth as I gave the incubator he handed me a once-over.

"Whoa! A four-star rarity?! That name's a mouthful, though."

Name: Crafting Skill Incubator with a Fire Attribute

Rarity: 4 / Quality: 5★

Effect: An incubator that grants a +4 initial stat boost at random to the monster that hatches from it. Also grants a random crafting skill to its initial skill set, as well as a fire attribute skill and fire resistance.

The incubator's effects were truly impressive. Its initial stat boost had increased from +3 to +4, perhaps owing to its five-star quality. Plus, the skills it granted were ridiculous. If what it said was true, my monster would gain a crafting skill, fire attribute skill, and fire resistance to boot. That being said, the original incubator had cost me 20,000 G and the crystal 30,000 G. Taking the

fact that iron ingots were also pretty valuable into account, I had hoped the result would be this impressive. I was also ecstatic that the crafting skill bonus had remained. Investing all those precious materials had been absolutely worth it.

"Hey, Sawyer. It doesn't feel right to not pay you for this astounding piece of work."

"Don't mention it. I should be the one thanking you. I gained a ton of XP from working with these high-quality ingredients. My Alchemy level went up two levels while I was making this! It knocked my socks off."

That *was* impressive. There was no way I could turn him down now.

"Well, if you insist, I gladly accept."

"It's all yours. Thanks for giving me a fun project to work on."

I couldn't wait to return to my barn and set up the incubator. *Sorry to keep you waiting, little eggie!* I was practically bursting with excitement as I ran all the way back to our farm.

"I'm back! *And* I got us an incubator!" I announced breathlessly.

"Mm-mm!"

"...♪"

"Hey, quit pulling!"

Olto and Sakura seemed unusually hyper. Did they know that this incubator was for their egg? I wondered as they grabbed onto both of my hands and jumped up and down.

"Mwa ha ha. Time for this baby's grand reveal."

After calming Olto and Sakura down and letting go of their hands, I took out the incubator Sawyer had made for me from my inventory.

"Mm!"

"...!"

"What do you think? Pretty dope, isn't it?"

The Crafting Skill Incubator with a Fire Attribute—*seriously, what a mouthful!*—was round and red in color and looked like something out of a sci-fi movie, resembling some kind of oxygen capsule. It made the egg I placed inside look like nothing short of an alien offspring.

“Hmm, wonder what kind of monster will hatch...?”

As I stared at the egg, Sakura and Olto came closer and began stroking it lovingly. Evidently, they knew it belonged to them.

“Stay here as long as you like, ’kay?”

“Mmm.”

“...♪”

With that, I left the two proud parents to fawn over their egg and stepped outside the barn.

“Now then, what next?”

Should I experiment again? Browsing my inventory, I found another luminous moss in the mix. This wasn’t the one I’d gathered from our expedition, but one that had been harvested on our farm. Apparently, it had grown just fine in the hole Olto had dug for me. To my disappointment, however, I found no white red panther caps.

“Guess it ain’t that easy.”

Whatever, I had all the time in the world. At least now I knew that I’d have no trouble obtaining luminous moss.

“Should I try concocting something with it?”

Not that I expected much, given that luminous moss was a weed. While pondering my next move in front of the barn, I thought I heard someone call out to me.

“Huh? Did you call me?”

“Chirp?”

“Growl?”

Bear Bear and Rick looked at me questioningly. If it wasn’t them, then who

could it be?

"...ey. Hey!"

The voice seemed to be coming from outside our farm. I turned my gaze towards the source and noticed someone waving at me.

"Uh, did you want something?" I asked them.

"As a matter of fact, I do. You're the owner of this farm, aren't ya?" they replied.

"I am, yes."

"The name's Tagosack. Been wantin' to greet ya, neighbor."

"Neighbor?"

"Yep. That's my farm," Tagosack replied, pointing at the plot of land closest to our farm. It was the plot with the mysterious crops that had seemingly appeared out of nowhere. So *this* was my neighbor.

"Um, *Miss* Tagosack?" I faltered. There was something I was dying to confirm before we got any further.

"Just call me Tagosack. Don't gotta be so formal!"

"Uh, you *are* a woman, right?"

That's right. From what I could see, Tagosack was most definitely a woman. She was much taller than me—at least 170 centimeters. I took a step towards her and found myself having to crane my neck to look her in the eye. She had long, straight, black hair and a pretty face, and wore some type of jumpsuit. Between her looks and her gruff way of speaking she put me in mind of a biker chick.



Although she talked like a dude, she looked like a woman. Which was it? Was she secretly a guy who had tweaked his appearance to look more feminine? If that was the case, I wasn't sure if I wanted to be friends...

"Yep, obviously. Oh, did the name throw ya off? Don't sweat the small stuff, dude. This is just for fun!"

Phew. So she *was* a woman after all. I wasn't sure if she was talking like this as some kind of rolep-lay or if it was just her usual way of speaking, but judging from the way the words rolled off her tongue, it was likely the latter. It didn't really bother me, though, so I set the question aside

"Whoops, where are my manners? I'm Yuto, by the way."

Since we weren't friends in-game, we raised our hands at each other in lieu of a handshake.

"Pleased to meet ya. Farmers are still a rare breed, so I'm glad to get to know someone new."

"Guess there aren't many of us, huh?"

"Nope. Even fewer who manage to maintain a farm of this size."

"In my case, I'm not actually a Farmer, though."

I was still a Tamer, even if I *had* raised my rank at the Farming Guild first. That was a title I wasn't willing to relinquish.

"Figured. You're Silver-Haired, aren't ya?"

"Ugh."

Hearing my notorious moniker, I couldn't help making a face. Tagosack immediately apologized, looking flustered.

"Oops, my bad. Should I not have mentioned that?"

"...How did you find out?"

"It's actually a well-known fact among Farmers that this farm belongs to ya. Everyone's dyin' to know how ya do it despite not actually being a Farmer."

I supposed it made sense that people who were Farmers by trade would be

interested in my farm. Alyssa did mention that Arboriculture was a pretty rare skill, and no doubt all these trees made my farm stick out a mile. Anyone who had even a shred of information about me would likely be able to guess who owned this place by taking one look at Olto.

"Since ya happened to be around, I thought I'd say hi and ask ya a few questions. Like how ya grow trees, for example."

"I don't mind, but I doubt you'll be able to copy me."

After all, she'd have to start with searching for and taming a gnome, and I hadn't heard of anybody encountering one just yet. She'd have much better luck raising her own Farming skill instead of trying to level up a gnome until it learned Arboriculture.

"Something to do with your gnome?"

"You got it."

"Well, I didn't wanna rule out other possibilities, y'know? One of the theories circulating online was that ya hired an NPC with Arboriculture."

"You can hire NPCs?"

"Sure can, once your guild rank reaches 6."

I had only just raised my rank to 5 recently. Tagosack's remark piqued my interest, though—I hadn't known hiring NPCs was an option. Having an NPC with Arboriculture help out on the farm did seem like it would make work easier. Unfortunately, it turned out that the NPCs for hire weren't the specialists I imagined them to be.

"That being said, the NPCs ya can hire at the beginnin' only have the bare minimum skills, so they aren't very useful," Tagosack added.

"Then why'd you think I had an NPC working for me?"

"C'mon, you're *the* Silver-Haired. How could I be so sure ya hadn't hired a high-level NPC through some kind of secret method? Course I don't buy that theory anymore after observin' this place for the past few days."

"What sort of person do you think I am, anyway?"

“Good question. Someone who enjoys playing differently than others and makes lotsa interestin’ discoveries along the way, I guess?”

Oh? That wasn’t too bad. I’d expected something much worse, like being considered a weirdo for farming despite being a Tamer. Upon voicing my thoughts, Tagosack burst out laughing.

“D’ah ha ha ha! Quit bein’ paranoid. Most Farmers have positive opinions of ya, mate.”

“Huh? They do?”

“Yep! Like, *That’s Silver-Haired for ya!* and, *Silver-Haired’s the bomb.*”

That was encouraging. I supposed Farmers were just a special lot, though. They probably felt a sense of camaraderie towards me as someone in the same line of business as them.

“That reminds me. Can I ask ya one more thing?” Tagosack asked.

“Go ahead,” I replied.

“About that tree over there. Never seen it before. Is it a special type of tree?”

I followed Tagosack’s gaze to see her pointing at my lakeside tree. I almost forgot that you couldn’t use your Appraisal skill on other people’s home bases. Now that she mentioned it, it was tricky to tell what kind of tree it was without being able to assess it.

“That’s a lakeside tree.”

“What? Lakeside as in the Lakeside Sequoia?”

Tagosack’s reaction was understandable. After all, the lakeside tree on my farm looked totally different from the Lakeside Sequoia in the East District.

“Yup. I happened to obtain a Lakeside Sequoia fruit in an event a while back. Olto propagated it for me, so I’ve been growing it ever since.”

“Th-That’s amazing, dude. Ya manage to harvest anything from it?”

“No, not yet.”

“Gotcha. How much do you reckon it’ll grow, by the way?” Tagosack wondered out loud, comparing the lakeside tree with the Lakeside Sequoia in

the distance. We were apparently thinking the same thing.

"...It won't grow *that* big, will it?" I asked her worriedly, hoping against hope that, as a professional Farmer, she might have some sort of answer. Unfortunately, she was none the wiser.

"Who knows? I sure don't. Anyway, you should continue takin' good care of it and let me know how things turn out."

"Figured as much."

Please don't grow too big, I prayed.

"Guess that means I gotta raise my Farming skill if I wanna obtain Arboriculture, huh?"

"Good luck."

"Thanks for the valuable info, Yuto. Here, take this. Consider it payment for sharing the deets with me."

"Seedlings? Hey, this is a mana plant seedling! And this one's an antidote plant! You sure about this?"

I was genuinely ecstatic to receive the mana plant, as it was one of the ingredients for mana potions, one that I'd been dying to get my hands on. Antidote plants were likewise unobtainable in Zone One.

"Yep. Those are both crops I grow on a regular basis. Will they do? I don't think ya have them yet, d'ya?"

"I'm more than happy to have these! Was that information really worth it, though?"

"Consider them a sign of our new friendship. Besides, I got to see your sick farm too."

Never in a million years did I expect a Farmer like Tagosack to show interest in my farm...

"My farm's decent, then?"

"*Decent?* That's an understatement, especially for someone who's not even a real Farmer. It's freakin' impressive, man."

Hearing that made me feel a bit guilty, though. None of this was due to my own efforts.

“My gnome—his name’s Olto, by the way—had Arboriculture from the start, thanks to his initial bonus. It lets him grow green peaches and walnuts too. It’s all him, not me.”

That’s why I don’t deserve that kind of praise, I explained to her. To my surprise, Tagosack looked a bit miffed.

“Bull. Sure, ya have your gnome to thank for. But guess what? *You’re* the one who chose how to use his powers.”

“Maybe, but...”

“It probably took ya a lot of courage to buy a farm despite not being a Farmer, amirite?”

“W-Well...”

“You’re the one who decided to plow the fields and plant all these trees. The reason you’re the person ya are today is because of your own efforts. Ya may have gotten titles and made new discoveries along the way, but that ain’t all sheer dumb luck. It’s because ya took the road less traveled, and that’s somethin’ to be proud of.”

She seemed to know a lot about me. I guessed it was only fair since my name had popped up a few times in the forums. She also appeared to be aware that I had more than one title. I had to say, though, encouragement from an older sister-type character like Tagosack carried a lot of weight. I was starting to feel a little more confident about myself. Although I had failed to get a head start, and had gotten off on the wrong foot, I was now content with the way things had turned out. I was doing pretty well as a Farmer: perhaps not the best out there, but certainly one-of-a-kind. My goal was to become a top Tamer who could also farm! Even though I was sure my playstyle was pretty uniquely half-assed.

“Aw, shucks. Thanks. I feel a bit more confident now.”

“Don’t mention it. Hold yer head high, dude. Ya may not be number one, but you’re seriously killin’ it! This is a game, after all. That’s what’s most important, yeah?”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“Heh heh. That kinda cheesy huh?”

“Actually, it was pretty cool.”

“C’mon, surely there are other ways of praisin’ a gal.”

“Can’t really think of a better way to say it...”

The word gorgeous did cross my mind for a split second, but I had a feeling that would piss her off, not to mention it could be interpreted as sexual harassment. Tagosack seemed happy to be called cool, though.

“Ha ha, ya got that right!” she guffawed, trying to slap me on the back and being promptly repealed by the harassment block. Once her laughter had subsided, I received a friend request from her.

“Huh? Did you send me your friend code?”

“You don’t mind, do ya? We can exchange interestin’ tidbits of information if anythin’ comes up.”

“Thanks, that’d be great.”

Tagosack was a far more experienced Farmer than I was and most likely more knowledgeable in every other area except trees. I now had an excellent companion to turn to for advice. She was a good person, and if she hadn’t sent me a friend request first, I would have proposed it either way.

“See ya!” she waved.

“See you around. Thanks for the mana plant!” I waved back.

After her dashing figure retreated into the distance, as I watched Olto plant the mana plant seedling, an idea occurred to me. I’d already given him his juice for the day, but what if I gave him another glass? I hadn’t read anything about not feeding your tamed monsters more than once, only that they had to be fed at least once a day. If I fed him multiple times, say, once every hour, would he continue working in a superpowered state? This was something I had to put to the test.

“Here, Olto. You can drink this.”

“Mm?”

“Drink it, bud. Down the hatch.”

“Mm-mm!”

At my urging, Olto happily downed his juice in one go. My hunch was correct—I *could* feed him as many times as I wanted to.

“Now *that’s* news!”

As I rejoiced in my discovery, I felt a set of eyes on me. I whirled around to find Bear Bear and Rick staring at me from the shadows. Seeing them peek out from behind a tree painted a picture of furry friends coming to play from the forest. If not for the reproachful look in their eyes it would have been pretty darn adorable.

“Growl.”

“Chirp.”

“H-Hey, don’t look at me like that. I-I haven’t forgotten you, you know. Your food’s right here.”

Bear Bear and Rick came running immediately as I pulled out their food from my inventory in a hurry.

“Growl!”

“Chirp chirp!”

Phew, that was close. I totally *had* forgotten about them.

“Mm-mm-mmm!”

“Wh-What’s wrong, Olto?”

What now? Was he upset about something? Olto stood there with downcast eyes, clenching his fists and groaning. His body was glowing slightly.

“A-Are you okay, buddy?”

Was it okay to touch him? What was I supposed to do here?!

“Mm-mm... Mm!”

“Whoa! What is it?!”

Olto had suddenly raised his right arm towards the sky. That was close! I had just narrowly avoided receiving an uppercut to my face.

“Mm-mm!” he muttered as his right palm continued to glow more intensely. Light began concentrating into a beam on his outstretched palm.

“I-Is he seriously gonna shoot something?!”

Or could it be that he was about to summon a legendary sword? As I stood rooted to the spot, panicking, a particularly intense beam of light shot forth from Olto’s hand.

“Mm-mm.”

“Y-You okay, Olto?” I called out to him tentatively.

“Mm!”

I didn’t notice any notable changes in appearance. He didn’t seem particularly tired either, although he pretended to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

“Mm!”

Sensing my puzzlement, Olto stuck out his right hand towards me and slowly opened his fist to reveal a beautiful stone in his palm. It was a white, translucent gem that resembled the beam of light that had just radiated from his hand, crystallized.

“Mm.”

“For me?”

“Mmm.”

The gem appeared to be a gift.

Name: Tamed Monster’s Heart (Olto)

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 10★

Effect: A tamed monster’s heart in crystallized form. Can’t be sold or given away.

What on earth was this? I'd never heard of such an item before. The fact that it had a ten-star rating was also mighty impressive. I couldn't sell or give it away, which meant I was to use it myself. There was no doubting this was a pretty amazing item.

"Can I use it for something, or is it some kind of collectible? Let's check my recipes and find out."

Sure enough, I discovered a new Alchemy recipe that required a tamed monster's heart.

"Looks like I'll need a tamed monster's heart plus a gem..."

Since this item couldn't be given away, I couldn't rely on Sawyer to make this recipe for me. I'd have to take matters into my own hands this time.

"Do I have any gems, though?"

The first thing that came to mind was attribute crystals, which weren't considered gems, but part of the magicite category. It looked like I had no choice but to buy one somewhere...

"No, hang on. Let's sort through the items in my inventory first."

I did a quick search in my inventory by selecting the category Gems, and lo and behold, I found exactly one item that matched the criteria.

Name: Marble

Rarity: 2 / Quality: 1★

Effect: Ingredient. For decorative purposes.

The marble turned out to be an item drop from a Lesser Ghost, along with an ingredient called soul powder, whose purpose remained unknown for now.

"All right, I've got both ingredients now. Just gotta put them together... Hm?"

For some reason, even though I had all the necessary ingredients, the *????* column didn't turn white, nor could I select it in Auto Mode. Could I not make this recipe with my beginner's Alchemy kit then? No, that couldn't be it.

Although my equipment's level hadn't been high enough when I attempted to make the incubator, the item itself had been indicated in white letters, which showed that it was possible to make. There had to be some other requirement that I hadn't unlocked yet. Alyssa's stall was closed today, though...

"Hmm, who else can I ask?"

I listed several possibilities off the top of my head: Sawyer, Tagosack, Akari, other Tamers, and the Magical Beasts Guild. I decided to ask at the guild first, then log out and scour the forums if that didn't yield any results. Having settled my course of action, I headed to the Magical Beasts Guild, where Barbara greeted me again with a cheerful smile.

"Hi there," I greeted her.

"Welcome. What brings you here today?" she replied.

"I'd like you to take a look at this."

"Why, that's a tamed monster's heart."

As I suspected, Barbara seemed to know what it was.

"I'd like to know more about this item. Care to enlighten me?"

"Very well. Before that, though, how about completing this quest?"

At Barbara's suggestion, a quest window popped up, accompanied by the sound of a notification bell.

Special Quest

Requirement: Show Barbara a Tamed Monster's Heart.

Reward: 2,000 G, one randomly selected gem.

Time Limit: None

"Didn't know there was a quest like this. Of course, I'll accept."

"Excellent. Here's your reward for completing the quest."

As I'd already shown Barbara my tamed monster's heart, the quest was

completed the moment I accepted it.

"*You have received 2,000 G and a Green Jade.*"

Name: Green Jade

Rarity: 4 / Quality: 5★

Effect: Ingredient. For decorative purposes.

Four stars, eh? That was pretty dang good! This was the perfect item to pair with Olto's tamed monster's heart.

"So, how exactly do I use this tamed monster's heart?"

"Sorry. I can't tell you the details."

Not Barbara withholding information after coming this far! Oh well, it did seem like a pretty important item. I bet it contained some sort of valuable secret.

"However, I will give you a hint," she continued.

Heck yeah! You're the best, Barbara!

"Try raising your Magical Beasts Guild rank to 7."

"...Is that it?"

"Yes."

Hmm, it didn't seem like she was going to divulge any further details. She did make it very clear to raise my guild rank, however, so I supposed I might as well put in the effort. In order to raise my rank, I'd have to complete as many quests as possible, but unfortunately, there weren't many I could fulfill at the moment. All things considered, it was probably best to take on persistent quests. While persistent quests only gave you one contribution point, they could be attempted as many times as you like. Once completed, regular quests either disappeared or granted you zero contribution points from the next time onwards, but persistent quests granted you contribution points each time. The persistent quest for Tamers entailed taming specific monsters and delivering

them to the guild.

There was some debate in the forums as to whether attempting this quest too many times came with any penalties, especially since it involved selling your tamed monsters. That was a valid concern. If you thought about it, selling the monsters you tamed seemed like a pretty crappy thing to do. People were concerned that doing so would be thought of as mistreating tamed monsters or affect their favorability score with their own monsters. However, I didn't think there were any downsides to this quest. To begin with, the persistent quests for other jobs rarely had any disadvantages, as they mostly involved gathering specific items. If the quest for Tamers alone came with a critical downside, the game balance would be seriously skewed.

Additionally, in order to raise your Tame skill level, you obviously had to use the skill over and over again, which resulted in many Tamers complaining about having too many tamed monsters. That could cause issues down the road, as you could potentially have to give up taming monsters you actually wanted due to not having enough slots. As harsh as it may sound, you could say that selling unnecessary monsters at the guild was the basic MO for Tamers. If your favorability score went down every time you sold a monster, no one would be able to level up their Tame skill. Some players did attempt leveling up by shooting their shot at untameable bosses, although that was pretty uncommon. At the very least, I could never do that. Also, taming would always result in failure when your tameable slots were full. While you could continue to use Tame as long as your MP lasted, the overall XP you would receive would be reduced by half.

"Considering my Tame skill level's still pretty low, I might as well grind this one."

With a single quest, I could get contribution points, XP for my Tame skill, and money from selling monsters. It was like killing three birds with one stone. The only downside was that the reward was pretty small, which would most likely be a turnoff for ordinary players. Not me, though—I had my farm, after all.

"Let's see, today's target is...Gray Squirrels! Today's my lucky day!"

In the beginning, they had been incredibly formidable foes, but not anymore.

“All right! Time to go squirrel hunting!”

Let’s tame lots of squirrels and raise that guild rank, baby! No time like the present.

After thanking Barbara for her time, I rushed out of the Magical Beasts Guild back to our farm, where I quickly confirmed my companions’ availability.

“Guys! We’re going to the Western Forest. Are you free now?”

Here, my tamed monsters’ work took precedence over my own plans. If they still had some farming to do, it was more important to get that out of the way first.

“Mm!” Olto flexed his biceps, showing that he was pumped and ready to go.

“Olto’s free. How about the rest of you?”

“...!”

“Chirp!”

“Growl!”

Good, everyone was available.

“To the Western Forest!”

“Mm-mm!”

As usual, Olto took the lead, perhaps feeling he should as the OG of the bunch.

“Funny, even though you’re the weakest.”

“Mm?”

“I said, do your best, bud.”

“Mm-mm!”

With Olto leading the way, we presently arrived at the entrance of the Western Forest. While Gray Squirrels could be found in the Southern Forest as well, there you were also more likely to encounter Wild Dogs and Snakes from the get-go. On the other hand, the area near the entrance of the Western Forest was home to mostly Fanged Rats and Gray Squirrels, with only the

occasional Wild Dog in the mix.

“Grinding here is way more efficient.”

The items here might have been of lower quality than those of the Southern Forest, but no matter. Our foremost priority was Gray Squirrels.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are, little squirrels.”

“Chirp!”

“Not you, Rick.”

“Chirp?”

You’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you, Rick? I sighed inwardly. Unfortunately, it was a well-known fact that the more you sought something in a game, the less likely you were to get it. At the moment, our last four battles had been with Fanged Rats, with not a single squirrel in sight. Actually, we *had* encountered one at the very beginning, but I’d failed to Hold Back and accidentally defeated it.

“Hmm... Hey, there’s one! Finally! Everyone, get ready to attack!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Don’t kill it, okay?!”

“Growl growl!”

Bear Bear charged at the Gray Squirrel that appeared before us like some kind of bloodthirsty beast.

“Growl...?”

Bear Bear blinked as the Gray Squirrel’s tiny body disintegrated, their first blow having demolished its life meter.

“Way to go, buddy...”

I knew that Bear Bear hadn’t done it on purpose, but seriously, they could’ve at least held back from delivering a critical hit.

“G-Growl...”

“What’s done is done. ...Time to move on.”

“Growl.”

However, our latter attempts were just as unfruitful. While I succeeded in reducing a Gray Squirrel’s HP with my Hold Back attack, it escaped before I could actually tame it.

“Y-Yikes. I’ve already used up half of my MP, and I haven’t tamed a single squirrel yet.”

I had at least managed to increase my Tame skill by three levels, but it would be really nice to tame something sooner than later.

Ding-dong.

“Ah, must be the daily report.”

I had been so focused on hunting squirrels that I’d lost track of time completely. I hadn’t realized it was already noon.

“The gate’s nearby. Let’s return to town for a bit.”

“Mm-mm.”

There was a wide-open space with benches in front of the gate connecting the town and playing field. We chose one as our resting spot, where I fed my monsters while I scanned today’s report. Obviously, the data that most concerned me was the Titles section.

“Cool. Looks like there are way more titleholders now.”

There were now fifty-eight players with one title. I was still the only player with more than two, though. Now people were bound to find out that I had four titles. There were a few more players who had obtained Plant Knowledge, making us a total of seven. Two of them were Ashihana and Sawyer, of course, bringing us to more than twice as many people as yesterday.

“Let’s check the Tamer-related stats.”

There were more than ten players whose max tameable slots exceeded ten. That was impressive, as it meant their Command and Monster Taming abilities were over level 20 by now. Although I was practically a part-time Farmer at this point, I still felt a twinge of frustration at being so far behind.

“Got some catching up to do.”

As the saying goes, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Raising my guild rank like I was doing right now was the closest shortcut to becoming a top Tamer.

“Aight, let’s go, guys!”

“Growl!”

“Go easy on the attacking, okay, Bear Bear?”

“Growl?”

Our afternoon was spent roaming around the entrance of the Western Forest in search of Gray Squirrels. Ideally, I would have liked to venture deeper inside the forest where monsters spawned at a higher rate, but that would have been less efficient. Since I only had one tameable slot left, I had to return to town as soon as I’d tamed a squirrel and sell it before I could tame another one. To deliver three squirrels to the guild, I’d have to make three trips in total. All things considered, it’d be way too much of a hassle if I went all the way inside the forest. Our luck finally turned around as we ran into not one, but three Gray Squirrels.

“Finally, about time you showed up! Get ’em, Rick, Bear Bear! Sakura, restrain those bad boys!”

I kept an eye on them, and after a while, Sakura succeeded at catching one of the squirrels with her whip. Given their small frame and swift movements, Gray Squirrels were notoriously hard to catch, but not this time.

“All right, make sure it doesn’t get away, Sakura! Hold Back! Aqua Ball!”

“Chirp!”

“Heh heh heh, I’ve got you now.”

“Ch-Chirp...”

“No use looking at me with those puppy-dog eyes! Tame!”

No matter how I worded it, I sounded like a bad guy. To an outsider, I was sure it looked as though we were ganging up on a poor, terrified little squirrel.

“...No point thinking about that. Anyway, Tame! Tame! *Tame!*”

Obtaining this squirrel was our top priority. Everything else was of secondary importance.

“Tame— All right, I did it!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Chirp!”

The Gray Squirrel I just caught was already frolicking about with Rick, a sure sign that I had managed to tame it. As with Bear Bear, I had to name it since it didn’t have a name yet, but... Seeing that I was going to give it away anyway, I didn’t see the need for a well-thought-out name.

“Hmm... Let’s go with Skippy, then.”

Skippy was already at level 4 from the start, the same as Rick had been when I first tamed him. The difference between Skippy, a regular Gray Squirrel, and Rick, a unique specimen, was apparent by comparing both of their stats side by side.

Name: Skippy *Race: Gray Squirrel* Base Level: Lv. 4

Master: Yuto

HP: 15/15 *MP: 99*

Strength: 3 *Endurance: 5* Agility: 12

Dexterity: 5 *Intelligence: 4* Sanity: 4

Skills: Vigilance, Collect, Jump, Climb, Cheek Pouch, Incisor Attack

Equipment: None

Name: Rick *Race: Gray Squirrel* Base Level: Lv. 4

Master: Yuto

HP: 18/18 *MP: 1010*

Strength: 4 *Endurance: 6* Agility: 14

Dexterity: 6 *Intelligence: 5* Sanity: 6

Skills: Vigilance, Collect, Pruning, Jump, Climb, Cheek Pouch, Incisor Attack

Equipment: None

As illustrated, unique specimens were clearly more powerful. The total of Rick's initial stats was eight points higher than that of Skippy's, as were his HP and MP. He also had Pruning, a skill Skippy didn't possess.

"You're actually more impressive than I thought, Rick."

"Chirp chirp."

He looked at me smugly, and rightly so. I now knew for sure not to take unique specimens for granted. With my mission accomplished, it was time to return to the Magical Beasts Guild.

"Welcome!" The receptionist at the guild greeted me.

"I'm here to report my progress on a quest," I replied.

"Understood. I assume you're referring to the Gray Squirrel quest, correct? Would you like to deliver these two squirrels?"

"Two?"

Whoops. The receptionist thought I was giving away Rick as well.

"Just this one, please."

Definitely no second thoughts there! After all, Rick was a rare, unique specimen! Seriously, I wouldn't give him away for all the world—unless I was *truly* desperate.

"Very well. I'll be taking just the one, then. That's two more to go."

Well, that was easy enough. When I was younger, there had been a monster-hunting game that guilt-tripped you whenever you tried to dismiss your cat companion, and as a result, I'd been unable to let go of a single one. Fortunately, Skippy neither gazed into my eyes nor shed a tear as I walked

away. Thank goodness the monsters in this game weren't raring to turn on the waterworks. If a single tear had glistened in Skippy's eyes, I might not have been able to let go of them. Feeling a pang of guilt, I glanced at my companions to gauge their reactions, but they didn't seem any different. As I had speculated, selling my tamed monsters didn't negatively affect my favorability score.

"Seeing as there are no problems, let's go catch squirrel number two, shall we?"

The question was, where to next...? Battling was easier in the Western Forest, but it didn't exactly give you the best bang for your buck. The Southern Forest, by contrast, offered a wider variety of items and more enemy spawns. The stakes were higher, but there would most likely be Gray Squirrels in the mix too.

"I'll have to work on other quests too if I want those contribution points."

The Southern Forest it was. There, I could fulfill item-gathering quests along the way. I set off for the Southern Forest with my companions in tow, checking my stats as we strolled through town. My Tame level had already increased to level 5, which was a huge improvement. I was basically doing the equivalent of texting while walking, but whenever I was about to collide with another player, Sakura and Olto pushed and pulled me out of the way.

"Mm-mm!"

"...!"

"Whoa. Thanks, you two."

"Mm-mm!"

Obviously, I didn't tell Olto that I at some points purposely pretended to walk into a wall simply because I found his pushing and tugging adorable. While we walked down the streets leading to the Southern Gate, I made a valuable discovery.

"Holy...!"

"Mm?"

"Chirp?"

“...!”

“Growl?”

My companions came to a halt and looked up at me curiously, shocked by my sudden outburst.

“Sorry. Don’t mind me.”

“Mm?”

“Just realized something important, that’s all.”

I patted Olto on the head reassuringly and double-checked my status.

Tamed Monsters (4/6): Gnome, Tree Nymph, Gray Squirrel, Honey Bear

That’s right. My Command ability had leveled up to 10 yesterday, meaning I could now tame up to six monsters! While I could only keep five by my side, I could still tame one extra, even if my party was full. Tamed monsters that didn’t fit in your party were automatically sent to a facility known as the Ranch. Monsters at the Ranch could be swapped out anytime at the Magical Beasts Guild, which meant I didn’t have to return to the guild each time I tamed another Gray Squirrel.

“Totally didn’t realize that.”

Better sooner rather than later, though. If I had found this out later, I would have ended up wasting a lot of time.

Two hours later...

“All right! Another one in the bag!”

“Chirp.”

Though their slower spawn rates were making things take longer than expected, I had now managed to tame the third squirrel I needed. This time, the squirrel I tamed started sparkling before fading into thin air, a sign that it had

been sent to the Ranch.

"*Please name your tamed monster.*"

"Hmm, what should I name it?"

I had named the first one Skippy and the next one Slappy, but I was running out of ideas. It didn't make sense to give them fancy names when they were fated to be sold.

"Let's go with Squirrel One."

The one after that could be Squirrel Two. This way, I wouldn't run out of ideas for names. It reminded me of how I used to name some of my Mokémon HM and Surf as a kid.

"Looks like my Water Magic has reached level 10 too, which means I get a new move."

At the moment, I could use two types of water magic: Aqua Ball and Aqua Lung. Aqua Lung was a skill that enabled me to breathe underwater. I had tried it out once, but really had hardly any opportunities to use it. The skill I had just learned was called Aqua Shield, which increased my defenses and water-damage resistance for a certain amount of time.

"All right, let's return to the guild so we can complete this quest."

Unfortunately, as was usually the case, the worse I wanted something, the less the game rewarded me. In the end, I only managed to fulfill one quest that day. It was going to take me forever to raise my rank at this rate.

"Gotta keep grinding!"

The following day, I logged in at sunrise again in order to get a head start on the persistent quest. That being said, the details of the persistent quest varied each day. Until I visited the guild, I would have no idea which monster I was supposed to catch.

"Hope it's one of the easier targets."

It'd be great if Fanged Rats were on the list today. I really hoped it wasn't Wild Dogs, or I'd have a hard time. As much as I wanted to rush to the Magical Beasts Guild to find out today's wanted list, I needed to take care of my daily

chores first.

“I’ll leave the farm to the monster crew. Need to get my concocting in.”

As I made my way to my farm thinking of today’s schedule, I noticed a large crowd of players in front of it.

“What the? What’s with all these people?”

The sight reminded me of the incident with Mirei.

“Not again...?”

I immediately returned the way I came from and ducked behind a house, taking care not to be noticed as I observed the crowd from the shadows.

“They seem pretty calm.”

At the very least, they didn’t appear hostile. While I did sense a sort of buzz in the air, most players seemed to be chatting amongst themselves amicably. On top of that, the crowd appeared almost orderly, as if they were lining up for something. The scene reminded me of people queuing outside a shop to get their hands on the latest smartphone. That ruled out the possibility of a riot.

“Where’s the front of the queue...?”

Upon closer observation, I discovered that they were queuing in front of my farm stand. The people at the very front had even brought their own chairs. They weren’t those small foldable stools either, but the kind of armchairs you’d put in your living room—a power move made possible by their inventories. I gingerly approached the line.

“Whoa!”

The crowd stirred briefly before collectively settling their gaze on me. I couldn’t help tensing up despite knowing they weren’t my enemies.

“Finally, you’ve come to restock...”

“I want herbal tea...”

“Today’s the day I get to try...”

If I were to believe what I’d just heard, these people were queuing up to buy herbal tea. I ran inside my farm before someone had the chance to talk to me.

“Mm.”

“Hey, Olto. Morning.”

“Mm-mm.”

I know, I should ask my companions. Perhaps they could shed light on the situation, even if they couldn’t talk.

“Hey, do you remember how long those people have been queuing there?”

“Mm?”

“Chirp?”

“Growl?”

My three tamed monsters all cocked their heads to the side at the same angle in response to my question. As adorable as that was, they didn’t seem to remember. I could almost see a question mark floating above their heads. Fortunately, Sakura, ever the big sis, seemed to remember. She put up all five fingers on her right hand and pointed at the crowd with her left.

“Five fingers... You mean to say they’ve been here for *five hours*?”

“...♪”

No way. Enthusiastic much? Even after seeing me, the crowd remained perfectly calm and simply moved to the side of the road, still lined neatly in a row. That was Japanese people for you. I didn’t mean to judge or anything, but was the tea really *that* good? As much as I enjoyed drinking coffee and herbal tea over water in real life, to my knowledge, there were a good many people who weren’t fond of the taste of herbs. Sure, the in-game herbal tea tasted great, and I’d had a feeling that it would appeal to a wide audience, but I didn’t think it would be *this* popular. Regardless, there was currently a long line of people waiting for me to restock.

“...Better make some more herbal tea.”

The tea blends I made yesterday had sold out almost instantly, so I decided to set a limit of three per person today. I’d also have to increase my production if I wanted to meet the crowd’s demand.

“Potions can wait. First, we gotta sort out those tea leaves.”

I instructed my tamed monsters to prioritize harvesting more herbs while I got to work drying the ones that were already in my inventory, making use of Auto Mode to mass-produce tea leaves.

“We’ve been making nothing but herbs the past few days.”

Thanks to that, I had gotten incredibly efficient at drying tea leaves. I was now able to produce roughly a hundred bags in thirty minutes. As I headed to the stand armed with my fresh batch of tea leaves, I noticed even more people had joined the line. Alerted by my presence, the crowd turned to stare at me, urging me to hurry up. While their lack of complaining might make it seem like they were polite, being stared at wordlessly was equally intimidating. It was true that people’s gazes bore a lot of weight—I felt it with my entire being. I quickly restocked the farm stand and left as fast as I could. Behind me, I could sense the players already latching onto the bags of tea I had just stocked.

“Phew... That should do it.”

With that taken care of, I could finally move on to concocting medicine and potions. I had also managed to harvest the mana plant and antidote plant seedlings that I had received from Tagosack, which meant I should be able to concoct mana potions and antidotes now. There was one item I didn’t recognize among the crops in my inventory, though. Upon closer examination, it appeared to be called Bitter Grass.

“Don’t remember planting anything like this. Doesn’t seem to be a weed either.”

Name: Bitter Grass

Rarity: 2 / Quality: 1★

Effect: A crop and type of ingredient made from Selective Breeding. Extremely bitter.

“Cool, so *that’s* what the mysterious seed turned out to be!”

Being made from ultra-bitter weed water and spinach, which was equally bitter in foods, the crop was aptly named Bitter Grass. No doubt it was agonizingly bitter. To my surprise, however, I had a recipe that used this grass.

“Looks like that’s the only thing I can make with it right now.”

The recipe required just two ingredients: three bitter grass and water.

“Gotta say, though, with all these crops we have going on, our farm’s getting pretty cramped.”

Was downsizing my weed patch my only choice? That would mean fewer herbs for herbal tea, though. Seeing how well they sold, it seemed a shame to do that.

“Hmm...”

Just then, I heard a knock on my barn door. It looked like I had a visitor. Since they had managed to trespass on my home, they had to be one of my friends.

“Who is it?” I called out.

“Hey, Yuto! Mornin’!” a brisk woman’s voice replied from outside the barn.

“Hey, Tagosack.”

I stepped outside the barn to welcome her. Tagosack had also apparently been farming since morning, as her overalls were covered in dirt.

“Morning,” I greeted her.

“Mornin’. Business is boomin’, eh?”

“You can say that again.”

I glanced at my farm stand to see that the line had gotten even longer. At this rate, the tea would sell out before long, even with the three-per-person purchase limit.

“I actually wanted to ask ya a favor,” Tagosack started.

“A favor? Depends on what it is...”

“Well, actually...”

According to Tagosack, she frequently posted in the Farmers’ Megathread

and exchanged information there. It seemed I was a hot topic of discussion. Not that I minded, though, since apparently no one was bad-mouthing me. As for her “favor,” she wanted my permission to post about what I told her yesterday. Apparently, the whole reason she bought the farm next to mine was because her curiosity was piqued by the people in the thread wanting to learn about my farm.

“I know it was kinda dishonest of me, but I was hopin’ it’d serve as a conversation starter...”

She bought a farm just so she could talk to me? Jeez, girl, wasn’t that going a bit too far?

“I don’t really see why you’d need to ask for my permission for that, though.”

All I mentioned was that I didn’t have an NPC working for me and that Olto deserved all the credit. I didn’t see any harm in that story spreading. People could easily find out that I had a gnome, and that said gnome was a farmer-type monster, so that was hardly news. Information about the Lakeside Tree was also bound to spread eventually since I’d sold the details to Alyssa. However, that seemed to be beside the point.

“Just wanted to set things straight, especially now that I know you’re a much nicer dude than I thought. I don’t like feelin’ like I’m somehow deceivin’ ya... Didn’t wanna keep any secrets from ya now that we’re friends and all, y’know?”

And the upstanding citizen award goes to...Tagosack! I seriously felt like calling her Big Mama.

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

“Really? Thanks.”

“In return, I’d like some advice from you.”

“Sure thing. Ask away.”

Though she was fully clothed, I couldn’t help noticing her voluptuous breasts jiggle as she thumped her chest. *Damn it! Manly, badass,* and *extremely well-proportioned?! She has it all!*

“Somethin’ wrong?”

“N-Nothing. Don’t mind me. A-Anyway, I wanted to ask you about the farms in the town in Zone Three.”

“Ah, ya thinkin’ ’bout finally expandin’ your farm?”

“Considering it. I wanna know what the soil quality’s like and how much land costs over there.”

“No problem, I’ll tell ya everythin’ ya needa know.”

According to Tagosack, the quality of the soil was roughly the same as in the Town of Beginnings. However, the upper limit was also one rank higher, meaning you could grow up to six-star crops on your farm. The price of those plots was also 1,000 G more expensive than the ones in the Town of Beginnings, but it seemed worth it considering the higher level cap. Unfortunately, the transportation device that allowed you to teleport instantaneously between towns cost 2,000 G per person each time. This resulted in pretty hefty commuting expenses, made all the more so by the fact that you had to pay for your tamed monsters as well. Even if I only brought Olto and Sakura with me, it would still cost me 4,000 G per trip.

“I’m sure you’d be able to get your money’s worth in no time, though.”

“I suppose...”

It looked like I had no choice but to visit the town in Zone Three. As I was chatting with Tagosack, I noticed a crowd had formed in front of my farm stand. What happened to the neat queue...?

“Did somethin’ happen?” Tagosack wondered out loud.

“Not sure. I’ll go have a look,” I replied.

“I’ll go with ya.”

My questions were answered once I got close enough. The players who hadn’t been able to buy any herbal tea were picking a fight with the player right before them.

“Why’d you have to go and buy the whole stock?!”

“Think about the rest of us, you inconsiderate fool!”

“Hey! I was well within my limits!”

The player who’d managed to nab the last bag of herbal tea was being yelled at by the people behind them. *Give me a break.* Why’d things have to turn out like this? Tagosack tapped me on the shoulder as if sensing my frustration.

“I was curious ’bout the herbal tea too. Like where you were gettin’ them from, for example. I didn’t ask, though, since I thought it’d be kinda inconsiderate...”

“Huh? You didn’t know?”

“Nope.”

If a Farmer as skilled as Tagosack didn’t know how to make herbal tea, then there was probably far less of it on the market than I expected.

“You can bet things’ll be like this for a while due to the hype.” Tagosack sighed.

“No way.”

The first player to drink the tea had apparently hyped it up to the max in the forums, saying it was the best thing they’d ever had, that they felt sorry for people who hadn’t tried it yet, and that it could only be bought here. Players who came to buy the tea only to find it sold out began to create a fuss, attracting a bunch of others who wanted to see what all the hype was about. As a result, my herbal tea had achieved premium status in a matter of three days.

“That’s scary AF.”

“I think they’re takin’ it way too seriously too.”

“Chirp chirp.”

Rick climbed onto my shoulder as though sensing my exasperation. Although I knew that he simply liked to perch there, and wasn’t necessarily doing it to cheer me up, just the feeling of his fluffy tail was enough to soothe me.

“Aah, smells like sunshine.” I sighed contentedly, huffing his fur.

“Don’t mean to judge, but ya kinda sound like a pervert, dude.”

“...”

“Chirp?”

Wordlessly, I let go of Rick’s tail. Now that I thought about it, sniffing a squirrel’s tail wrapped around my neck, clearly enraptured, was definitely not a great look. As the two of us stood side by side, observing the commotion, the players who appeared to be the center of it seemed to notice me and stomped over. Since they couldn’t enter my home, however, they had no choice but to yell at me from outside of my farm.

“Hey! Sell us some of that so-called herbal tea!”

“You can make more, can’t you?!”

“Actually, why dontcha tell us how to make it?! Quit hogging it all to yourself!”

Ugh, here they come. This was awful. I hated idiots like these; I’d already experienced more than my fair share of them during the Mirei incident. Not only were they stubborn and abusive, but they tried to be intimidating by calling you all sorts of names. Although I didn’t want anything to do with them, I was afraid of what they might write about me in the forums.

“Um...”

However, someone stepped between the aggressive thugs and me before I could say anything.

“Yo! Chuckleheads! Whatcha shootin’ your mouths off for?! Y’all should be thankful this dude’s sellin’ the herbal tea leaves he found!” Tagosack said in my defense. *Marry me, Big Mama!*

“Y-You stay out of this! In that case, he oughta sell them cheaper! He clearly has other motives if he’s selling them at such a high price!”

“You should be thankful that he even decided to sell them at all.”

“What, you want me to thank him for selling them?! They’re just tea leaves! Quit getting all high and mighty!”

What a load of hooey coming from someone getting their panties in a knot over said tea leaves. Tagosack seemed to be thinking the same thing.

“If they’re *just* tea leaves, ya don’t need them, d’ya? They’re *just* tea leaves,

after all. Why dontcha give up and go home?”

“Don’t you get that I’m a customer?! The customer is king! Be grateful that I came all the way to buy these!”

Ah, so they were *those* kinds of people. Some people like to believe that the customer is king, but that’s a lie. Customers were just that—customers, not some kind of monarch or deity. While workers in the service industry were meant to provide the best hospitality they could within bounds, they weren’t expected to do more than that. The only places that still believed in the old “customer is king” mantra were shops run by corporate dropouts who had the wrong idea, or old-timey businesses operating on outdated logic. That, or the hotel industry, which depended on making customers happy. Of course, that phrase did slip out occasionally, but there were times when one needed to pay lip service. Still, some stupid Karens and Kens accepted this bullshit without question and liked to unironically spout garbage like, “I’m a customer! I’m a god!” *Please, a god? Don’t make me laugh.* If anything, they were more like pests—oops, I got a little carried away there. Old wounds... Right now, I had to deal with these complainers.

“Why not make some now if you’re out of stock? You have the ingredients, dontcha?!”

“These idiots don’t know the first thing about craftin’, do they?” Tagosack sighed, a look of pure disdain on her face.

“What did you say?! Better watch your mouth, crafter!”

“I’ll have you know that we’re frontliners!”

“Wow.”

I couldn’t help but sigh in admiration at that brilliantly stupid response.

“Why are *you* impressed?” Tagosack asked.

“It’s just that I’ve never seen someone act all high and mighty using such a clichéd, textbook phrase before. Didn’t know these people actually existed.”

“Wh-Why you! You makin’ fun of us?!”

Crap, me and my big mouth. I hadn’t intended to aggravate them. The next

instant, the players around me began shouting at the idiots, looking highly incensed. There were about thirty players altogether against five of the troublemakers. Most of them were of the opinion that crafters had every right to keep their findings to themselves and criticized the idiots for their arrogant behavior. Some even mentioned that they had never seen these people before on the frontlines. Wow, so they weren't even actual frontliners. *Ouch.*

"What if Silver-Haired stops selling herbal tea because of you guys, huh?!"

"Exactly! Don't you feel sorry for Silver-Haired?!"

Ah, so they *did* know who I was. Not that I was trying to keep my identity a secret anymore, though. Besides, I hadn't expected so many people to take my side. Touched by their kindness, I unwittingly found myself tearing up a little. Once again, Tagosack growled at the troublemakers, who were now quaking under the weight of the abuse from everyone else.

"Yo, you knuckleheads made fun of us crafter-types just now, didn't ya? Better not underestimate the power of our network."

Ooh, that sounded like a real threat. From what I heard later on, crafter-type players apparently had a blacklist circulating among them, which banned quite a few players from using player-run shops. There were currently thirty-odd names on this list, namely players who had tried to scam others, players who complained and were a frequent nuisance, and players who looked down on crafters and tried to extort items from them. Whether they were aware of this or not, the idiots backed away, seemingly intimidated by Tagosack's intensity.

"D-Damn it! We're never buying your herbal tea again, you hear me?!"

"Better not regret it! We'll let other players know that it tasted terrible!"

Actually, that would be a great relief. *Please do so and contribute to extinguishing these rumors.* I doubted they'd get very far, however, since the other players had already reported them to the devs. Even if their accounts didn't get deleted, they would most likely get suspended for a while.

"Mm-mm!"

"Growl!"

“Chirp!”

“...!”

My companions had snuck up behind me and were all blowing raspberries at the troublemakers running off into the distance. The gesture was very becoming on Olto, ever the cheeky little boy. The others looked adorable too. I did hope Sakura would refrain from such unladylike behavior in the future, though.

“Um, thanks, everyone.” I patted Sakura on the head as I bowed to the players who had defended me.

“Don’t mind idiots like them! We’re on your side, okay?”

“Keep doing you!”

I was pleasantly surprised to receive such support. Even the few people who hadn’t managed to buy tea leaves didn’t so much as grumble. What an understanding crowd.

“Hey, will you sell us herbal tea leaves again tomorrow?” someone asked.

“Huh? Yeah, that’s the plan.”

“Any plans on selling something else until then?”

“Um, what do you mean by that?” I replied, not understanding their question.

“Well, you’re all sold out of herbal tea, right? So right now, you don’t have anything in your farm stand. I was wondering if you planned on selling something else in the meantime while we wait for you to restock tomorrow.”

That was a revelation. Come to think of it, they were perfectly right. It seemed a waste to leave my shop empty for that long. What could I sell, though? It’d have to be something that I had a decent supply of, so that ruled out potions. What other items were related to my farm...? I flipped open the farm stand’s settings page while I rummaged around in my inventory for items I could sell. There, I found a mountain of wooden crafts—several different types of crockery—that I hadn’t known existed. When did Sakura make all these? There had to be at least fifty of them altogether.

“Plates, cups, coffee mugs...”

She had even made spoons, forks, and chopsticks. Since they were for practicing her Woodworking skills, the quality and rarity were low, but at least there were enough of them to go around. How was I able to sell wooden crafts at my farm stand, though? I thought I could only sell crops that were grown on my farm or items that were made from said crops. It would make sense if one of the ingredients was from my farm, but these plates were made by simply carving wood, right? The whole thing was a mystery to me.

“Well, might as well sell them if I can.”

“Restockin’ the shop?”

“Hey, Tagosack. I found some plates and stuff from Woodworking practice, so I figured maybe I could sell them.”

“Plates, eh...? What are they like?”

“Like these,” I said, handing her a coffee cup and spoon.

“Oho.”

Tagosack examined the items from different angles, sniffing them and rapping her knuckles on them.

“What do you think?”

“Not bad. Nice chic color too. They’ll likely appeal to all genders.”

I got Tagosack’s stamp of approval! All right, restock was a go. After seeing her off, I tweaked the farm stand’s settings so I could register my crockery. At 200 to 300 G apiece, they were relatively cheap. Not much I could do about it, though, seeing as they were made from kindling. Unlike herbal tea, which was made from a blend of tea leaves, there wasn’t much room for improvement. These, too, had a purchase limit of three per person, set at the highest price possible. If they sold, great. If not, I could rethink my strategy then. Before I knew it, a crowd had formed around the farm stand while I registered my wooden crockery. *What now?* I hoped they didn’t have the wrong idea.

“Uh, these aren’t tea leaves, by the way.”

“Oh, we know that. Please, continue.”

So they *were* aware of that.

“Don’t mind us.”

“Go ahead and restock the shop.”

The crowd motioned to me to hurry up and restock the stand, their movements almost comically choreographed. They had apparently stuck around instead of heading home, thinking that I might restock the shop with new items. As happy as I was that they were that invested in my stall, surely they had better things to do...? Once I’d restocked my shop and stepped away, the crowd immediately opened up their purchase screens.

“Hey, what’s on sale?”

“Wooden crafts. Plates and stuff.”

“I want a mug so I can drink my herbal tea.”

“Why’d you buy tea when you don’t even own a mug?!”

“’Cause I felt like it?”

“Wasn’t there a monster that dropped cups in Zone Two?”

“Wimpy Goblins drop broken cups.”

“They’re super dirty, though, aren’t they?”

“I know an NPC shop that sells teacups.”

“Really? I’ve been using a broken cup this whole time.”

It looked like they were satisfied with what I had to offer, so that was good.

“Now then, time to do a little research. Are you free, Sakura?”

“...?”

I decided to ask Sakura to show me her Woodworking process, as it might shed light on why I was able to sell her crafts at my stand. Sakura went to the toolbox in the barn and brought out some wood and a simple Woodworking kit. That I could understand, but what was that small bucket for? I assessed the item, and to my amazement, it turned out to be a bucket full of weed water. Was she going to use that too? Sakura dragged a chair to her side, then patted it, gazing up at me. *Sit,* she appeared to be saying.

“Thanks.”

“...♪”

Once I sat down, Sakura pulled up a chair next to me and perched on it before she set to work, humming as she carved the wood. The wood changed drastically in shape, right before my eyes. From the looks of it, she appeared to be making a teacup. Halfway through the process, she used tree magic to strengthen the wood, presumably to prevent the slim teacup handle from breaking. Five minutes later, a plain-looking, unvarnished wooden teacup was nestled between Sakura’s hands.

“Is that it?”

“...♪” Sakura shook her head to and fro. Apparently, she still had some work left. *What else is there to do, though?* I wondered, returning the cup to her. The next instant, she dunked the teacup in the bucket of weed water and left it there.

“Huh? S-Sakura? Are you sure this is okay?”

“...?”

“Wouldn’t your drink taste bitter if you soak the cup in weed water that long?”

“...♪”

Sakura just smiled in response. This was the ultra-bitter weed water we were talking about. Despite my worries, however, she nodded reassuringly. But why was she doing this?

After ten minutes had passed, Sakura removed the teacup from the bucket of weed water and began washing it with water from the well. Unfortunately, the teacup was stained brown from the weed water.

“I feel like any tea you drink from this would just taste like weeds.”

Sakura then carried the cup outside the barn. I wasn’t sure what she was doing until she placed it on a small table, also presumably made by her, to dry.

“Are you gonna let it dry in the sun?”

“...”

“Mind if I dry it with Alchemy?”

“...♪”

It didn’t seem to matter as long as it dried. I decided to speed up the process by applying an Alchemy art.

“Dry!”

“...♪”

That appeared to be it. Sakura held the finished teacup high above her head and smiled at me expectantly. *Don’t worry, I know what you’re driving at.*

“Good job.”

As I patted her on the head, Sakura smiled shyly, her cheeks flushing pink. Man, she was too adorable for words! I had to watch out for pedophiles. No way was I going to let anyone else have her!



I examined the teacup Sakura had made from various angles. Now that it was dry, the color seemed to have faded a bit, seeming more muted. I see, so the whole point of dunking it in weed water was to add some color. The brown teacup certainly looked more chic and expensive than its unvarnished counterpart.

“Let’s try it out.”

I poured some water into the newly made teacup and took a sip.

“...Hmm, doesn’t smell or taste any different.”

There appeared to be no problems using weed water as a dyeing agent. *Phew.* Glad to know I wouldn’t receive any complaints from the people who’d bought my crockery earlier. That was a relief. And who knew, if things went well, maybe we’d be able to draw or paint patterns on them. When I suggested the idea to Sakura, she clapped her hands and nodded in agreement. I was looking forward to seeing what kind of patterns she would come up with. That also solved the mystery of the farm stand. Because the weed water was made from weeds that we’d pulled up from the plot, the tableware was also considered to be made from ingredients harvested from my farm.

“Right... Although we ran into some trouble this morning, everything’s taken care of now. Let’s go to the Magical Beasts Guild.”

Online Forum [Gather ’Round Tamers, Part 2] LJO Tamer Megathread

Share the deets on new tamed monsters, show off your companions, etc.—this thread is for everyone!

Bad-mouthing other Tamers is not permitted.

Screenshots gladly accepted.

Avoid double-posting.

Be mindful of what you post.

334: Ursula

So you *can* still make summoning beads—it’s just that the recipe’s changed since beta?

335: KingOysterMushroom

Apparently, you need an item called a tamed monster’s heart. Not only that, but your guild rank also needs to be above 7.

I got this from Amimin’s page, so it’s most likely true.

336: Ursula

My rank’s high enough, but... Wah, I shouldn’t have wasted that crystal! It was my most prized possession, and I had to practically get down on my knees and beg my friend for it! It cost me 40,000 G too!

337: Ivan

I can vividly imagine you prostrated by grief...

338: KingOysterMushroom

It’s your fault for not checking the recipe first. You’ve only got yourself to blame. Why didn’t you consider the possibility that things might be different from the beta test?

339: Ursula

sob I was so eager to get a summoning bead, I didn’t think twice!

How do you obtain a tamed monster’s heart, though? Never heard of it.

340: Amelia

I have one.

341: Ivan

I don’t. Go on, enlighten us.

342: Amelia

Hmm... I’m actually not clear on the details either.

I got mine when I was brushing my Bun Bun. There was a sudden flash of light, and the next thing I knew, Bun Bun had a pretty gemstone in their mouth, which they then gave to me.

343: Ivan

So *that’s* a tamed monster’s heart?

344: Amelia

Yep. Mine was named “Tamed Monster’s Heart (Bun Bun).”

345: Ursula

Judging from the name and the timing you got it, perhaps it had something to do with your favorability score maxing out?

346: Eulenspiegel

I say you hit the nail on the head. My tamed monster suddenly started glowing too, when I was feeding them their favorite barbecue. After that, they gave me an item called a tamed monster's heart.

I was seriously freaked out at first since I had no idea what was going on.

347: KingOysterMushroom

I guess your favorability score *does* matter a lot. What am I doing wrong, though? I feed my tamed monster his favorite food every day, and I do my best to give him affection.

348: Ivan

What kind of affection are we talking about?

349: KingOysterMushroom

I feed my Caterpillar, Alexander, honey every day. We even take naps together. His skin is super soft and smooth, like a baby's bottom.

350: Eulenspiegel

I'm not sure where to begin with that, but you do you. Do you really think naps will raise your favorability score, though? Shouldn't you be brushing him or something?

351: Ursula

Personally, I don't think it's a bad idea. Maybe it's a

matter of food he likes versus food he *loves*. They might each give you different amounts of points.

Some monsters might also be easier to raise your favorability score with than others.

352: Ivan

Yeah, I suppose you're right. I've only given my monster honey dumplings before... Better find out what they like.

353: Eulenspiegel

By the way, here's something else I heard about favorability scores. Or rather, I figured they might have something to do with it, based on what I've read so far.

I recently found out that my Wild Dog gained a new evolution form. It's probably due to my favorability score.

354: Amelia

Huh? What do you mean? Spill the beans, please!

355: Eulenspiegel

Normally, Wild Dogs can only evolve into War Dogs or Wolves, right?

But after my Wild Dog gave me their tamed monster's heart, I noticed a new evolution option called Guard Dog. Don't you think my favorability score has something to do with it?

356: Amelia

Hey, good point! Does that mean my Bun Bun might be able to evolve too?

357: KingOysterMushroom

It’s possible. At the moment, Rabbits are confirmed to evolve into White Rabbits and Black Rabbits for regular specimens and Translucent Rabbits for unique specimens.

Anything other than that is a new evolved form.

358: Amelia

Well I’m psyched! I’m going to start leveling up Bun Bun right away! Mark my words, I’ll make sure they evolve today! For maximum efficiency, we’ll fight together, just the two of us!

359: KingOysterMushroom

Don’t push yourself too hard. Also, make sure to share the evolution deets with us later.

360: Ursula

I’m going to go pamper my tamed monster! I’ll feed them as much honey as they want and snuggle with them all day!

361: Ivan

There can still be too much of a good thing, you know? Also, you probably shouldn’t overfeed them.

Feeding them as much honey as they like sounds like a sticky situation...

362: Eulenspiegel

Moderation is key. Overdoing it will probably affect your score negatively.

>358

I reckon it’s more efficient to fight a powerful opponent as a group than reduce the number of members in your party.

363: KingOysterMushroom

...I doubt they’re still reading this.

364: Ivan

I have a feeling they’re going to come crying to us later, saying they’ve messed up.

Let’s take things at our own pace.

365: Eulenspiegel

Agreed.

366: KingOysterMushroom

Ditto.

Chapter Six: There Are Many Kinds of Players Out There

Another day, another quest. Once again, I found myself at the Magical Beasts Guild, ready to raise my rank.

“Huh? Squirrels again?”

Today’s requirement was the same as the day before: deliver three Gray Squirrels to the guild. I was wondering why it hadn’t changed, when the receptionist informed me that the monster of the day was chosen at random from the six types of monsters available in the vicinity of the Town of Beginnings, so you sometimes got the same creature twice in a row.

“All right! Looks like luck’s on our side!”

Gray Squirrels were much easier to catch than Snakes or Wild Dogs. This had to be a sign from the gaming gods to rack up my contribution points while I could. As taming Gray Squirrels was our top priority, I had chosen the Western Forest as our hunting grounds—the place where you were most likely to encounter them. My goal today was to fulfill the Magical Beasts Guild’s persistent quest at least three times.

We spent half a day going back and forth between the forest and the guild. In that time, we managed to complete the persistent quest four times, as well as raise our skill levels significantly. We all saw an increase in our base levels too. Although I’d considered taming the unique Fanged Rat specimen we encountered on the way, I was short on MP and had no choice but to defeat it. It was unfortunate that I’d run into it when I was running low on gas. In the end, I only had enough MP for five Tames. While I did manage to acquire a Giant Fang, one of the Fanged Rat’s rare drops, I would have loved to tame a unique specimen as well. Even if it was the weakest monster in the game, a unique specimen would most likely have had an interesting skill that others lacked. *Pity.*

Things worked out in the end, however, as I managed to my surprise to fulfill the unique drop delivery quest in the process. I also realized that I was one item away from fulfilling a Rock Ant rare drop delivery quest with the three vials of formic acid I currently possessed. I would be a fool not to grab this opportunity, as rare drop delivery quests granted more points.

“There’s only one place to go if we’re talking about Rock Ants.”

Underground passage, here we come! As far as I knew, Rock Ants were the only monsters to spawn in that area. We swiftly headed to our next destination, where I noticed a handful of players coming and going on the bridge above the entrance to the tunnel. Although it was already after dark, the town was still lively at this hour. I crouched in the shadows by the bridge and waited for the pedestrians to disappear. Thinking back on this later, I realized I had absolutely no reason to be so furtive. I had already sold information about the door to the Quick-Eared Cats, so this place was no longer totally unknown. At that time, though, I still couldn’t help but sneak around out of habit.

“Is the coast clear, Olto?”

“Mm!”

Olto, who was on the right side of the bridge, checked to make sure no one was coming our way, then raised his right arm. His Night Vision gave him a clear view of the streets.

“How about your side, Rick?”

“Chirp chirp!”

Rick, who had been in charge of the left end, stretched his right paw out as far as it could go. Right meant all clear, left meant wait. Although he didn’t possess Night Vision, his Vigilance skill was more than reliable.

“All right, let’s go. You two can come back now.”

I hurriedly waded into the canal and ducked under the bridge.

“Phew... No one saw us, did they?”

“Mm-mm!”

“Chirp chirp!”

We stopped by the altar just in case, but since it wasn't Tree Day, we obviously didn't see the dryad there. As it was Bear Bear and Olto's first time here, however, they showed a keen interest in the raised platform.

"Mmm?"

"Growl?"

Hey, quit touching it so much. It's disrespectful. D'ah! Rick! Climbing it is definitely off-limits!

"Th-That's enough!" I admonished my companions. "We're heading downstairs!"

I felt like I might go crazy from worry if I allowed them to run amok any longer. Besides, our main destination today was the underground passage. We couldn't afford to waste time here. After rounding everyone up, we slowly made our way to the tunnel.

"Careful, there are monsters down here. I'm counting on you guys."

"Mm!"

"Chirp!"

"Growl!"

"...!"

Olto pumped his right fist into the air, and the others immediately followed suit. Where *did* they learn how to do that, anyway? Not that it mattered—it was adorable, and that was enough for me. I didn't have much time to revel in the fuzzy feelings from my companions, however, as we were soon joined by enemy monsters. Like before, they were mostly Rock Ants. Thankfully, my tamed monsters were strong enough now to deal damage to them, so it looked like I'd be able to conserve my MP.

"Growl growl!"

"...!"

"Chirp!"

Bear Bear dealt a swift uppercut to a Rock Ant and flipped it on its side,

Sakura then promptly binding it with her vines. Rick then pounced on it and dealt another blow. Everyone then ganged up on the creature and beat it to a pulp. If it was just one monster, it was nice that we could now defeat them without sustaining any damage. We had come a long way since the old days. Even up against multiple opponents, though, I remained unscathed due to Olto's protection. It was endearing to see Olto's normally cute expression turn serious when he was protecting me. Was this what people meant by gap moe? Seriously, my tamed monsters were always full of charming new surprises. They were simply too cute for words!

"Hey, we already got some formic acid. Lucky us."

After a mere thirty minutes of battling Rock Ants underground, we managed to obtain what we were after. If we returned now, we'd be able to deliver the items before the day ended. Perhaps I could explore a bit farther, though, seeing as I still had half of my MP left. However, our happiness was short-lived, as we stumbled upon an unexpected foe. Why were *they* here?

"Yikes, *Lesser Ghosts*?"

How could I possibly forget those translucent beings that had nearly killed me? Considering that we hadn't encountered them up until now, their spawn rates were likely on the low side. Thank goodness we had run into them on our way home and not earlier; it would've been a huge pain in the butt to deal with them while searching for Rock Ants. Though there were few enough of them that we were able to defeat them easily, I was still eager to get out of here as soon as possible. I definitely didn't want to encounter more ghosts when I was out of MP. While I'd been hoping to rely on Olto's Luck to find another red panther cap mutation, it was probably best to head home while we could. However, just before we reached the exit, I heard a faint voice from somewhere nearby.

"Are those players?"

Apparently, we hadn't been the only ones battling Lesser Ghosts.

"Damn it! Why can't I deal any damage?!"

"Because they're *ghosts*, dummy!"

“D’ah! I knew I should’ve learned some magic!”

Two boys were swinging around a sword and spear, locked in a furious battle with a lone Lesser Ghost—or rather, suffering its incessant attacks. Neither of them appeared to know any magic, and their weapons didn’t have special attributes either. A quick once-over of their equipment told me that they were still using their initial gear. It was obvious that they were beginners who were just starting out.

“Hmm, they’re gonna end up respawning at this rate. Better give them a hand.”

I was always being saved by other people, after all. This was my first time actually helping someone out. Let’s see, what was I supposed to do first? Send a rescue request? *Crap.* I had never done this before, so I wasn’t quite sure what to do.

“Damn it!” one of the boys yelled.

“Hang in there!” I replied, flustered. I had to hurry up or the boys were doomed! Where was it... Ah, there it was! I finally figured out how to pull up a rescue request and approached the boys, showing them my screen.

“Huh? What’s this?”

“What is it?”

“Something about a rescue request...”

Apparently, they couldn’t see my screen from their side since I was in the dark. They didn’t seem to know anything about rescue requests either. Stepping out of the darkness, I called out to them.

“Hey! Just accept my request!”

“Huh? What?”

“Y-Yo, it looks like he’s going to help us! Hurry up and accept whatever that thing is!”

“O-Okay.”

Phew, took them long enough.

“Aqua Ball!”

Lesser Ghosts didn’t have much HP to begin with, which meant you had a one hundred percent chance of defeating them as long as you used magic. My Aqua Ball completely obliterated the ghost. Once they realized the danger had passed, the boys sank to the ground.

“I thought I was gonna die.”

“Don’t think I can ever visit haunted places in real life again.”

Judging from their deathly pallor, the boys were beyond terrified. Their reaction was understandable—Lesser Ghosts were fairly realistic compared to other monsters.

“You guys okay?” I asked them.

“Th-Thank you! We owe you one!”

“You saved us!”

Alerted by my presence, the boys sprang to their feet and began bowing profusely. It was refreshing to see a bunch of youngsters who had proper manners.

“My name’s Tsuyoshi!” the swordfighter with short red hair introduced himself.

“I’m Takayuki,” the boy with a blue middle part and spear replied. While I wasn’t a fan of the edgy sort of names young kids usually liked to give themselves, traditional Japanese names also felt a little off in-game. Not that I intended on saying that to their faces, though. I was an adult, after all.

“I wouldn’t recommend this place unless you’re a magic-user,” I told them.

“You’re right. We’ve learned our lesson,” Takayuki said with a sigh.

“Guess we should’ve been grinding in the Eastern Plains like the beginner’s thread suggested,” Tsuyoshi muttered.

I knew it: they *were* beginners. It had been a few days since the game had launched, though. Why had they chosen to start playing only now? Curious, I asked them about it, and learned that they’d gotten off to a late start since

they'd done poorly on exams and had to take a makeup class.

"Tsuyoshi failed his test, and I caught a cold on the day of our exam," Takayuki explained.

"I totally thought I'd pass, though."

It'd been years since I last sat for an exam. *Oh, to be young again.*

"What are you guys doing here anyway?" I asked them. "It's supposed to be a dead end up ahead."

"Really? But I heard there was an altar."

"Did the information broker trick us?"

"Information broker? You talking about the Quick-Eared Cats?"

"Yep. We happened to come across this key by chance," Takayuki said, showing me a key exactly like the one I had—the one that unlocked the hidden door. Neither of them had ever worked a part-time job in real life, so they had taken on a labor quest in LJO to get a feel of what working was like, which was how they had obtained their key. Looking up ways to use it had led them to the Quick-Eared Cats, whom they then bought information about the altar from.

"We couldn't wait until the next Tree Day, so we came down to have a look," Tsuyoshi said sheepishly.

"We were told that monsters only appeared in the passage opposite the altar, though..." Takayuki mumbled. They had apparently come the wrong way.

"Didn't they tell us to go right when we reached that fork in the road?"

"Huh? Did they? I thought they told us to go left."

"Hmm, now that you mention it, they might've..."

Clearly, they hadn't spent enough time memorizing the directions.

"Anyway, magic is the only effective way of dealing with those ghosts. The other type of monster you'll encounter here—Rock Ants—also has strong defenses against physical attacks, so you'll need magic to deal with them too," I explained to the boys, who nodded dejectedly in response.

"Gotcha. We'll call it quits for today." Takayuki sighed in defeat. The exit was

right there, so there was probably no need to accompany them.

“Yeah, you do that. See you around,” I said. Feeling good about mentoring them, I got a little cocky and tried to give them a friendly pat on the shoulders as I left. Unfortunately, the game’s harassment block prevented me from doing so, and my hand grasped nothing but air. Olto and the others attempted to mimic me, reaching out to pat Tsuyoshi and Takayuki’s feet as they walked away. Although they weren’t able to touch them either, their smug faces looked mighty cute. *This is embarrassing as hell!* I screamed internally, feeling my face grow hot. Seriously, this game didn’t have to reproduce every single minuscule detail to a T! As I tried to walk away, pretending like nothing had happened, I heard Takayuki call after me.

“Hey, wait!”

Have pity on me and let me go!

“You’re Silver-Haired, aren’t you?”

“Huh? How’d you know that?”

Apparently, even beginners knew who I was now. I was taken aback to learn that the duo had perused the forums to obtain information about me. Yikes, yet another embarrassing rumor for people to laugh about! However, from the looks of it, the boys hadn’t seemed to notice my earlier blunder. *Thank goodness for that!* Now, to keep the conversation going as if nothing ever happened!

“We seriously admire you, Silver-Haired! Right, Tsuyoshi?”

“Totally! Mad respect, dude.”

“Huh? What?”

How was I supposed to react to that...?

“Wh-Why, though?”

They didn’t seem to be Farmers or Tamers, so why would they look up to me? Was it because I’d discovered more titles than the average player? Compared to the frontliners, however, there was nothing flashy about my playstyle. If I was being honest, there was absolutely no reason for anyone to admire me. Perhaps

they had mistaken me for another player? Yes, that had to be it! One of the frontliners probably had silver hair like me, and they had gotten the two of us mixed up. Otherwise, why else would they be acting this way? Someone had posted a photo of the frontlining team fighting a raid boss in the forums, and they had looked incredibly cool and badass. Even I had felt envious of their swords and spears, despite having given up on being a fighter.

"To be honest, we'd almost given up on this game after getting started so late," Takayuki confessed.

"Since we couldn't get a head start anymore, we were discussing chucking LJO in the bin and switching to another game," Tsuyoshi chimed in. That was understandable. If I were in their shoes, I would probably be sulking too. I might even have lost motivation to continue playing.

"But after learning about you from the forums, we decided to stick with it."

"Even though you got a monster who's not made for fighting, you refused to give up. You discovered new titles and this altar along the way and really seem to be enjoying yourself."

"That made us realize that getting a head start and fighting on the frontlines isn't the only way to enjoy a game!"

"So now, we focus on just doing whatever we're interested in and having fun. We've been dabbling in all sorts of things ever since."

This Silver-Haired character they so admired turned out to be me after all. I felt like they were seeing me through rose-tinted glasses, but it was nice to receive such high praise, and I wasn't about to dash their dreams by correcting their perception of me.

"I-Is that so?" I stuttered, feeling highly uncomfortable.

"Yeah! Um, can we call you big bro?" Tsuyoshi, the swordfighter, asked out of the blue.

"What? *Big bro?*"

"Yeah! Whaddya say?"

That was a big *hell nope* from me. Although I understood that there wasn't

any deep meaning behind it, I didn't want other people to think that we were super chummy with each other. Wouldn't that seem just way too fishy? Hearing my protests, albeit said in a rather roundabout fashion, Tsuyoshi looked at me, puzzled.

"Hmm. The girls in our class mentioned something similar, you know."

"They did?"

"Yeah. They pointed out that Takayuki and I were way too close, and when I told them that was because we were childhood friends, they started squealing."

Their class *definitely* had a few BL fans. I shot a glance in Takayuki's direction and saw him bowing apologetically at me. He seemed to understand both the reason for the girls' reactions and why I was against Tsuyoshi's term of endearment for me. I now had a rough idea of their relationship: Tsuyoshi was honest and hot-blooded, while Takayuki was calm and rational. In many ways, they balanced each other out perfectly. I bet all those girls had more than enough material to fantasize about.

"Hey, Tsuyoshi. We've only just met. Don't be rude!"

"Right, good point. Sorry. I got a little carried away."

While I wasn't keen on being shipped with anyone, I certainly didn't mind their generous assessment of me. Tsuyoshi agreed not to call me big bro, and we parted ways after exchanging friend codes.

"Thank you."

"Thanks a bunch!"

Both boys shouted their thanks at me, polite until the very end.

"We got a little sidetracked, but let's go deliver this formic acid, shall we?"

"Mm!"

"Congratulations. Your guild rank has increased to 6," Barbara congratulated me once we returned to the Magical Beasts Guild and gave our report. *All right, just one more level to go until I hit the magical number 7.* It was time to repeat the persistent quest, as there was no guarantee I'd get an easy target again tomorrow. It was best to take advantage of the Gray Squirrel situation while I

could and earn as many contribution points as possible. Although the playing field was more dangerous at night due to an increase in monsters, that also meant more opportunities for taming.

“It ain’t every day we go hunting at night!”

“Mmm!”

“...♪”

“Chirp!”

“Growl!”

I pumped my right fist into the air, my companions immediately following suit. Good, they still had plenty of energy left. *Time to go hunting before the date changes!* With that, we headed to the entrance of the Western Forest and continued our search for squirrels. Due to more powerful enemy spawns, we sustained more damage than usual in battle, though I was also able to tame at a quicker pace. *So far, so good.* We had already completed the persistent quest twice, with one hour remaining on the clock.

“Think we can go one more round?”

My MP was about to run out. Ideally, I wanted to fulfill the quest one more time and take on another round before the day ended. As long as I had accepted the quest, it didn’t matter when I fulfilled it.

“Chirp chirp!”

“What’s up, Rick? Find a monster?”

Having returned from his foraging, Rick tugged at my robe desperately.

“Chirp chirp!”

Judging from his urgency, it wasn’t a Gray Squirrel he had encountered.

“Don’t tell me it’s another predator?!” I gasped.

“Chirp!”

That wasn’t it either. Rick shook his tiny head to and fro, his fluffy tail swishing hypnotically in sync. What was he trying to tell me, though? Not knowing what to expect, we followed his lead, venturing deeper into the forest. Apparently,

his Collect skill allowed him to travel much farther than I thought.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Is that...a player? What are they doing, though?”

Rick had led us to a tree where a lone player sat completely still, hugging their knees to their chest. Judging from their physique, they appeared to be a man. It was incredibly eerie to see a grown man crouching like that under a tree, though. What *was* he doing?

“Chirp!”

Rick jumped onto my shoulder and pointed at the player. It looked like he had wanted to alert me to this man’s presence. Upon closer inspection, I noticed the player’s life meter was in the red zone. He appeared to be on the verge of death.

“Hey, you okay?” I asked the player huddled on the ground.

“Hm? Are you talking to this humble soul?” the man replied.

“Huh? Uh, yeah, sure.”

Now that I looked, he was clad entirely in black, his face hidden by a mask. Was he playing as a ninja? Wow, this had to be the first time I’d met a player who took role-playing this seriously. For a moment Lewin’s face popped into my mind, but that seemed to be his usual temperament rather than an affectation.

“Chirp!”

“Ah, my good sir! You really *did* call for help!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“I am indebted to you.”

Rick’s chest puffed with pride from the ninja’s praise.

“So you really are in trouble then.”

“Indeed, I am. I used up all of my recovery items on the way here, so I had no choice but to hide from my enemies using my Hiding skill. That was when I met this honorable squirrel.”

He further explained that since he could tell Rick was a tamed monster from the color of his marker, he had placed his remaining hopes in him and asked him to call for help. His friend, whom he'd sent a rescue request to, would apparently take at least another hour to arrive, and he couldn't bear the thought of sitting huddled in this position the whole time, hence the need for my assistance.

"Do you *have* to sit in that position for your Hiding skill to work?" I asked him.

"Not necessarily. It doesn't matter what position you're in as long as you don't move a muscle. This just happened to be the most comfortable position for me. Many people sit cross-legged or in lotus position."

Hiding seemed far more strenuous than I thought. However, the skill remained in effect for as long as you didn't move, and the MP cost was onetime upon activation. If you so much as moved an inch, though, the effect would disappear. It was a skill best suited for players who could tolerate staying still for long periods of time.

"Anyway, I'm Yuto, a Tamer. Here, go ahead and drink this."

Rick had come to me, after all. For his sake, I decided to help this ninja.

"Thank you, good sir! You have my deepest gratitude. My name is Murakage. I'm a shinobi."

"I don't recall there being such a job."

"...At the moment, my official title is a Thief. However, I *shall* become a shinobi someday!"

S-Sure, whatever you say, dude. Players who took role-playing seriously were on a whole other level. I didn't mind their enthusiasm, though. If anything, I was kind of envious of how deeply they could immerse themselves in the game.

"How much shall I pay you?" Murakage asked.

"Think it was about 1,000 G at the shops. That's fine with me."

"In that case, please accept this."

"That's 500 G extra."

“I believe it’s common courtesy to add something extra in cases like this. It’s a meager compensation for saving my life, but I hope it’ll do.”

Oh well, might as well accept it. Arguing with him would only be a waste of time.

“Did you come to the forest alone, Murakage?”

No matter how good he was at stealth, it wasn’t advisable for solo players to venture into the forests at night. Even more so if he hadn’t advanced to a secondary job class yet, and he did just mention he was a Thief. It would be a different question entirely if he were as strong as Akari, though.

“Yes. I had no choice. I was tasked with a certain quest.”

“What quest?”

“The Bandits’ Guild’s rank-up quest. In order to raise my guild rank to 5, I have to gather three glowing walnuts on my own in a single night,” he explained. That did sound vaguely familiar. “However, it turned out to be more difficult than I anticipated, and I’ve been having a hard time of it.”

Glowing walnuts were already rare enough as they were. Having to gather three of them in one night was intensely challenging—all the more so if you were a solo player. It seemed far more demanding than the Magical Beasts Guild’s rank-up quest.

“Right, that... Isn’t it really hard to complete?”

“Not as hard as you might think. You simply need to pinpoint where the walnut trees are during the day and plan your trips effectively.”

Simply put, it was a quest that required preparation beforehand. As long as you possessed Hiding and Night Vision, it was doable even as a solo player.

“Why were you on the verge of dying, then?”

“It’s a long story...”

“Oh, in that case—”

“To my great dismay, I ran into a predator on the way! It nearly killed me!”

This dude was pretty talkative for a shinobi. I thought ninjas were supposed to

be more reserved and secretive?

“Eh, whatever. Think you can make it back to town?”

“Oh yes, without a doubt! You were an absolute lifesaver. I promise to repay you for your kindness!”

“Anytime, man.”

“I shall be taking my leave now. I look forward to meeting you again someday!”

Well, that was exhausting. It didn’t seem like I had enough time to tame three more squirrels before the day ended either. I decided to head back to my farm for now.

Five hours had passed in-game since I saved Murakage, the would-be shinobi Thief, before I logged in again and returned to my farm. I had logged in before sunrise so that I could observe the growth of my crops. There was no deep meaning behind my decision; the idea had simply occurred to me. Did they grow inch by inch like plants did in real life? Or did they experience a sudden growth spurt after a certain amount of time? I was curious to find out. Who knew? I might even witness something peculiar like a time-lapse. Or so I hoped...

“They’ve already grown.”

So much for getting up early. My crops were already fully grown and ready to be harvested. They hadn’t grown yet when I logged out, so that meant they had matured in the few hours I had been away from the game. I had estimated that they would only be ready for harvest once the sun had risen, but my assumption proved to be incorrect.

“Mm!”

“Chirp chirp.”

“Growl growl!”

As usual, my tamed monsters were full of energy, running around the farm engaged in a serious game of tag. Bear Bear appeared to be “it,” while Olto

stayed low and crawled army-style, hidden among the crops. Rick took advantage of his size and darted in and out of the grass. Bear Bear surveyed the area with a fierce intensity that I'd never seen, not even during battle. *Just don't trip and damage the crops, okay?*

"You guys sure are frisky," I commented, making my rounds. The farm was a sight to behold at night. Unlike farms in real life, the air felt fresh and crisp with just the right amount of dampness. Countless stars lit up the farm, creating a magical atmosphere that you'd never be able to witness in the city. Out of all the vast land, one tree in particular caught my eye. It was a tree planted on our first farm, which was steadily turning into an orchard.

"That's our walnut tree, right...?"

A faint light leaked from between the overlapping branches. Searching for the source of the light, I found a glowing walnut. Wow, I had managed to harvest another one! Today was my lucky day.

"Better hurry up and harvest it."

If I remembered correctly, glowing walnuts lost their glow and turned into regular walnuts after twenty-four hours. To prevent that from happening, my only choice was to store it in my inventory immediately after harvest. As I was harvesting my walnut, I noticed Rick scampering towards me.

"Chirp chirp!"

He seemed to be pointing at something near the entrance.

"Did something happen?"

"Chirp!"

I followed Rick's lead and spotted two players in front of our farm. They appeared to be a couple, a woman and man. I say "appeared" since their faces were both obscured by black, full-face coverings; I simply assumed one of them was a woman from their stature and physique. That, and I recognized the man.

"My good fellow, thank you for calling Master Yuto over!"

"What's up, Murakage?"

The man was none other than Murakage, the wannabe ninja I had helped a

mere few hours ago. Didn't he say *I look forward to meeting you again someday?* This was way sooner than I expected.

"Hello there, Yuto! Thank you for your help yesterday!"

"Don't mention it. It's only right to look out for each other."

"You're too modest. It's thanks to you that we were reunited."

"Oh, so that's your companion?"

"Yes. My name is Ayakage. Pleased to make your acquaintance," the woman replied. Their names rhymed! I should've guessed from her appearance: like Murakage, Ayakage was also clad entirely in black from head to toe. It didn't take a genius to figure out that she, too, was role-playing as a ninja.

"I thought I recognized your monsters. Are you the owner of this farm?" Murakage asked.

"Yeah, I am," I answered. "What brings you here, anyway?"

Did he want something from me? It didn't take much digging around to find out about this farm, especially if he'd made the connection that I was Silver-Haired, the player known for having died three times, from our previous encounter. According to Murakage, however, he had other reasons for coming here. Apparently, he had been staking out this place—or rather, the walnut tree on my farm—for the past few days.

"I never thought I'd find a player growing walnut trees, especially here of all places, this early on."

"Well, I have my reasons."

"May I ask you a question? Do any glowing walnuts grow on the walnut tree you're growing?"

"I take it you're looking for glowing walnuts, then?"

"That's right."

I could think of only one reason why he might want a glowing walnut...

"For your rank-up quest?"

"Precisely. You see, I could only obtain two glowing walnuts in the Western

Forest. Is there any chance I could buy one from you? If you happen to have one, that is."

"Huh? Are you okay with that?"

Wasn't he supposed to gather the walnuts himself? Wouldn't buying one be cheating?

"This quest only requires that you gather and deliver three glowing walnuts without teaming up with anyone."

As Murakage explained, as long as you delivered them, it didn't matter whether you bought or found them. That being said, glowing walnuts were a rarity and scarcely available on the market, not to mention expensive when they were. As such, hardly anyone was able to buy them for this quest.

"Sure you wanna spend your hard-earned money on this?" I asked him.

"I don't mind. If possible, I'd like to raise my rank today. I have to go back to work tomorrow, so I don't have time to keep attempting this quest."

Ah, such is life. I could empathize with that all too well.

"You just need one walnut?"

"That is correct."

Hmm, I supposed I could afford to give him just one. Chances were I'd be able to obtain more in the future, seeing as they grew on walnut trees. Besides, it didn't feel right to turn him down. As a fellow working adult, I felt a strong urge to support the guy.

"Okay. I don't mind giving you just one."

"Really? Thank you, my good man!"

"Thank you so much," Ayakage chimed in, and the couple bowed together. They really did look alike. Were there other ninjas like them in this game?

"You two are in the same party, right? Are your other party members also ninjas?" I asked, getting my hopes up ever so slightly. That was too much to expect, though.

"No, it's just the two of us at the moment."

“However, our dream is to gather like-minded members and form a ninja party someday.”

A ninja party? Oh, were they talking about forming a clan? I was impressed with how far ahead they’d planned this. However, my most surprising discovery wasn’t that my glowing walnut sold for 25,000 G or the fact that they were both over thirty years old in real life, but that they were actually a married couple. An actual couple playing the same game *and* role-playing as ninjas? *Talk about getting along well!* Still, why did I not feel jealous of them at all?

“We’ll be going now.”

“Thank you.”

Our dependable biker chick Farmer, Tagosack, came to visit almost immediately once the ninja couple had departed. She too appeared to have gotten up at the crack of dawn to tend to her farm.

“Mornin’, Yuto. ’Nother great day for farmin’, eh?” Tagosack greeted me, a hoe slung over her shoulder.

“Morning, Tagosack,” I replied. I suddenly became aware of her eyes boring into me.

“What’s up?”

“Well, I, uh...”

“Go on.”

“The thing is...”

Though it was obvious that she wanted to ask me something, she seemed hesitant to say it out loud. This wasn’t like her at all. We hadn’t known each other for very long yet, but even so, I knew she was the type of person to speak her mind freely. Seeing her beat around the bush like this was pretty unusual.

“I realize this might be kinda rude, but...” she mumbled.

“What is it? Come on, we’re neighbors. Feel free to ask me anything.”

“Well, you grow weeds on your farm, don’t you? Any particular reason why?”

Ah, the million-dollar question. Honestly, it was weird that she hadn’t asked

me this before now, as she'd surely spotted my patch of weeds long ago. Hmm, what now? I did say she could ask me anything, but this particular issue concerned more than just me.

"Uh, about that..."

"Sorry. You don't needa tell me if you don't want to. Was just curious, that's all."

What should I do? I supposed I could tell her on the condition that she kept it a secret from other players, but... As I was contemplating my next move, two more people arrived on the scene.

"Morning, Yuto."

"Good morning."

The newcomers were none other than Ashihana and Akari. The two made an unlikely pair.

"Fancy seeing you here, Tagosack."

"How's it goin', Ashihana?"

"Huh? You guys all know each other?" I asked, surprised by this turn of events.

"Akari's a regular of mine. So is Tagosack. I made that hoe she's holding, you know?" Ashihana explained.

"I swung by Ashihana's place to hang out. She told me she was going to your place to deliver something, so I decided to tag along," Akari chirped.

Deliver something? That could mean only one thing...

"Ta-da! Bear Bear's beehive is finally complete!" Ashihana exclaimed.

"Whoa!"

Name: Ashihana's Special Beehive+

Rarity: 3 / Quality: 8★

Effect: Place item on home base to enable the collection

of honey. Quantity, quality, and pickings may vary depending on the person or monster in charge.

At last! And check out that quality!

“Bear Bear! Your beehive is here!” I announced.

“Growl growl!”

Bear Bear had already caught sight of the beehive. Before I knew it, they were standing right next to me, eyes wide and sparkling.

“What do you think? Pretty neat, eh?”

“Totally. I’m glad I asked you, Ashihana. Except... Isn’t it a bit too tall?”

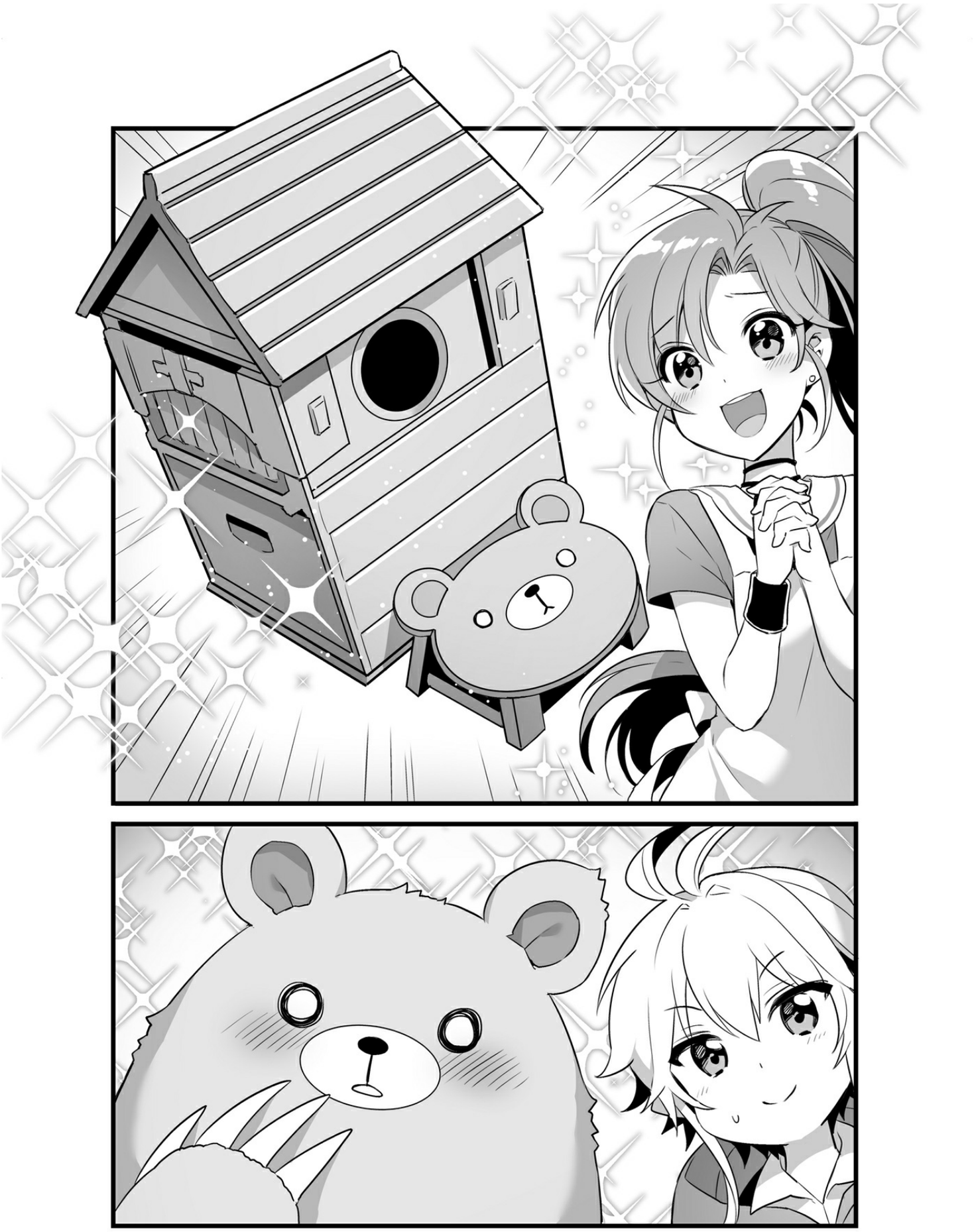
The beehive appeared to be made for human use and was too tall for Bear Bear’s height. At this rate, they wouldn’t be able to peek inside the box. Or would their Beekeeping skills activate automatically once I designated them the monster in charge? As if to answer my question, Ashihana took something out of her inventory. It looked like a small stepladder of sorts.

“Heh heh heh, did you really think I hadn’t thought about that? *This* is part of the set too! Behold my masterpiece—Bear Bear’s personal step stool!”

So that was what it was. *Masterpiece*, though? It looked like a regular step stool to me. Did it have some sort of special effect or something?

“I dyed it the same yellow color as Bear Bear, so the two complement each other perfectly. Also, look at these handles! I made sure the holes were big enough so that Bear Bear could easily carry it around!”

There weren’t any special effects—it was just a well-designed piece of furniture. It did suit Bear Bear perfectly, though. Now that I looked at it more carefully, the stool was even shaped like a bear. Ashihana had really gone all out on the details.



“You’re giving me this too?” I asked.

“Of course. Think of it as a full set.”

“In that case, I gladly accept.”

Bear Bear wouldn’t be able to use the beehive without it, after all. Next to Bear Bear, who was using the step to peek inside the beehive, Akari stood stroking Rick’s tail. Judging from his reaction, he seemed to be enjoying it immensely.

“Chirp.”

“By the way, did you just come here to chill, Akari?”

“Yup! I wanted to ask if it was okay to play with your monsters. That’s not the only reason I came, though,” she replied, taking something resembling a potted plant out of her inventory. Correction: it *was* a potted plant.

“This is for you.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a grow-at-home herb kit that was being sold in Zone Five! The seeds and pot are a set, and you can apparently grow herbs in about five days even if you lack Farming skills.”

“What? Seriously? Can I take a closer look?”

“Of course. In the first place, I bought this as a gift for you. I was sure you’d appreciate it as someone who owns a farm.”

A tiny basilil seedling was sprouting from the pot Akari gave me, proving that the kit worked. People would most likely be able to obtain Plant Knowledge by cultivating herbs this way. Until now, I’d considered players with that skill to have an unfair advantage in the game, but I now knew that it was a skill anyone could obtain once they reached Zone Five.

“Herbs, ya say? Show me,” Tagosack said, craning her neck to look at my potted plant.

“Is this cheap?” I asked.

“It’s 1,000 G apiece,” Akari replied.

“Can anyone buy them once they get to Zone Five?”

“Yeah. It’s becoming a pretty popular Zone Five souvenir lately. I’m growing one too.”

That meant Plant Knowledge would no longer be considered a rare skill. It would only be a few more days before the hype surrounding my herbal tea died down too. Rather than lament the loss of profit, I was far more relieved about being spared from ridiculous fusses like the other day. I wouldn’t be breaking my promise to Ashihana and Sawyer either if this skill were to become widely known as a natural progression of the game.

“One of my friends has made it to Zone Five too. I’ll ask them to buy some for me.”

Tagosack was also keen on cultivating herbs. Since she possessed Farming, I wouldn’t be surprised if she obtained Plant Knowledge by tomorrow.

“Tagosack, you wanna know why I’m growing weeds, right?”

“If you’re willin’ to share, that is. You don’t have to tell me anythin’ if ya don’t want to.”

I glanced at Ashihana, who nodded and gave me the go-ahead.

“You sure?”

“What can you do? Things change. People are bound to find out sooner or later.”

Ashihana also seemed to think that Tagosack would meet the skill’s requirements immediately. That was a no-brainer. I decided to share what I knew about Plant Knowledge with Tagosack. It was also in my own interest to do so; if she could spread this information for me, the herbal tea hype might die down sooner. I sincerely hoped that would be the case.

“Gotcha! So *that’s* why you were growin’ weeds...” Tagosack nodded sagely upon hearing my explanation.

“Yep. You should grow them too, Tagosack. Since you have Farming skills, you can grow them on your farm without having to rely on kits.”

“You’re right. I’ll give it a go. Thanks, Yuto!”

“Even if I hadn’t told you, you would’ve learned about it sooner or later.”

“Don’t be like that. Ya shared a valuable piece of info with me. Lemme know if I can do anythin’ for ya, anytime.”

She seemed far more grateful than I expected, which made me feel a little bad. All I wanted was for the commotion to die down.

“Sure, I’ll let you know if something comes up.”

“Cool. Ya can count on me!” Tagosack answered, thumping her chest. *You really should lose that habit, Miss.* I cringed inwardly—though I still couldn’t stop myself from lowering my gaze ever so slightly.

Online Forum [I’d Kill For A Title] A Discussion Thread for Ever-Elusive “Titles” Pt. 2

447: Coriander

Loads more people have been getting titles lately.

448: Keropi

We owe it all to Silver-Haired and the Quick-Eared Cats.

Lots of players who didn’t make it in time for launch day for whatever reason and got off to a late start have been obtaining the title Thou Shalt Not Kill.

449: Kitaro

Famous players sure have a lot of influence.

Also, correct me if I’m wrong, but Silver-Haired’s the one who got The Dryad’s Blessing, amirite?

450: Kurumi

That’s right. He was the only person who had three titles at the time the second report was released.

That rules out the possibility of other players.

451: Kainz

Not only that, but he has *four* titles now, doesn’t he?

How the heck do you get that many?

452: Kitaro

On the flip side, there aren’t that many frontliners who

have titles at the moment. This could very well be a message from the devs, you know?

453: Kurumi

What kinda message?

454: Kitaro

Something like, “Quit getting caught up in fighting all the time, it’s nice to stop and smell the roses once in a while.”

455: Coriander

Makes sense. Could be their way of rewarding players who stop to take the scenic route.

Does that mean the devs prefer players like Silver-Haired who break the mold?

Looks like a few people have been trying to copy him, but I don’t see *them* obtaining titles left and right.

456: Keropi

From the devs’ point of view, it’s not really considered “breaking the mold,” is it? They probably want players to enjoy what this world has to offer instead of just battling monsters all the time.

Besides, people who make half-assed attempts at obtaining titles and Silver-Haired, who naturally just plays at his own pace, are *totally* different lol

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457: Kainz

I actually changed my hair color to silver in the hopes of emulating him.

458: Kitaro

Yo, blockhead!

459: Kurumi

You really think that’s the important bit?

460: Keropi

If only it were that easy to obtain a title! What are you, stupid?

461: Coriander

What a waste of (real) money.

462: Kainz

You’re all SO mean! *sob*

Listen, though—there are actually a *ton* of Silver-Haired Defenders! I tried taking on a labor quest like Silver-Haired did, and suddenly all these people started calling me “Pseudo-Haired” and “copycat bastard!” I just wanted to be a little bit like him!

463: Kurumi

Silver-Haired Defenders?

464: Keropi

That’s what his fans are called. Basically, they’re people who were inspired by his playstyle or smitten by his adorable gnome and tree nymph. I feel like he’s gained a lot of followers ever since the Mirei incident.

465: Kitaro

He probably had a lot of hidden fans to begin with. They simply became more outspoken after rumors of him quitting the game surfaced.

466: Keropi

The Defenders aren’t a singular organization, but their main purpose is to watch over him from afar and report players who harass him like in the previous incident.

467: Kurumi

Wow, never knew they existed.

468: Kainz

They’re horrible, I tell you! All I did was change my hair color and say that I was gonna get loads of titles too! “Pseudo-Haired” is too much! At least call me “Fake Silver-Haired” or something!

469: Coriander

Sure you’re okay with that, Fake Silver-Haired?

470: Kainz

For the record, my hair is blue again!

471: Coriander

You seriously wasted your money for nothing, huh?

472: Kainz

I’ll forge my own path. Someday, y’all shall know me as Blue-Haired.

473: Kitaro

Uh, okay. Do your best, I guess?

Online Forum [Gather ’Round Tamers, Part 2] LJO Tamer Megathread

Share the deets on new tamed monsters, show off your companions, etc.—this thread is for everyone!

Bad-mouthing other Tamers is not permitted.

Screenshots gladly accepted.

Avoid double-posting.

Be mindful of what you post.

663: Amelia

Guys, I have an announcement!

My Bun Bun has evolved! And into an unknown species at that!

664: Ivan

Congratulations. What sort of species?

665: Amelia

They’ve evolved into a Heart Rabbit!

At first glance, they look like an ordinary white rabbit, but they have a pink heart on their back! It’s simply adorable!

I always thought Bun Bun was cute, but I had no idea! Bun Bun’s current form is THE pinnacle of cuteness! Nothing can top it!

666: KingOysterMushroom

We all tend to get carried away when we talk about our tamed monsters, so I'll just leave that at that...

So, what kind of abilities do they have?

667: Amelia

They have high Intelligence and possess Healing. Their defenses are pretty high too.

668: Ursula

That's an interesting evolution. I'm guessing their appearance hasn't changed much, though?

669: Amelia

Not really. Only their color has changed. They're pretty much the same size as before.

670: Eulenspiegel

Really? My tamed monster underwent a pretty drastic change.

When they were a Wild Dog, they looked like a black mutt, but once they evolved into a Guard Dog, they totally became a Saint Bernard. Their droopy eyes are simply lovely.

In terms of stats, they have high Endurance and Intelligence. They also possess Detection and First Aid skills, which are really useful!

671: KingOysterMushroom

Oh, you went *that* route.

I prefer War Dogs since they look like Shepherds. Even if my tamed monster *can* evolve into a Guard Dog, I'll probably go the War Dog route.

672: Amelia

D’aw, really? Saint Bernards are adorable! They’re extra fluffy!

673: KingOysterMushroom

To each their own. Gotta say, though, the evolved forms that are unlocked from maxing out your favorability score have been pretty unexpected and interesting, both in terms of appearance and ability.

Your monsters might even become something completely different.

I’m kinda worried about how my Caterpillar will transform...

674: Ursula

Uh? Caterpillars turn into chrysalises, so of course they look *totally* different.

675: Amelia

I just realized something SUPER important!

676: Ivan

What is it? Did you misread Bun Bun’s stats?

677: Amelia

I’m not talking about Bun Bun! If the new evolutions we discovered drastically alter our monsters’ appearances, what about Silver-Haired’s gnome?

Up until now, I wasn’t worried since I figured both regular and unique specimens didn’t change much when they evolved, but...

678: Ursula

Y-You’re right. He might undergo a huge transformation! What if he grows up?

679: Amelia

Nooo! I won’t allow that! Gnomey is cute *because* he’s a gnome! He’ll no longer be a gnome if he matures and turns super handsome or something!

680: Ursula

I wouldn’t mind him becoming a hottie, though.

681: Amelia

Huh? Oh, now that you mention it...

Imagine Gnomey, all grown up, with Silver-Haired... Eep!

682: Ursula

Eek! I just pictured it! Heh heh, I can totally stand behind that!

683: KingOysterMushroom

You and your filthy minds...

How did we end up on this subject, anyway?

684: Ivan

Apparently, Silver-Haired’s gnome is secretly popular among female Tamers and Summoners; he’s pretty much on the verge of getting his own fan club. He does give warm, fuzzy feels, after all.

685: KingOysterMushroom

His other monsters are super popular too. I see loads of

people with Little Bears and Honey Bees lately. You can totally tell they're trying to get a Honey Bear, although I hear it's incredibly hard to get them to lay the egg they want.

686: Ivan

I see plenty of Tamers with squirrels on their shoulders too.

687: KingOysterMushroom

For people like us who grew up with the early Hayao Miyazaki films, having a small animal riding around on your shoulder is pretty much the dream. I totally get the appeal. If only I had an extra slot left!

688: Eulenspiegel

I'm all for Silver-Haired's tree nymph! She's seriously cute. I'd love to tame one too, but you'd need a near-miracle to encounter one on the playing field. It's not as if I can copy Silver-Haired either.

689: Ivan

I hear lots of Tamers have secretly been obtaining Farming skills.

690: KingOysterMushroom

I reckon the gaming gods blessed Silver-Haired in exchange for getting a gnome as his first monster.

There's no way we can copy him.

691: Ivan

The consensus on gnomes has changed completely, though.

I gotta say, even though it doesn't seem like he's doing

it on purpose, all of Silver-Haired's monsters are bloody adorable. It's like he's a natural magnet for cute things.

692: Eulenspiegel

Hey, if you guys want a gnome that badly, why don't you tame one? Considering how Silver-Haired was able to obtain one as his first monster, they've gotta be somewhere around Zone Two, right?

693: Amelia

If we knew where they were, we would've tamed one a long time ago!

694: Ursula

Try being in my shoes! I've been camping out in Zone Two for *ages*!

695: KingOysterMushroom

Idiot. You've done it now.

696: Eulenspiegel

Huh? You mean no one's found them yet?

697: KingOysterMushroom

They did appear in Zone Three during the beta test, but apparently, no one's had any luck encountering them there in the official version.

Meaning, you can't get your hands on a gnome even if you wanted to.

698: Ursula

I've been recruiting volunteers to comb the area, but we can't find a gnome anywhere!

699: Amelia

Please, if there’s a gaming god, give us a gnome *sob*

700: Eulenspiegel

Y-You guys are creeping me out! I’ll do anything I can, so please forgive me!

701: Amelia

Anything?

702: Ursula

I saw that.

703: Ivan

Haven’t you heard of the saying “least said, soonest mended”?

704: KingOysterMushroom

Wouldn’t it be “least *typed*, soonest mended” in this case?

705: Amelia

The Gnome Search Party gladly welcomes you as our newest member! Let’s do our best together!

706: Ursula

We’re meeting at the Humming Forest at 6:00 a.m. tomorrow! Don’t be late!

707: Eulenspiegel

Huh? For real? I don’t actually want a gnome, though... I’d much rather have a tree nymph.

708: Amelia

Are you gonna betray us? Betray all lady Tamers in this game?

709: Ursula

You said you'd do anything! I have proof!

Do you still intend on going back on your word?

710: Eulenspiegel

...I shall humbly join your search party (ToT)

711: Ivan

Good luck! Won't be joining you, though.

712: KingOysterMushroom

Yeah, good luck, dude.

Definitely count me out.

“Aw man, look at that line...”

I had totally assumed that I’d been freed from the herbal tea fiasco after telling Tagosack how to obtain Plant Knowledge. To my dismay, however, people were queuing in front of my stand as usual. I should’ve known the hype wouldn’t die that easily. It looked like I would have to restock my shop with tea leaves again. At the same time, I had realized something else—this hype would likely continue unless I also spread information on how to dry weeds using Alchemy. It was probably best if I let Tagosack know so that she could post it online.

At this rate, it’d be ages before I could visit Zone Three to buy more land; all this demand for herbal tea left me with hardly any free time for anything else. Of course, I had no obligation to keep selling herbal tea here, but there was no telling how people would react if I just quit all of a sudden. While I was sure most people would be understanding, there would no doubt be haters as well, and those who are critical tend to be the loudest. I supposed I could post the information myself, but like I mentioned before, I was more of a lurker.

I was relieved when Tagosack readily agreed to help me spread the word. Ashihana also agreed to post in the forums. If the method for making herbal tea leaves became common knowledge among Farmers, this whole storm would likely subside shortly.

“Things should quiet down in a few days.”

In the meantime, I meant to complete the Magical Beasts Guild’s persistent quest as many times as possible and raise my rank there, as there was no telling if I would be ready to take on the quests in Zone Three.

“Let’s set up the beehive, shall we?”

After restocking my stand, it was time to set up Ashihana’s beehive.

“Growl growl!”

Bear Bear tottered after me, step stool in hand. Where would be a good place to set up their beehive? Somewhere on the farm?

“Hey, Bear Bear. Know where the best place is to set up a beehive?”

“Growl!”

For matters like this, I figured it was best to ask a skilled professional for their opinion. Bear Bear nodded sagely in reply and began leading the way. As I suspected, there seemed to be places that were more suitable than others. Since the step stool was relatively big for Bear Bear, they weren’t able to walk very fast. With each step they took, their bobtailed butt wiggled from side to side adorably.

“Mmm, nice ass.”

Bear Bear’s butt was beautiful and plump—bootylicious, if you will.

“Growl?”

“...Nothing. Anyway, have you decided where to put this?”

“Growl!”

The location Bear Bear selected was the plot I had started referring to as our orchard, where our green peach, walnut, and lakeside trees were. Bear Bear glanced back at me, directing me to place the beehive in the open space in the center.

“You mean here?” I turned to him for confirmation.

“Growl growl!”

I set up the beehive according to Bear Bear’s instructions. Once I’d set it down, the box glowed faintly, and a window popped up, prompting me to select the person in charge of the beehive. Although my name was also an option, Bear Bear was the obvious choice.

“Selecting Bear Bear as manager... And done.”

As soon as I’d designated Bear Bear as the owner, a change overcame the beehive.

“Hm? Are those bees?”

Several tiny bees had begun flying around the box. Would they increase in number and eventually build a hive? That was fine and all, but they wouldn’t sting, would they? I decided to steer clear of them just to be safe. Wouldn’t

want them to freak out and flee either. I followed the bees' trail and saw that they had flown in the direction of the green peach tree. Could they have gone to gather honey from the flowers there? I suspected they might be able to collect good-quality honey from the green peach and walnut trees in our orchard. I was already looking forward to what was to come.

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

"Growl!" Bear Bear raised their paw eagerly. I left them to deal with the rest, getting ready to head out for a bit.

"If I'm going to Zone Three, I gotta make sure I have the right gear."

I decided to buy some new equipment with the money I made from selling tea leaves. While my staff was still in good shape, it was about time I replaced my robe and accessories. I could also equip myself with more items now that my Strength and Endurance were slightly higher. To be honest, I currently had more than 100,000 G on me. With that much money, I was sure I'd be able to buy something good.

"I'm heading out. You staying for a bit longer?" I asked Ashihana, who was still playing with Rick.

"Where are you headed?"

"Gonna look into replacing some of my equipment."

"I see. Are you buying a new staff then?"

"Nah, I have this, after all. What I really want is a new robe, and maybe some accessories too."

"Gotcha. ...You know, you can strengthen this staff if you want."

"Strengthen it?"

"Yep," Ashihana replied, holding on to my staff as she checked something on her status window. "In terms of what you can add on to this staff...I'd say adding minor boosts to your water magic firing power or MP would be your best bet."

"You can tell all that just by looking?"

“Yeah, as long as it’s a wooden item. I *am* a Woodcutter, after all.”

That was a top woodworker for you. Her Appraisal skill seemed to give her all sorts of information.

“How much will it cost?”

“20,000 G for either option.”

That included the cost of gathering the necessary materials. I figured I might as well take her up on her offer, so I paid Ashihana the 20,000 G for a minor boost in water magic attack power.

“How long do you reckon it’ll take?”

“I have all the ingredients for that option, so it should be ready in about an hour or so.”

“That soon? In that case, can I leave my staff with you? I’ll go buy my armor in the meantime.”

“Sure thing.”

“Thanks.”

I left Ashihana my wooden staff and set off to buy some new armor. Rick was my sole companion, as the others had chores to take care of. *First stop, Lewin’s.*

“Hi. Long time no see,” I greeted him.

“Hey, Yuto. Good to see ya again. Ya here to upgrade your armor?”

“I am. Can I see your robes?”

Lewin showed me several options, but none of them really spoke to me. While their defenses weren’t bad, their other effects weren’t that appealing.

“Hmm, if none of these appeal to ya, I don’t think you’ll find anythin’ suitable at my shop.”

“That’s a shame...”

I had, however, found one accessory that I liked:

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Name: Wind and Earth Necklace
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Rarity: 3 *Quality: 6*★ Durability: 160

Effect: Defense +3, minor wind and earth damage resistance.

Weight: 1

Having resistance to more than one attribute was a nice feature, considering how often I was on the receiving end of magical attacks during battles. My bronze necklace had proved to be of very little help in that regard. The question was, what should I do about my robe...? Should I check out other shops? As I was contemplating what to do, Lewin recommended to me one of his acquaintances' shops—a tailor, as it happened. Although they weren't a member of the Quick-Eared Cats, they, too, appeared to be an ex-beta tester.

"Sure you're okay with introducing me to one of your competitors?" I asked.

"We're acquaintances now. Besides, it doesn't sit right with me to leave a customer dissatisfied. If I can't help ya, it's only right to introduce ya to someone who can."

"Thank you very much. I'll pay them a visit."

"Say hi to them for me, will ya?"

Saying goodbye to Lewin, I headed to the indicated stall in the North District.

"Hmm, should be around here somewhere..."

"Chirp!"

"Hey, buddy. You see it?"

"Chirp chirp."

Rick shimmied down my body onto the ground and darted off in the direction of the square.

"Wait up! Not so fast, Rick!"

"Chirp chirp." He glanced back from a little ways ahead, urging me to hurry up.

"So, where's the armor shop?"

“Chirp?”

“Huh? I thought you said you found the shop Lewin told us about.”

“Chirp?”

What shop? Rick seemed to be saying, tilting his head to the side. Why had he taken off like that, then? I mused it over, slightly baffled. As if to answer my question, Rick scampered up a stall in front of us.

“My my, what an adorable customer.”

The shop appeared to be run by a plump, middle-aged woman NPC who was frying something in a wok. What was that sound, though? It sounded like pebbles rubbing against one another.

“Welcome,” the woman greeted me. “Is this your squirrel, young man?”

“Uh, yes. What kind of shop is this?”

“We sell roasted beans.”

The mysterious food she was tossing in her wok turned out to be beans. Now that I had stopped to smell it, the fragrant whiff of roasted beans permeated my nostrils. It seemed like something Rick would enjoy.

“Don’t tell me you simply happened to find your favorite food?”

“Chirp chirp!”

Don’t stare at me with those puppy eyes. Oh, for goodness’ sake! Fine, you win!

“How much are they?” I asked the woman, giving in to Rick’s demands.

“That’ll be 100 G per bag,” she replied.

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Name: Roasted Beans
Rarity: 1 / Quality: 6★
Effect: None. Edible.
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“I’ll take one, then.”

“One bag of beans, coming right up!”

Using a ladle, the woman scooped up a bunch of beans and emptied them into a paper bag. It was a pretty generous helping; there had to be at least three ladles worth of beans in there. I munched on one, and the plain taste of lightly salted beans filled my mouth. They tasted like the roasted soybeans you ate during Setsubun, the Japanese bean-throwing holiday. To be honest, they weren’t that good. They weren’t bad as a snack, but I’d get bored of them real quick if I had to eat them every day.

Cromch cromch cromch cromch.

“Chirp!”

Rick seemed to enjoy them immensely, though. He shoved his whole head inside the paper bag I was holding, devouring the beans like there was no tomorrow.

“Hey, slow down!”

“Chirp?”

Rick’s face was beyond recognition as he poked his head out of the bag. Who knew a squirrel’s face could stretch this much...?

“How many beans do you have in there?” I sighed, staring at his puffed-out cheeks. I had no idea how he was storing all those beans in his body.

“Ha ha ha! What an appetite!” the woman chortled. Thanks to this little detour, however, I was able to find out where Lewin’s friend’s shop was.

“Found it. That must be Shuella’s shop.”

It was obvious from the outside that the shop belonged to Lewin’s friend. Frilly lace decorated the roof of the stall, giving it an indescribable grandeur. It was more than just stand-out crazy; it didn’t fit in at all with the rest of the square. How on earth could I have missed *that*?

“Excuse me. I’d like to see your robes, please,” I called out hesitantly.

“Coming! Welcome to Shuella’s, fam! We specialize in tailoring and leather goods,” the girl looking after the store greeted me. She had a peculiar air about her and was dressed from head to toe in a frilly gothic lolita outfit, with two

pink ponytails on each side of her head and a skull eyepatch over her right eye. She clearly had a certain aesthetic in mind. She was about 140 centimeters tall, with large eyes set in a babyish face. While she could almost pass as an elementary school kid, her mannerisms and expression were more mature.

“Heh heh. Did I sweep you off your feet?”

“Huh? More like surprised me with your unique choice of outfit,” I replied without thinking, completely taken aback. The woman didn’t seem offended, though, and seemed to be enjoying herself instead.

“Tee hee. Neat, huh? Female Dwarfs get to pull off the lolita look legally! I got a little excited by that and ended up spending over two hours just on avatar creation.”

Though it wasn’t exactly the same as role-playing, she, too, appeared to be enjoying the game in her own way. Just then, the player next to her chimed in.

“In real life, she’s a crone nearing forty. That’s why she wants to look young, at least in-game. Hope you’ll forgive her for that.”

“Uh, okay...?”

“You asshole! How *dare* you give away my secret!” Shuella fumed.

“Just telling the truth, that’s all.”

The player who had blurted out Shuella’s real age was a plain-looking young man. Unlike her, his avatar looked like he’d hardly put any effort into it. Considering this game made you look attractive by default, he had to have tweaked his appearance somewhat to get it to look this nondescript. *What a total waste of energy.* Was he role-playing as a mob character or something? I found him just as intriguing as Shuella.

“The name’s Seki. I’m a leathersmith. Nice to meet you.”

“L-Likewise.”

Seki remained stony-faced, not moving a single facial muscle. That was pretty impressive in itself.

“Um, Lewin told me about your shop,” I explained.

“Is that so? Guess he can be useful sometimes. So, what are you looking for?” Shuella asked. She seemed to be in charge of dealing with customers. Seki simply stood there, staring off into space.

“I’m looking for a new robe.”

“Gotcha. How much weight can you handle?”

“No more than 3, if possible.”

“Hmm, then how about these?”

Name: White Dragonfly Wings Robe

Rarity: 3 / Quality: 7★ / Durability: 180

Effect: Defense +23, Agility +1.

Requirement: Intelligence 10 or higher.

Weight: 2

Name: Armored Robe

Rarity: 3 *Quality: 6*★ Durability: 230

Effect: Defense +38, Agility -1, magic skill debuff.

Requirement: Strength 4 or higher.

Weight: 3

Name: Fish Scales Robe

Rarity: 4 / Quality: 4★ / Durability: 170

Effect: Defense +35, minor water resistance, minor water adaptability.

Requirement: Water magic level 5 or higher.

Weight: 3

Name: Savage Dog Leather Robe

Rarity: 3 *Quality: 6*★ Durability: 200

Effect: Defense +22.

Requirement: Strength 3 or higher.

Weight: 2

Shuella had a surprisingly good selection. The Armored Robe had several metal plates sewn onto it and offered the highest defense, but the magic skill debuff made me hesitant to buy it. Although the White Dragonfly Wings Robe wasn't bad, its appearance was a little...eccentric. True to its name, it looked like a set of dragonfly wings sewn together and resembled a heavenly maiden's dress. On top of that, it was semitransparent, and the bottom half of the robe was perfectly see-through. To be honest, I didn't have the courage to wear such a gaudy outfit. That left me with two options: either the Fish Scales Robe or the Savage Dog Leather Robe. The Fish Scales Robe had bluish fish scales taken from a giant fish sewn onto it, which accented the robe perfectly. In contrast, the Savage Dog Leather Robe was a simple brown robe made from leather. With its slightly short hem, it sort of reminded me of the protagonist's clothes in The Deadly Companions.

The Fish Scales Robe was the clear winner. At 35,000 G, it cost more than double the price of the Savage Dog Leather Robe, but its stats were far superior to the Blue Robin Robe I was currently wearing and likely surpassed my initial Silver Robe too. I also bought a bluish-white pair of trousers called Forest Spider-Spun Pants to wear underneath, which cost me a whopping 23,000 G.

Name: Forest Spider-Spun Pants

Rarity: 4 / Quality: 4★ / Durability: 130

Effect: Defense +15, moderate paralysis resistance.

Requirement: Endurance 4 or higher.

Weight: 1

Although its defense seemed somewhat low for its price point, it did offer moderate resistance to paralysis, an effect I had eagerly sought. After all, who would heal my monsters if I got paralyzed? Not to mention it was incredibly lightweight. There was no denying it was an excellent piece of equipment. Now that my new purchases had more than doubled my overall defense, it'd likely be a while before I had to worry about buying new gear again. I also bought Rick a new bandana.

```
Name: Crimson Bandana
Rarity: 3 / Quality: 5★ / Durability: 140
Effect: Defense +13, paralysis resistance.
Weight: 1
```

"Looking sharp, Rick."

"Chirp!"

"Is that all? If you're going to enter the Martial Arts Tournament, you'll probably need to strengthen your defenses a bit more," Shuella suggested. That's right—the Martial Arts Tournament was starting today. Since I didn't intend on participating, it had completely slipped my mind. Not that it had anything to do with me, though. I had never fought on my own before, and you couldn't bring your monsters to the event. Tamers and Summoners would have far too big an advantage if they were able to fight with their monsters. Although cheering from the stands was an option, I didn't really get the appeal of watching other people fight. I supposed I could check out the finals, but the preliminary rounds didn't particularly interest me. Besides, the final match would very likely be streamed online, so there really was no reason for me to go to the arena to watch it. Gaining XP on the playing field seemed like a far better use of my time.

"I see. Well, I suppose that's fair if you're not interested in fighting."

Though crafters themselves, Shuella and Seki appeared to be interested in

fighting as well. People like me who were indifferent were apparently a minority.

“I’ll be leaving now,” I said, bidding them goodbye.

“Come again soon,” Shuella winked at me as I left the square, shrewd until the very end.

“Chirp.”

Cromch cromch cromch.

“You’re *still* eating?!” I gasped exasperatedly. Rick must have eaten more than his weight in beans by now. *How greedy can you be?!* There was no way I could get mad at him, though, not with those puffy cheeks and round button eyes.

“Whatever, come along,” I sighed.

“Chirp chirp.”

Cromch cromch cromch.

I found Ashihana waiting for me when I returned to our farm.

“Yuto! Welcome home.”

“Growl growl.”

“Hey, Ashihana. Did you come just to bring me my staff?”

“Yep. Besides, I wanted to hang out with Bear Bear!” Ashihana exclaimed, hugging Bear Bear from behind and nuzzling their fur. I wouldn’t call that *hanging out*; using Bear Bear as a plaything seemed more accurate. Bear Bear had their eyes closed in contentment, however, and didn’t seem to mind the affection. There was one thing that concerned me, though...

“You didn’t bother Bear Bear while they were working, did you?”

“Of course not. I was waiting here the whole time until they were done!”

“That’s fine then. Anyway, how about that staff?”

“It turned out great! Here you go!”

Name: Giant Dogwood Staff+

Rarity: 3 *Quality: 6*★ Durability: 130

Effect: Attack +3, Magic +21, minor decrease in energy expenditure when using water magic, minor boost in water magic attack power, medium increase in energy expenditure when using fire magic.

Weight: 1

Wow, I really did have a minor boost in water power now. Wielding water magic had just gotten easier.

“This is great!”

“Right? Are you sure you want to specialize in just water, though?”

“What do you mean?”

“Usually rearguard mages specialize in two attributes, don’t they? You’ll be a goner if you encounter an enemy that voids water-based attacks.”

She had a point... I didn’t expect I’d be running into any such enemies in the near future, though, so I decided to think it over a bit longer. I still had ten bonus points left to spare.

Ding-dong.

“*This is a public announcement. We will be starting the event as advertised in one hour. For details, please refer to the in-game notice in your inbox.*”

Our conversation was interrupted by an announcement from the devs. I opened the attached file, which listed details of the event.

“Huh. Didn’t know it was that kind of event,” Ashihana whistled.

“I thought it was just a Martial Arts Tournament.”

The Martial Arts Tournament was still scheduled to be held, but to our surprise, there was another event besides it. The other event was for crafter-types and players who didn’t intend on watching the tournament. For the Martial Arts Tournament, there was a solo division and group division, and

anyone who wanted to join could take part in them. Even NPCs seemed to be participating. Wouldn't it be hard to win if you were up against a particularly high-level NPC? Not that I cared. I was more interested in this other event.

"*Many adventurers, mercenaries, and crafters gather in the Town of Beginnings during the Martial Arts Tournament. Because of that, the neighboring villages have fewer workers during this period, causing various jobs to stagnate. We kindly ask those of you who aren't participating in the tournament to lend a helping hand to these villages.*"

That was how the message started out. As I read on, I discovered that it was an event even *I* could take part in. Participants were divided into groups of roughly three hundred and transferred to their designated villages. They would then spend a week there completing various quests and helping the villagers. To be honest, that wasn't any different from what I usually did. Time would also be sped up during this event, so one week in the village would be equivalent to only one day in real life. Furthermore, Tamers would be able to bring their tamed monsters with them. That was good to know. Should I participate? I hadn't done any preparations, but it did seem like a fun event.

"How about you, Ashihana?"

"I'm definitely joining! Gotta go round up my friends first. See ya!"

I decided to select Join as well. Seemed like we'd get transported to our respective villages as soon as the time came.

"Wasn't expecting to be able to take part in an event...! I'm excited!"

"Chirp chirp!"

"They said it's starting in one hour, right? Better run back to our farm and get ready!"

"Chirp!"

Epilogue

“How are the preparations for the event going?”

“Oh, hi, Deputy Chief. Swimmingly. All that’s left is the server allocation!”

“This is our first large-scale event. We can’t afford to make any mistakes.”

“Never mind us, though. What did the chief say? He kept complaining until the very end that the difficulty level wasn’t high enough nor the monsters strong enough.”

“Not to worry. I took care of that.”

“If you say so. Oh, and could you *please* tell the chief to refrain from hosting so many drinking parties? Our programmers got dragged into one after an all-nighter and nearly died...”

“Ignore him.”

“Easy for you to say. Do you know how hard it is to refuse a piece of grilled squid being waved in your face...? Besides, there’s no way our young’uns can say no to such a pushy chief.”

“All right. I’ll quash him.”

“...Quash? What do you mean by that...?”

“Got a problem?”

“N-Not at all!”

“Looks like there are no problems with the Martial Arts Tournament.”

“None whatsoever!”

“How about the villages? This event is mainly supposed to be for crafter-types.”

“They’re good to go too. They were far more difficult to organize than the Martial Arts Tournament. I’m just glad we made it in time.”

“I can imagine managing all those flags was a cumbersome task. One mistake is all it takes to ruin the whole event.”

“Nothing to worry about there, although our debugger’s completely spent. More importantly, is this event even clearable? After all, the chief supervised this one. It’s an effing *beast*.”

“Fighting aside, it’s true that this event has a much higher difficulty level. Worst-case scenario, we can expect all of our servers to fail.”

“Yikes, poor things...”

“However, if people work strategically, it shouldn’t be hard to arrive at the correct answer.”

“There are always selfish bastards who try to make a grandstand play, though.”

“Hey, about today’s event! I’ve decided to monitor the village event instead of the Martial Arts Tournament!”

“...Speak of the devil.”

“Ahem. What’s the matter, Chief? Didn’t you say you wanted to observe the Martial Arts Tournament because it was flashier than the village event?”

“Uh, well, you see... I had a change of heart.”

“...Did that player choose to participate in the village event? Is that it?”

“H-How did you...?!”

“You always look forward to checking their logs, after all. I know you take sneak peeks every now and then.”

“I-I do not! I’m simply keeping an eye on them so they don’t get involved in another incident like before!”

“Um, Chief? We’re running out of time...”

“Very well, I shall monitor the Martial Arts Tournament instead. I’ll leave the village to you.”

“R-Roger!”

“However...”

“Yes?”

“You’ll be severely sorry if you don’t take your job seriously.”

“...How so?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Nope! I’ll do as you said!”

“Good, I’ll leave it to you then. Make sure you don’t focus all of your energy on that Tamer and neglect your other duties.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“...Is this workplace really okay?”


A Late-Start Tamer's Laid-Back Life
A LATE-START
TAMER'S
LAID-BACK LIFE
2


Ashihana
Sakura
Rick
Olto
Sawyer
Yuto
Alyssa
Bear Bear


Olto and Sakura beamed with delight as I tousled their hair. It was a mess by the time I was done, but they didn't seem to mind.
"You little munchkins!"
"Mm-mm!"
"...♪"
"CHIRP!"
"Hey! Quit spilling crumbs on me!"
Better to enjoy this blissful moment surrounded by my three adorable tamed monsters while it lasted!

Table of Contents

Cover

Prologue

Chapter One: Don’t Underestimate Weeds!

Chapter Two: Life with Bear Bear

Chapter Three: Plenty of Things to Do in Town

Chapter Four: The World Is a Scary Place

Chapter Five: Welcome to Silver-Haired’s Farm

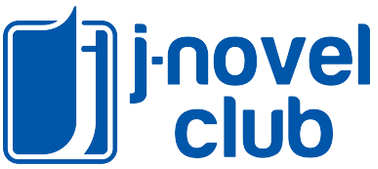
Chapter Six: There Are Many Kinds of Players Out There

Epilogue

Color Illustrations

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A Late-Start Tamer’s Laid-Back Life: Volume 2

by Yuu Tanaka

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