
A LATE-START TAMER'S LAID-BACK LIFE
6
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Illustrator:
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Prologue

“Honestly, I’m starting to get sick of all these flames. I kinda wanna go home already...” I muttered. With my new companion Himka—a Salamander I had just tamed in the Fire Elementals’ trial—having been sent off to the ranch, I was having trouble deciding our next move. We were in a harsh environment, and exploring the dungeon was hardly all fun and games. I much preferred the idea of heading to the Water Elementals’ trial to staying here and continuing to fight. It was prettier there, and besides, there were plenty of food options. That said, it wouldn’t hurt to have more foaming tree fruits and fire ores for future experiments, especially as the latter could be used to make fire-resistant paint.

“That paint does seem pretty versatile.”

It could be applied to plates and furniture; it would definitely come in handy in clearing the dungeon if I could use it on armor as well. Given all that, it seemed like a good idea to secure more fire ores. On the other hand, I was also itching to retrieve my new companion and find out about his personality and abilities.

“Hmm...”

Do I forge on, or quit and come back another time? It was a tough call.

Just then, a thought occurred to me. “Hang on. Aren’t Reflet and Fau close to evolving?” I wondered aloud. The two had gained quite a bit of XP since we entered the dungeon; Reflet was now at level 24 and Fau at level 23. If Reflet’s evolution requirements were the same as Olto’s, she would only need to level up once more. Although I wasn’t a hundred percent sure that the threshold was the same for Fau, given how both Olto and Sakura had evolved at level 25, it was highly likely that she would follow the same pattern as her parents.

“Well, there’s no way I can quit now.”

“Hum?”

“Aye?”

Fau and Reflet looked at me quizzically. I patted them both on the head, gathering my thoughts.

“Grinding until they level up could take a while.”

Thankfully, I could get more fire ores and foaming tree fruits while I was at it.

“Although...maybe I *should* head back to my farm first.”

There was a lot of prep I had to do if I wanted to attempt the dungeon again, like restocking on the supplies I was low on. I had only a few more rounds until my HP and MP ran out, and I didn’t have nearly enough potions to last a drawn-out battle. Besides, if I was going to grind for a few hours, it would be more efficient to bring Himka along so he had a chance to level up. We also had to finish all of our chores on the farm for the day. Having made up my mind, my monsters and I exited the Fire Elementals’ trial. As soon as we ducked out, however, we came face-to-face with something standing at the entrance.

Click-clack.

“Eek!” I yelped instinctively. How could I *not*, though, when there was an *armed skeleton* right in front of us? Surely, that would cause anyone to freak out. Worse still, there was a fairly realistic zombie next to it! The zombie wasn’t the old-school, rotting-corpse type, but the modern horror-movie type that looked like a living person infected with a virus. Not that the distinction mattered much; either way, it made my skin crawl. It was hard to believe this creature used to be human, with its deathly pallor, bulging dark-blue veins, and sharp fangs and nails—in an alternate reality, I probably would’ve shot it clean through the head.

“Oh. Sorry, did I spook you?”

“Huh? What the...?”

For a split second, I thought the cute voice I’d heard had come out of the zombie, but I soon noticed someone poking their head out from behind it. The player was an adorable half-man, half-rabbit hybrid, dressed in a sweet bunny-girl outfit much like you’d see on a magician’s assistant, with white ears sprouting from the top of his head. Yes, you heard that correctly: the person before me was a dude. In this game, your character’s gender automatically

matched your IRL gender, which meant you could easily tell who you were dealing with at a glance by using your Appraisal skill. By that measure, this cute "bunny girl" was unmistakably a man—a beautiful, androgynous young man who looked undeniably cute in his frilly outfit. I have to admit, I was almost unsettled.

The player wore a swallowtail coat adorned with frills on top and a miniskirt paired with knee-length, black-and-white-striped socks on the bottom. Of course, I should have known men could wear skirts too; I had forgotten you could tweak your outfit regardless of gender.

"What's wrong? Are you okay?" the player asked, sounding concerned.

"I-I'm good. Don't mind me."

Damn it! Stop being adorable, glancing up at me and tilting your head like that! What if it awakens something inside me?! Man, I never thought I would meet a femboy in-game! *No, hang on; maybe that's not so weird.* If anything, being in a game made it all the more likely that I'd run into someone like him. Maybe that was just an ordinary occurrence... *D'aah!* This was way too confusing!

"Er, I, uh, freaked out a bit because of that skeleton, that's all." I explained sheepishly.

"Oh, sorry about that! It actually belongs to me."

Whoa, what a boyish voice out of a— Wait, no, no mystery here. This is *a dude! Nope, totally not panicking right now.*

"If that's your monster, does that mean you're a Tamer?" I asked hesitantly.

"Nope. I'm a Necromancer."

"No way. For real?"

Talk about an even bigger *shocker! To think I would run into a Necromancer—one of the least popular job classes—here, of all places!* If I remembered correctly, there were only about thirty of them in the entire game.

"Yes, for real. These guys are living proof."

Click-clack!

“Rrr-aaghh.”

The white skeleton and zombie raised their hands and greeted me cordially. Not only was it terrifying, but it was also kind of gross. In LJO, you could actually change how certain things appeared to you, like these guys, for example. This feature was probably implemented out of consideration for kids, young teens, and people who couldn’t handle gore or horror well. You could also add a filter to specific types of insects or reptiles, ranging from shadowy black filters to ones with heavy censorship abilities that made such creatures look innocuous.

Until now, I had never encountered any undead aside from ghosts, so I had simply stuck to the default settings. Besides, I wanted to enjoy the fantasy aspect as much as possible without making too huge a compromise. So far, I could still tolerate the bunny guy’s monsters; I could think about what to do later on if I met one that was creepier.

“Cute, aren’t they?”

“*‘C-Cute’?*”

Dude, there’s a HUGE *difference between “tolerable” and “cute”! Those aren’t synonyms!*

“Uh-huh! I mean, there’s just something really sexy about a skeleton in motion, don’t you think? And this zombie! Seeing it move with such swiftness makes me positively swoon!”

Holy shit, what was with this guy? *A femboy who’s a Necromancer with an undead-monster kink?* They were all such distinct qualities that it was hard to grasp his character.

“Anyway, nice to meet you. I’m Chris the Necromancer,” the player introduced himself.

“Yuto. I’m a Tamer.”

“I know! You’re a celebrity, tee-hee!”

Don’t “tee-hee” me! It’s too adorable!

“You’re Silver-Haired, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. A lot of people like to call me that.”

By now, I'd given up trying to keep my identity a secret. After all, I had a bunch of rare monsters with me, like Olto and Sakura—there was no use trying to play dumb.

"It's an honor to meet you. Any plans on taming an undead, by the way?"

"Huh? An undead?"

"Yes!" Chris exclaimed as he bounded towards me, a twinkle in his eye. Though the harassment block prevented him from making physical contact with me, he was still a bit too close for my liking.

"Generally speaking, yes, your monsters might be considered cute! But! In my opinion, they lack oomph!"

"O-Okay...?"

"Imagine this—a skeleton standing behind your small, adorable monsters! Or a zombie, whichever you prefer. What do you think?"

"What do *I* think...?"

All I could picture was me screaming, "Olto! Behind you!" as I watched my companions about to be ambushed. In any case, "cute" was the last thing on my mind. Chris seemed to think otherwise, though.

"Doesn't that sound lovely?" He smiled. Wow, he really meant it; his expression said it all.

"Y-You think?"

"Of course. How could I not? We're basically adding a cute undead to an already adorable group of monsters. That's double the cuteness."

I didn't really understand the appeal. In fact, Chris didn't seem that interested in my companions at all. Compared to Amelia and Ursula's intensity, Chris was pretty indifferent. I guessed the undead were the only things that mattered to him.

"I personally recommend the Poor Zombies in Zone Three since they have both Zombie *and* Skeleton in their evolution routes!"

"Uh-huh..."

“Although Ghosts are cool too, they’re not as cute as skeletons or zombies.”

“Sure. I’ll think about it if I run into one.”

Crap. Time for me to take my leave. If I stayed, there was no telling what bizarre rabbit hole I would fall down. *I’d like to remain a normie, thank you very much!* I was more than content with admiring femboys and the undead from afar, nothing more.

“A-Anyway, it was nice meeting you. I gotta go take care of some personal business now.”

“Aww, stay! Let’s chat about the undead some more!”

Don’t “aww” me, you cutie! Sh-Shit! It’s already begun!

“S-See ya!”

“I’ll tell you all about how cute zombies are the next time we meet!”

No thanks! Run, Yuto! Run, and don’t look back! I ran without stopping, trying to forget the fleeting thoughts that were crossing my mind. For now, I simply needed to distance myself from this pushy, adorable character.

Chapter One: The Battle at the Fire Elemental Gate

After a while, I found myself back in the Town of Beginnings. *Man, what a day.* I was exhausted.

“Fau, Reflet. I want you guys to work together on this task, okay?”

“Hum!”

“Aye!”

Reflet and Fau both saluted at me, the latter perched atop the former’s head. These two were in charge of making potions from our stock of medicinal herbs and the like. In the meantime, I headed to the Magical Beasts Guild to retrieve Himka.

“Chirp.”

“Squeak.”

Rick hitched a ride on my shoulder, which was nothing new. This time, however, we were joined by Drimo, as he didn’t have anything in particular to do.

“All right. Ready to fetch the newest member of our family?”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Squeak squeak.”

In contrast to Rick’s cheerful reply, Drimo simply shrugged his shoulders and waddled away. Not that I expected a grand display of emotion from him; if anything, I preferred his reticent attitude. The only thing we needed to complete the look was a cigarette dangling from his lips. Speaking of cigarettes, would Drimo be willing to smoke one if I managed to buy some from Mattsun, aka The Smoky One?

“Hm!”

Thirty minutes later, a red-haired boy stood before me, waving his arms above his head energetically.



Himka's cute and rather soft appearance suddenly called Chris back to mind.

"Hm?"

"Nothing. Welcome to the family, Himka."

"Chirp!"

"Hmm!"

Down by my feet, Rick raised his paw in greeting. Himka bent forward at the waist and shook his tiny paw.

"Hm-hmm!"

"Chirp? Ch-Chreep!" Rick uttered a distressed squeal. Himka's handshake appeared to have been a tad too strong for my tiny companion. As a matter of fact, the force seemed to have lifted him clear off the ground, as he now dangled above it.

"Squeak."

"Hmm!"

"Sq-Squeak."

Once he was done with Rick, Himka moved on to Drimo, pumping his hand enthusiastically. Even the usually calm Drimo was taken aback, blinking in surprise. So far, I had learned that Himka was incredibly energetic and somewhat lacking in the social awareness department. The same thing happened all over again when we arrived home at our farm. Fearing a repeat of Rick, I put Fau on my palm when it was her turn and made Himka settle for a high five instead. It turned out to be kind of futile, though, as the powerful clap of Himka's hand knocked her straight off my palm and sent her flying. Once everyone had been blessed by his handshake, I pulled Himka aside for a little Q and A sesh in the barn.

"I'm gonna ask you a few questions, so nod if it's a yes and shake your head if it's a no. Capisce?"

"Hm!" Himka nodded eagerly, showing that he understood.

"Poko." Kettle appeared noiselessly, offering me a cup of tea.

“Hey. Thanks, Kettle,” I replied, grateful for the gesture. Kettle felt a lot like a housekeeper—a *tanuki* maid, if you will. Regular housekeepers probably didn’t climb onto the table, though. I patted its stomach in return, which was extra fluffy today. It seemed like Kettle was able to alter its appearance and size to an extent, ranging from toy-poodle size to Olto size. Sometimes it resembled a Tea Kettle Tanuki, with arms and legs sprouting from a kettle, while other times it wore the kettle on its back like a turtle, as it did right now. Although Kettle was cute either way, this form was much nicer for cuddling.

“I see you’re using the teacup I gave you. Neat.”

“Poko!”

Kettle could only produce tea once every six hours. That wasn’t exactly profitable, so I’d decided to save it for myself rather than sell it.

“Okay, first question,” I said, turning to Himka. “For starters, I wanna know if you can fight. Can you use your Malletworking skill and fire magic in battle?”

“Hm.”

“You can’t, eh?”

Another monster specializing in crafting—the same as all the other elementals I had seen so far.

“Hmm...”

“Come on, no need to look so gloomy. I figured as much. It’s okay as long as you do your best at crafting.”

“Hm?”

“Yeah, really. So don’t give me that sad look, okay?”

“Hm!”

Hearing that, Himka jumped up and down with joy, no longer dejected. Perhaps energetic wasn’t the right word for him; expressive was more like it. In that sense, he was similar to Reflet.

“Okay, next question. You’ll need a furnace of some sort to do glassblowing and metalworking, correct?”

“Hm.”

“Do you need a separate furnace for each skill?”

“Hm!” Himka shook his head. Apparently, that wasn’t necessary. In that case, maybe I could just buy the cheapest furnace available and see what he was capable of making. I had apparently misunderstood him, however, as he immediately moved to the corner of the barn and crouched down, humming to himself while he rummaged inside his personal work bag.

“Hm-hmm-hm-hmm!”

“Whoa! No way!” I gasped at the small furnace that had suddenly appeared inside the barn. It seemed that Himka’s work bag doubled as a storage box, although I would never have guessed he had a furnace stashed inside it. Did that mean he could work outdoors if he wanted? Oh, but unlike metal*smithing*, metalworking lacked the ability to repair your equipment’s durability. Maybe there wasn’t much point in being able to use it out in the playing field then.

“Guess that means I don’t need to buy a furnace after all.”

“Hm!” Himka puffed out his chest proudly.

“Hey, can you try making something for me now?”

“Hm?”

“Let’s see... Which ores are good for this? How about these copper ores?” I asked, handing him ten from my inventory.

“Hm-hmm!”

Himka began tossing the ores into the furnace one after another before stirring them around.

“Hm-hm-hmm.”

After a minute or so, he extracted something from the furnace, holding it high so I could have a good look at it.

“Whoa, did you just make an ingot?”

“Hm.” Himka nodded, handing it to me. In true video game fashion, there was no need to wait for it to cool down.

“It really *is* an ingot.”

“Poko,” Kettle agreed as we both stared at it side by side. Since the quality of the copper ores and furnace hadn’t been high to begin with, the end result was also of low quality. Regardless, I was glad to have Himka as our new, much-needed metalworking expert. This was great news—it meant I could potentially make my own ingots for future incubators from now on.

“So, what next? Given that your skill is Metalworking, you’re not done with this ingot yet, are you?”

“Hm!”

Himka beamed confidently, rolling up his sleeves—or pretended to, anyway, seeing as he was wearing a sleeveless top. After I returned the ingot to him, he used fire magic to heat it and began beating it with his mallet on an anvil, which he also produced from his work bag. *What was the difference between Himka and Reflet?* I wondered. Why did Himka have all of the tools he needed for work right from the get-go while Reflet didn’t? Was it due to how affordable their tools were? In Olto’s case, it made sense since he mostly just used a hoe. Maybe the difference was that while Himka could get his work done in the furnace in one minute, Reflet required several days to brew stuff.

“Hm! Hm!”

I turned a few things over in my head as I watched Himka continue to pound the ingot, fully focused on his task. I was startled to see him suddenly grab the red-hot ingot with his bare hands halfway through, but he didn’t seem to feel anything, presumably due to his resistance to fire and heat. He then began stretching the ingot and molding it into some kind of shape, as though he were working with candy.

Five minutes passed, during which I finished my tea and started petting Kettle’s fluffy tanuki tail. Finally, Himka seemed to be done with his task.

“Hmmm!”

“Hey! You done?”

“Hm.”

“Wow! You made a copper tumbler? Nice! It looks really stylish.”

“Poko!”

Although it was just a normal tumbler without any special effects, it was extremely pretty, with a masterful finish. Kettle nodded too, admiring Himka’s work. If you were to buy something like this in real life, it would no doubt cost at least several thousand yen. Given that none of us were capable of wielding metal equipment, we were probably better off with practical items like this.

“Okay, now I have a vague idea about how your Metalworking skill works,” I told Himka. “Can you show me your Glassblowing skills next? What materials do you need?”

“Hm...”

“What is it? Do I not have what you need?”

“Hmm.”

I took out various ores from my inventory and laid them out on the table, but we still seemed to be missing some ingredients for glassblowing. Pottery was also out of the question. It seemed like I would have to wait until we had gathered all the necessary materials.

“Oh well, not much I can do about it now... Guess we’ll just have to go back to the dungeon. Himka, you’re gonna be acting as a tank in battle. You good with that?”

“Hmmm!” Himka jumped up and down, muscles flexed, pumped and eager to fight. Since he was also resistant to fire and heat, there was a chance he could make our dungeon dives slightly easier. That said, I was obviously going to Alyssa’s to buy information related to the dungeon first.

“Well, we’re off now. Take care of things for us, Kettle.”

“Pom-poko!”

After saying goodbye to Kettle, I came to Alyssa’s store, accompanied by Himka, Rick, and Drimo. The rest of the crew was still hard at work on our farm.

“Hey, Yuto. Let me guess: info about the Fire Elemental Gate? Are you here to

sell or buy?” Alyssa asked the moment she saw me.

“P-Perceptive as always, Alyssa. Well, that saves us both some time.”

“I can tell just by looking at the new guy there.”

“Hm?”

One look at my Salamander, Himka, was apparently all the information she needed to draw a conclusion.

“And that hair color... It’s a unique specimen, isn’t it?”

Wow, she could even tell that just by looking...! Wouldn’t expect less from Alyssa.

“To be honest, I don’t really have anything worth selling. Do you have info on the hidden room?”

“Sure do.”

“Figured as much.”

Given that it was located in the first room, most parties would have discovered it by now. The first party that had come to sell Alyssa information on it had even found it the way that we did. *Guess our thought processes had been pretty similar.* Basically, she already knew everything I knew, including the information I had on the monsters that spawned in the rooms and what items you could find. Other parties seemed to be having a hard time with the Wandering Rock’s rolling billiard attack too, many of them respawning due to not preparing enough water.

“You’re the first person to tame and bring me a unique Salamander, though.”

“Guess I can still sell you the deets on Himka then.”

“I’d like that very much.”

“Hm!” Himka greeted Alyssa, both arms raised high above his head. Her expression relaxed, and her eyes crinkled as she smiled at him.

“Himka, huh? She’s lovely. Or should I say he? He’s very cute, but he’s a boy, right? Or a boyish girl, perhaps?”

“I don’t know if monsters have a gender, but my guess is he’s a male. At least,

that's how the other Salamanders are classified."

"I can see him gaining a lot of fans too... So, what kind of abilities does he have?"

"Here, take a look at this," I said as I showed her Himka's stats.

"No way!" she cried. "He even has pottery skills?! Gosh. Unique specimens really are something else!"

"I take it that regular Salamanders don't have Pottery, then."

"Nope. Carlo managed to tame a normal specimen, but his Salamander didn't have this skill. Himka's stats are also slightly higher."

So Pottery was a rare skill. I had no idea how it worked yet, though, due to our lacking ingredients.

"What do you need to use pottery skills? I've shown Himka various materials, but none of them seemed appropriate."

"Well, first of all, you'll need clay. Water and ceramic glaze are a must too. Lastly, you'll need a kiln."

Dang. That was a lot of items.

"A kiln, huh... Himka, do you have one in your work bag?"

"Hm..."

Guess not. I supposed that was to be expected, considering Pottery wasn't usually included in Salamanders' starting skills.

"Adding kiln to shopping list... Done."

"Do you wanna know where to get the other materials too?" Alyssa asked.

"I'd like that, thanks."

"My pleasure. Let's start with clay, then. You can find that in Zone Three."

"Anywhere in Zone Three?"

"Nope, just in the south and the west."

Zone Three was built slightly differently from other zones. Basically, it was a fieldless area. Half of the area was occupied by the Northern, Southern,

Eastern, and Western towns; once you'd passed through each town, you would find a dungeon leading to Zone Four. That probably meant that clay could be found in the southern and western dungeons. I didn't know much about them, only that they were fairly extensive.

"Water you can find anywhere, obviously. I've heard that you can substitute paint for the ceramic glaze, though. Actually, you can also make unglazed pottery, so glaze isn't strictly necessary. I guess it's more for when you want to achieve a specific color or effect."

In that case, we could omit the glaze too. That just left the clay and a kiln. I supposed I could always borrow one from a rental craft studio, though. As the name implied, rental craft studios were facilities that you could rent for crafting activities. You usually had to pay by the hour, though, so you were probably better off buying the equipment in the long run. That said, quite a few players used these studios, as they allowed you to use moderately advanced equipment and saved you the hassle of worrying about storage issues. Renting seemed like a good option for the time being if all I wanted to do was test out Himka's skills. I didn't have space to set up a kiln as it was. If only I could find one that was small enough, like Himka's portable furnace... *Wait.* Maybe there *was* one, and I just didn't know about it.

"Do you know if portable kilns exist?"

"Yup, they do. They're quite expensive, though."

"They are?"

"Mhm. Even the cheapest one will cost you 50,000 G, and that's with *the* most basic of functions. You could buy a stationary one that performs the same for just 2,500 G."

"Right..."

With that much of a price difference, I was a bit hesitant to buy one just yet. It was probably better to get some clay and do a test run at a rental studio before I made my decision. Not that I couldn't afford to pay 50,000 G, though. *Oh yeah, I might as well ask about Glassblowing as well while we're on the subject.*

"I'd like to ask about Glassblowing next. I don't have materials for that either.

Do you know what I need to get?”

“Sure do. It’s really simple, actually. All you need is either silica or quartz, plus a furnace.”

“That’s it?”

“Mhm. You can also mix in ores if you wanna add special colors or effects, but like ceramic glaze, they’re not a must.”

“Where can I get them?”

“Same place—Zone Three. Either north or east.”

In other words, if we went to Zone Three, there was a good chance we could get the materials needed for making ceramics and glass. Even if we didn’t attempt the dungeon, it seemed likely that we could buy them at one of the town stalls.

After making some casual conversation and learning more about how to clear the dungeon, I left Alyssa’s stall and went on my way. Incidentally, I didn’t have to pay for anything—Himka’s info had sold for a lot more than I was hoping for.

“Ready to go home?”

“Hm!”

“Chirp!”

“Squeak.”

While Himka and Drimo had waited patiently for me to finish chatting with Alyssa, Rick had clambered onto Drimo’s helmet, enjoying playing on its smooth, slippery surface. Drimo seemed a tad peeved by the bushy tail waving in front of his face.

“Sorry, buddy,” I apologized on behalf of Rick.

“Squeak.”

“Chirp?”

Drimo raised his hand slightly as if to say, *Don’t worry about it.* Talk about a mature mole. Meanwhile, Rick, still blocking Drimo’s view with his tail, tilted his head, a puzzled look on his face. *You, on the other hand, need to grow up a*

little. Not that it bothered *me* particularly. He looked adorable as hell clinging onto the helmet; I couldn't resist taking a bunch of screenshots.

As an added bonus, Alyssa had given me some information about the dungeons in Zone Three, namely their names and a brief overview of each place.

On the outskirts of the Eastern Town lay the Fire Beasts' Lair, a highly unpopular location, home to various fire-type monsters. People often stumbled and lost their footing on the unstable, sandy ground, which was the reason players tended to avoid it. That being said, it was also rumored to be the area you were most likely to find silica, so I wasn't about to cross it off my list just yet.

Beyond the Northern Town was the High Wind Trail. Strong winds constantly blew through this area, impeding players' movements and affecting the trajectory of air-launched weapons. As troublesome as it sounded, it seemed unavoidable if I wanted to obtain silica.

Traveling through the Western Town led you to a dungeon called the Tunnel of Detritus. So far, this was the dungeon that had been explored the most, and most of the areas and hidden elements had already been mapped and uncovered. The reason for this was simple: gnomes. During the beta phase, this dungeon had been a hot spot of gnome activity, leading many female Tamers to comb the place obsessively in search of them. If I wanted clay, this was the place to visit.

Finally, there was the Underground Canal outside the Southern Town. As the name suggested, the dungeon was designed like a canal; in some cases, you had to wade through paths that were completely submerged underwater. While that didn't bother me too much, I wasn't sure how my companions would feel about it. Rather than plow through such a place, it seemed easier to head to the Tunnel of Detritus instead, an obstacle I already had all the necessary info to clear.

"But first: round two of the Fire Elementals' trial. I'm counting on you too, Himka. Let's do our best."

"Hm-hmm!"

“Squeak squeak!”

“Chirp!”

“All right, all right! That goes for you guys too, obviously! D’ah, quit pulling my robe!”

Thirty minutes later, we were back inside the Fire Elementals’ trial, this time facing a major predicament. Himka wasn’t the problem; despite this being his first time on the battlefield, he was actually doing much better than I’d expected. Although his tanking abilities were pretty much on par with Olto pre-evolution, he had the extra advantage of not catching aflame, thanks to his fire and heat resistance; he was the perfect tank for this dungeon. I had no worries about letting him take on weaker monsters like Fire Larks.

The problem was, in fact, Sakura. I had wanted to see how well she would fare as a tree elemental in a fire dungeon, but unfortunately...

“...!”

“Not *again*! Here, Sakura!” I panted, dousing her in water.

“...”

As it happened, Sakura immediately caught on fire every time she was struck by a Fire Lark or Salamander. As Reflet, courtesy of being an Undine, was resistant to the Blaze status ailment, Sakura was instead vulnerable to it. Once every two battles she went up in flames, requiring dousing and healing from me and Reflet every time. As a result, we were quickly running out of MP. To make matters worse, Fire Larks and Salamanders were semiresistant to tree-based attacks, lessening the impact of Sakura’s blows.

For this round, I had selected Himka, Sakura, Reflet, Fau, Drimo, and Olto as my party members. I had chosen Sakura to take Bear Bear’s place based on her ability to act as both a skilled tank and attacker. Under ordinary circumstances, this should have been a breeze for her, but her incompatibility with the Fire Elementals’ trial led to devastating results. Swapping out Rick with Himka had also decreased our overall firepower, causing each battle to take twice as long. The longer we dragged out a fight, the more likely we were to suffer damage

and become inflicted with Blaze. We were chewing through our MP and resources at a frightening speed.

“Man, this is really inefficient.”

“...”

“Hey, come on. No need to look so bleak. You did nothing wrong, Sakura. It’s my fault for bringing you here despite knowing the dangers.”

“...”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, okay?”

“...”

No matter what I said, Sakura merely shook her head, her expression utterly miserable. I was afraid that if we continued our search, it would have a negative effect on my favorability score. Not to mention how traumatizing it was to see her constantly engulfed in flames. No matter how many times it happened, it remained terrifying to witness a cute girl (literally) on fire. Whenever someone was inflicted with Blaze, they would be partially scorched and covered in soot for a while. On Sakura, the effect was even more pronounced due to her realistic appearance, and her burns looked all the more painful, whereas Rick, Drimo, and Bear Bear simply looked like their fur was dirty, Olto like he’d rolled in mud.

In the end, I decided it would be best to head home to swap Sakura out with Bear Bear. I made a mental note to take my monsters’ compatibility with dungeons and field bosses more seriously from now on.

“...Sorry for being an ass, Sakura.” I sighed. Her crestfallen expression when we parted still haunted me, and I felt a pang of guilt.

“Mm-mm.”

“Are you trying to cheer me up?”

“Hm.”

“Growl growl.”

“Hum!”

“Squeak.”

“La la la♪”

My companions patted my knee reassuringly, Drimo’s touch slightly lighter than the others’. Fau also began playing a cheerful tune atop Reflet’s head as if to lighten the mood. I was touched by everyone’s kindness.

“All right, time for Take Three. You guys ready?”

“Mm-mm!”

“Hm.”

We returned to the Fire Elemental Gate once more, horsing around the whole way. While I felt terrible for subbing Sakura out of the team, I couldn’t deny that our party was much more stable with Bear Bear, and we were able to proceed with far more confidence. Although the absence of Rick meant that we couldn’t gather as many items this go-around, this was probably our best lineup for conquering the Fire Elementals’ trial.

After several more battles...

“Hum-hum-hum!”

“All right! Finally!”

“Hum!”

At long last, Reflet reached level 25. So far, it seemed like the evolution thresholds for all four Elemental types were the same.

“Hey, looks like you learned a new skill too.”

Olto had acquired his new skill, Bountiful Harvest, at level 10, but Reflet’s hadn’t appeared until just now, at level 25. *Guess there are* some *differences, then.*

“Aquamobilize? Dang!”

Reflet’s new skill was capable of boosting *all* party members’ movements in water—presumably, that meant we’d all be able to hold our breaths for longer and swim more capably. This would no doubt come in super handy during underwater explorations.

“Plus, you get to evolve now! Man, I can’t wait to see what you turn into! Let’s check out your options, eh?”

Grinning, I pulled up my status menu to check Reflet’s evolution routes. Olto had had four routes when it was his time to evolve; how about Reflet?

“Hmm... Looks like yours are Undine Cook, Selkie, and Undine Fräulein.”

As I expected, Reflet had three options to choose from. Her max favorability route remained locked for now, as I had yet to obtain her Tamed Monster’s Heart. Undine Cook was likely her normal evolution; it granted advanced Brewing and Cooking skills and specialized water magic. She would also obtain specialized staff skills and have the option of learning new cooking-related abilities.

Selkies were, if my memory served me correctly, mythological sea people who wore sealskin. While this sounded kind of cute if you imagined them as cartoon characters dressed in animal onesies, they’d probably be pretty creepy to see in real life. Abilitywise, this evolution seemed to specialize in underwater exploration. In addition to gaining advanced Fishing, water magic, and Aquamotion, Selkies would also learn staff skills and Water Exploration. Moreover, they were capable of combat, which would significantly increase our party’s overall strength if I chose this route. However, what truly interested me was the Undine Fräulein, Reflet’s unique evolution. *Er, what did “Fräulein” mean again? Better look it up.*

“Let’s see... Fräulein means ‘young woman’ in German. Gotcha.”

Didn’t the term “Undine” also originate from German? *That’s definitely in keeping with the theme, all right.* That said, game designers tended to care mostly about how things sounded, or simply go with whatever term was most universally acknowledged, so they probably weren’t that focused on linguistic accuracy.

“Yup, just as I thought. The unique evolution is pretty much in between the other two.”

Name: Reflet *Race: Undine Fräulein* Base Level: Lv. 25

Master: Yuto

HP: 70/70 *MP: 8888*

Strength: 10 *Endurance: 11* Agility: 17

Dexterity: 21 *Intelligence: 20* Sanity: 19

Skills: Brewing, Aquamotion (Advanced), Concoct, Fishing, Fermentation, Water Magic (Specialized), Cooking (Advanced), Aquamobilize (20), Healer, Brewing Acceleration

Equipment: Undine's Staff, Undine's Garments, Undine's Barrette

Choosing this evolution would grant Reflet advanced Aquamotion and Cooking skills, specialized water magic, and a new skill called Healer. Furthermore, she could select whatever skills she liked for the remaining slots. The route I had chosen for Olto, Gnome Leader, also incorporated the best characteristics of Gnome Farmers and Knockers, which had been his standard evolution options. Similarly, Undine Fräuleins seemed to get the best of both worlds, not to mention the skill Healer, which was pretty impressive:

Healer: Increases amount of HP healed from magic or items when skill is in use. Sanity score increases in proportion to the number of party members. User temporarily acquires Conceal while skill is in effect.

This would be incredibly beneficial to Reflet, considering she essentially *was* the main healer in our party. The added protection Conceal offered would also prevent her from taking too much damage from our enemies. Given how potent Olto's Guardian skill was, I had no doubts this skill would exceed my expectations too.

"Well, only one obvious choice here."

Unique evolution it is!

“Ready, Reflet?”

“Hum!”

“And...go!”

“Hum-hum!”

A bright white light instantly engulfed Reflet as she began her transformation. Once the light had subsided, I let out a sigh, admiring her new and improved form. For starters, she had grown taller: at just over 140 centimeters, we were almost the same height. Though her pale-blue outfit showed very few changes, it appeared to have more frills now, and the indigo patterns adorning it had become more intricate. Overall, she seemed more grown up and ladylike.

“Looking cute, Reflet.”

“Hummm!”

Reflet beamed at my praise, jumping up and down like a kid at a carnival. Though she looked older now, she still retained her cheerful demeanor and childlike innocence.

“All right! Show me what you’ve got, girl!”

“Hum!”

Over the course of a few battles, I was able to assess Reflet’s new abilities. Unsurprisingly, her Healer skill was exceptionally powerful, as the increased HP recovery rate meant she could conserve a higher amount of MP. Her stats had also improved greatly, her Aqua Heal twice as effective as before. Moreover, due to the temporary concealing effect the Healer skill provided, she was able to use her healing abilities without generating too much enmity, allowing her to do her job free of interruption. Thanks to this, even Blaze was no longer a problem—we were able to recover with ease. No doubt she would be an excellent healer out in the general playing field and in other dungeons as well.

After another grueling hour, it was Fau’s turn to shine. At level 25, she, too, had learned a new skill and was ready to evolve.

“Aye!” she exclaimed, sitting in a Snufkin-esque pose atop my head and strumming her lute excitedly as if to show she was aware of what was coming

next.

“Hmm, your new skill is...Long-Range Sound Transmission?”

According to the description, this skill was capable of carrying sound longer distances. Did that mean it could expand the area of effect of her Singing and Musical Performance skills? *Doesn’t sound that useful... Wait, I take that back.* On second thought, wouldn’t that mean she’d be able to grant buffs to more players during a raid boss battle? Even if that wasn’t the case, I could see it being a great asset to have during parties—the longer her range, the better people would be able to hear her music. I wasn’t sure if we’d have another flower-viewing picnic like the recent one, but it was bound to come in handy if we did.

“For evolution routes, we have...only two, huh?”

As with Reflet, I was slightly torn between wanting to evolve her immediately or waiting until I’d unlocked her max favorability score route. In Reflet’s case, her unique evolution had been the deciding factor, but for Fau, I was only given normal evolution options. That being said, it was possible that I would need a specific item in order to max out her favorability score, as had been the case with Rick; if so, there was no telling when I’d be able to evolve her.

“Let’s just evolve you now then. At the very least, you’re guaranteed to become stronger than you are now.”

Since Fau was a normal pixie specimen, I could choose from two options: Fairy or Korpokkur. No doubt they would both be cute; it all came down to their abilities now. I decided to read the description for Fairies first.

“Uh-huh, uh-huh... Hang on, it says ‘Flight’ here. Does this mean she’ll be able to fly then?”

I guessed that made sense, since fairies usually had wings. In fact, people would probably riot if the fairies in this game were completely wingless. In exchange for gaining the ability to fly, however, it seemed like she would lose one of her current skills: Jump. Or was it more so a case of Jump transmuting into Flight?

Additionally, her Singing abilities would gain an upgrade to Advanced, and she

would also learn the skills Evade, Presence Detection, and Dazzle. Dazzle appeared to be a skill that lowered the chances of her being hit by an enemy attack. Being a passive skill, it probably wasn't that powerful, but it was reassuring to know she was less likely to be caught off guard by a critical hit. This was a great set of skills to have considering how low Fau's HP and defenses were, as it drastically lowered the chances of her becoming a sitting duck. I was positively stoked—though, to be perfectly honest, I'd already been pretty excited at the prospect of her growing wings, before I even learned about her new abilities.

"Definitely like the sound of that. How about Korpokkur?"

Sadly, the Korpokkur weren't capable of flight. Overall, they weren't markedly different from pixies; in terms of abilities, they gained advanced Musical Performance and Conceal skills, and their Gather skill turned into Collect. They also learned a couple of new skills, such as Archery and Fishing. I wasn't sure how powerful they'd be as archers, given their diminutive stature, but becoming a better gatherer and long-range attacker didn't seem like a bad upgrade. Then again, they weren't capable of flying...

"Hmm... Let's go with Fairy. After all, we don't have any team members who can fly yet."

It was a tough decision, as I would have loved to see Fau dressed in traditional Ainu clothing too. *If I ever obtain another pixie, I'll be sure to evolve them into a Korpokkur then.*

"And...done! See you on the other side, Fau!"

"Aye!"

Once I'd selected my option, a bright light engulfed Fau. However, because I'd started the evolution process while she was still perched on my head, I couldn't really tell what was happening. *Damn it, I should've put her on my palm or something first.*

Name: Fau *Race: Fairy* Base Level: Lv. 25

Master: Yuto

HP: 58/58 *MP: 8888*

Strength: 6 *Endurance: 6* Agility: 28

Dexterity: 26 *Intelligence: 22* Sanity: 19

Skills: Musical Performance, Heal, Conceal, Singing (Advanced), Eavesdrop, Gather, Fire Resistance, Fire Summoning, Night Vision, Alchemy, Long-Range Sound Transmission, Flight, Evade, Presence Detection, Dazzle

Equipment: Winged Fairy's Lute, Winged Fairy's Clothes, Winged Fairy's Necklace

"Aye! La di da da...♪"

The light disappeared, and I heard Fau's sonorous voice from above as she strummed her lute—not that I could see anything that was going on while she was still on top of my head.

"Hey, Fau, come down here."

"Aye!" Fau replied cheerily, fluttering down onto my outstretched palms.

"I knew it! You have *wings* now!"

"Aye!"

The change in her appearance was dramatic. While her height and curly red hair remained the same, she now had four dragonfly wings—two on each side—sprouting from her back. They were fairly huge, stretching a little past her knees. Her clothes were also noticeably different. Instead of the blue short-sleeved shirt and shorts she had initially been wearing, she now wore a blue leotard coupled with some kind of frilly, tutu-like miniskirt. The outfit had an incredibly deep, plunging neckline that extended all the way down to her navel, with laces crisscrossing it like the top of a sneaker. I couldn't see any straps on her shoulders; from the front, it looked like a V-shaped halter dress. It also had a low, plunging back due to her wings, making the outfit even more daring. Given her tiny stature and childlike physique, there was nothing remotely sexy about it; anyone who would think otherwise desperately needed professional

help.

There were a couple of other minor changes as well: her poncho was gone, and she now wore a metal choker around her neck, plus brown boots instead of sandals. Overall, she looked more fairylike and less like Snufkin now. Her lute had also gotten a miniature upgrade. Her lute—which I would call “charming” if I were to be generous, dull and uninspired if not—had until now been only a solid shade of brown. Now, though, it was a bit spiffier, accented with red around the edges. No doubt its stats had improved too. I was looking forward to her future performances.

“Ready for a test-drive before we head home?” I asked, glancing up. Funnily enough, she still liked sitting on my head, despite having wings now.

“Aye!”

Her appearance wasn’t the only thing that had changed—Fau’s fighting style had also undergone a complete transformation postevolution. Until now, she had always performed her songs at the rear and attacked with her Fire Summoning skill. However, to my surprise, she actually zoomed past us in battle, flitting around our enemies while singing and plucking her lute. Naturally, the increased hate made her more of a priority target. This was where Fau’s new abilities really shone, though. She’d been extremely nimble even before evolving, but now that she could fly and possessed Evade, Presence Detection, and Dazzle, she was able to perform evasive maneuvers almost effortlessly. As such, she managed to avoid most of the serious blows.

While she was still susceptible to AoE attacks, such as the Fire Larks’ fire sparks or the Deranged Fire Elementals’ scatter shots, attacks like those didn’t actually pose much of a threat, due to their weak potency. Having fire resistance also played a big part, as it meant she was immune to Blaze. In short, Fau had established a unique combat style for herself as an evasion tank and buffer. I wasn’t sure how well she’d fare against stronger enemies in the future, but for now, she was a reliable team player to have in the Fire Elementals’ trial.

Her advanced singing abilities also meant her buffs were stronger than ever. As powerful as Drimo’s signature combo move was to begin with, I was still taken aback when we brought down a Deranged Fire Elemental now in one go.

The downside was that her upgraded skill required more MP; if I wasn't careful, we'd run out of mana potions in no time.

I smiled at Reflet and Fau. "You've both gotten a lot stronger."

"Hum!"

"Aye!"

As challenging as this dungeon was, the rewards were also great, and we came out of it significantly stronger than before. Thanks to Fau and Reflet's evolutions, the going was a lot smoother now, and I almost considered grinding there for a bit longer. At the same time, I was itching to explore Zone Three. That reminded me; the following day was when the new batch of LJO units went on sale in real life. The next wave of players would likely be arriving in a few days' time, and in greater numbers, no doubt. It was probably better to try and clear Zone Three while I was there, before it got too crowded.

"Hmm... Well, I did achieve both of my goals. Maybe I'll head back and do some experimenting next."

We'd managed to obtain quite a few foaming tree fruits and fire ores during our quest, so I had plenty of ingredients to work with. On our way back to the Town of Beginnings, it occurred to me that I'd never properly explored the four towns in Zone Three. Thus far, they had been nothing but places for me to teleport to in order to return to the elemental gates in Zone Two. Despite visiting the Eastern Town every morning to work on our farm there, I knew next to nothing about most of it. Although Alyssa had given me a map of the four towns, I hadn't actually seen all of them for myself. *Maybe I should take a little tour before the newcomers arrive,* I thought. I decided I would do just that once I was done with my experiments. Besides, I needed to travel to Zone Three anyway to find clay and silica.

As I returned to the barn, mulling over my thoughts, I saw a figure crouched on the ground outside it. *Who could that be?* I wondered. It had to be one of my friends, I figured. Upon closer look, I saw that they were playing with Kettle, who was sprawled out on the ground, a look of contentment on its face as this person scratched it under its chin.

"Poko..."

“Heh heh, do you like it when I scratch you here?”

“P-Poko!”

“How about here?”

“Pom.”

“Mmm. Yes, that’s the look I wanted to see. Heh heh heh...”

The visitor was none other than Rikyu, aka Master of Explosives. As per our agreement, it looked like she’d come to visit my monsters, although the way she was phrasing things sounded incredibly questionable.

“Hey, Rikyu. Didn’t know you were coming by,” I greeted her.

“Heh heh. Welcome back, Silver-Haired,” she replied with her signature laugh. “Let me guess. You were at the Fire Elemental Gate, weren’t you?”

“Yeah. How’d you know?”

“For starters, you were trying to clear the Southern Forest, *and* it’s Fire Day today. Doesn’t take a genius to put two and two together, heh heh.”

“Ah, gotcha.”

Rikyu continued to stroke Kettle while chatting with me, eyes glinting gleefully behind her long bangs.

“I see you’ve taken a liking to Kettle.”

“So this little dearie is called Kettle, huh?”

“Technically it’s a Tea Kettle Tanuki yokai, but that’s kinda long, so I just call it Kettle for short.”

“A yokai? I see it’s an NPC too. So you didn’t tame it?”

“Nope. You see...”

I proceeded to explain to Rikyu how I had obtained Kettle. Just to be safe, I checked the Quick-Eared Cats forum first to make sure my information had already been posted. It had, much to my relief—I couldn’t land in hot water for sharing something that was already out in the open for everyone to see.

“W-Wow, I had no idea...” Rikyu sighed once I was done. “I skipped the

auction because I absolutely detest crowds, but...now I'll definitely have to go to the next one."

"Good luck. I'm sure you can find other yokai if you look hard enough, though, like a Sunekosuri."

"No, that won't do. It *has* to be a Tea Kettle Tanuki!"

"Huh? Do you, like, have a thing for tanukis?"

"Heh heh heh... Kettle... Hiragumo..."

"Oh, right."

So you're a "Bomberman" stan, huh? Other than Sen-no-Rikyu, she appeared to be a fan of Matsunaga Hisahide as well, aka the infamous tea enthusiast who had allegedly blown himself up. "Hiragumo," or flat spider, was the name of his prized tea kettle; according to lore, he had filled it with gunpowder and blown it up with him, meeting an explosive end. All things considered, it was incredibly fitting for Rikyu's image.

"Whoa, wait a minute. You aren't going to pack a *tanuki* with gunpowder and use it as some kinda weapon of self-destruction, are you?"

"Heh heh, of course not. I'll make sure to use a regular kettle for that. Heh heh heh heh."

"...Poko."

Kettle cowered beneath Rikyu, its eyes suddenly hollow. It now seemed petrified of her with the way she chuckled to herself, stroking it continuously. *Poor thing. Better change the subject... Hmm, what was most likely to catch her interest?*

"Oh yeah, that's right! I got something for you, Rikyu!" I exclaimed, inspiration striking.

"For me?"

"Yep. Here you go."

"Why, this is green tea!"

Phew. I knew that would grab her attention. The instant she saw me produce

some green tea from my inventory, she sprang to her feet, taking the cup from me and gazing at it intently. Meanwhile, Kettle had made a hasty escape. As much as it seemed to have enjoyed her touch, the story of the exploding kettle was a bit too much, apparently. Maybe it thought Rikyu wanted to turn *it* into a bomb? However, she didn't even seem to have noticed Kettle's departure—at the moment, she only had eyes for green tea.

"M-May I...?"

"Go ahead. It's all yours."

"Thank you..." she mumbled, bringing the cup to her lips. I didn't blame her for her slightly over-the-top reaction; after all, I'd been pretty stoked too the first time I got to drink green tea in-game.

"Heh heh heh! It's green tea, all right!" she chuckled delightedly.

"Glad you like it."

"Wh-Where did you get this?"

"Kettle made it, actually."

I told Rikyu how Kettle had made green tea for me in exchange for offering it herbal tea. *Hang on*—I hadn't told Alyssa about this yet, had I? Oh well, I supposed I'd have to ask Rikyu to keep it a secret for now.

"Heh heh, my lips are sealed. I'm pretty good at keeping promises, you know. Hey, Silver-Haired. You wouldn't happen to have enough stock to sell, do you?"

"I-I don't, unfortunately. Sorry about that."

"Heh heh heh. Understood... But yes, the auction... Better sell as many bombs as I can to save up for the next one. I'd love to get my hands on a tea kettle that I can turn into Hiragumo."

Ah, you're gonna name your tea kettle bomb Hiragumo, huh? From the looks of it, she was dead set on acquiring a tea kettle at the next auction.

"Heh heh heh. I must visit the Fire Elemental Gate right away. Bet it's a treasure trove of valuable materials."

"Got a fire crystal?"

“Heh heh. Not to worry—I have a few. They make great ingredients for my bombs.”

Don’t tell me she used those expensive fire crystals for her bombs*?* D-Damn, she wasn’t called Pyro for nothing. Those had to be really powerful bombs, though.

“But why didn’t you go to the Fire Elemental Gate sooner then?” I asked. If she was so sure she could find ingredients for bomb making there, she could’ve gone much earlier, right?

“Heh heh heh... I’m scared of crowds, that’s why.”

“...Ah. That explains it.”

She had a point. Larger crowds were inevitable at this stage, the place still teeming with players like me who wanted to get a head start.

“You’ve already been to the Fire Elementals’ trial, right? Find anything that might be useful for bomb making? Heh heh.”

“Uhh... Here, it’s easier if I just show you,” I said, laying out the materials we had obtained in the dungeon. Although there weren’t that many, Rikyu’s eyes shone at the sight of them.

“Wow... These all have fire attributes. Heh heh.”

“How about these? They explode when you use them as nut bombs—just a small explosion though, mind you.”

“Foaming tree fruit? Interesting... That’s good to know. Heh heh heh, these will make excellent bombs.” Rikyu grinned. She looked like a mad scientist, her eyes wide and unblinking beneath her bangs. “Well, I’m off now. Thank you for the insider scoop, heh heh.”

“Don’t mention it. It’s the least I can do in return for the bombs.”

Thanks to her, defeating that field boss had been a cinch; this was nothing compared to that. Or so I thought...

“Heh heh heh. In that case, consider this payment for the tea and information.”

“Huh? No, really, it’s fine. I didn’t do anything.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say that, heh heh. The tea was excellent.”

“But isn’t thi—”

“My pride and joy, yes. Farewell, Silver-Haired.”

“Hey, Rikyu, wait u—”

“Heh heh, heh heh heh...”

And just like that, she was gone, leaving me with a few shiny, black bombs. They had a slightly different shape and name from the ones she’d given me last time; these new bombs were called Miniature Flame Bombs (The Rikyu Special: New and Improved).

“The ‘new and improved’ part sounds so ominous...”

Even the regular Rikyu Specials had terrified me with the force of their explosion—how much more powerful could *these* be? Besides, I still had one left from the previous set.

“Guess I’ll use these as a last resort...”

For now, I decided to get started on my experiments, as there were still plenty of things I had yet to test out. After some thought, I chose to start with what was left of the foaming tree fruits, of which I had already propagated a few and planted them on our farm.

“Guess I’ll try eating them first.”

To begin with, I had no idea whether they were even edible, given that they were basically explosives.

“They won’t explode if I cut them open, will they?” I gulped, slicing one gingerly. Thankfully, nothing of the sort happened, although I did stiffen a bit when I heard a small *pshh* from the soda-like substance evaporating.

“Hmm... It’s kinda bitter. Also tastes pretty earthy.”

“Chreep...”

“Aye...”

“Squeak...”

My monsters grimaced in turn after eating them. I had given one each to Rick, Fau, and Drimo, the only ones on my team capable of eating foaming tree fruits, but none of them seemed to like them either. That was a bit unexpected: I’d figured that, at the very least, Fau and Drimo would be okay with them since they both loved vegetables. I now knew that the mildly bitter aftertaste on the Heat Resistance Potions (Weather) came from the foaming tree fruits in it.

“Can I actually make juice with these...?”

Perhaps mixing them with other ingredients would diminish some of the aftertaste. In any case, though, I couldn’t make any Heat Resistance Potions (Weather) due to missing a few components. My only options at the moment were to either save them for Rick’s nut bombs or use them in cooking. *Might as well see what I can make with them then.*

“Besides, if this works, it means I’ll be able to drink fizzy drinks. That’s totally something worth hustling for.”

Sure, I could drink soda anytime in the *real* world, but that wasn’t the point—the point was that I wanted to drink soda *with my monsters* in-game. To get rid of the earthy taste, I decided to try mixing the fruit with the following ingredients: white pears, purple persimmons, crimson grapes, green peaches, amber pumpkins, cure carrots, white tomatoes, walnuts, and honey.

“Guess we can try adding some fruit vinegar t— Hm? Is this yogurt? Does that mean it’s done?” I wondered aloud, discovering an unfamiliar item in my inventory. Apparently, Reflet had logged it for me, along with some cheese. *Imagine, our first-ever dairy products!* There had to be at least ten servings each.

“All right! Let’s give ’em a taste test.”

I decided to start with the cheese. As soon as I selected one serving from my inventory, a block of Swiss cheese shaped like a slice of cake appeared before me. It looked similar to Emmentaler cheese and reminded me of a certain cartoon mouse’s favorite food. Texturewise, however, it was closer to cheddar or Gouda and felt incredibly soft to the touch. I supposed the results varied depending on how long you fermented it and the types of ingredients you used.

This was a game, after all, and the process itself was entirely different from real life. Tentatively, I broke off a piece and popped it into my mouth.

"Hmm. It's cheese all right, but..."

Unfortunately, it didn't taste as good as the cheese I'd had in Alf: this was milder and also slightly gamy. Still, it wasn't utterly inedible. I supposed it was an acceptable enough appetizer for red wine.

"Okay, how about the yogurt?"

Next, I tried a bit of the yellowish yogurt using one of Sakura's wooden spoons.

"Blegh! Smells and tastes like sour milk!"

How should I describe the taste? It wasn't downright *awful*, and still tasted unmistakably like yogurt, but compared to the stuff I was accustomed to in real life, this was roughly thirty percent tangier and smelled equally more sour. Even though I normally ate my yogurt with very little sugar, this was hard to eat on its own. Was it because it was made with goat's milk instead of cow's milk? Or did it have to do with my equipment levels not being high enough? That said, perhaps the extra tanginess would work in our favor if we used the yogurt as a condiment instead.

"Eh, whatever. Might as well use this too."

I couldn't very well use cheese to make juice, but if I could make yogurt drinks, I could potentially eliminate the earthiness of the foaming tree fruit and sourness of the yogurt.

"What about the other fermented stuff...?"

Aside from cheese and yogurt, I also had brined olives and a huge amount of trash in my inventory. I'd tried salt-curing some olives, hoping I could make something like the ones in real life. My plan seemed to have worked—no doubt these would make great pizza toppings. The trash was a bit concerning, though. Apparently, I had screwed something up pretty badly, but what...? I tried to remember what I'd filled the barrels with the other day, scooping up the contents for closer inspection.

“Now, what did I...? Oh! The cherry blossom petals!”

The pile of “trash” turned out to be the cherry blossom petals that I’d tried pickling after the picnic. I hadn’t really expected to succeed, and sure enough, the cherry blossoms were nothing more than an unidentified mass. Considering how I could brine the fruit from Olive Treants, I might have a shot at it if I used Otherworldly Cherry Blossom Petals instead. I’d have to wait until I’d collected a few more, though.

I continued making more drinks, although after a while I started caring less about brewing soda and more about finding the tastiest combinations.

“The best combo is green peaches, yogurt, two units of honey, and foaming tree fruit. Let’s name it ‘Peach Yogurt Cider (Original Recipe).’”

The drink tasted similar to Calkiss soda, with a good balance of refreshing and tart flavors. Due to the yogurt, it no longer smelled bad, and the peach added a pleasant sweetness to it. The only downside was that it wasn’t as fizzy as I would’ve liked it to be. There seemed to be a problem with the way I prepared the foaming tree fruit, which resulted in the final product being rather flat. No doubt I was letting the carbonation escape whenever I peeled them, as evidenced by the *pshh* sound I heard each time. At first, I considered using the whole thing, peel and all, but the skin was even earthier and more bitter than the fruit, so I eventually scrapped that idea. Worse still, the soda made with the entire fruit was extra carbonated, which would have been great if it didn’t smell and taste like fizzy wheatgrass cider. *Nuh-uh.* There was no way I could stomach another glass of that vile stuff.

“Here, you guys can drink this.”

“Mm-mm.”

“Growl.”

I prepared two glasses of the best drink I’d made so far for Olto and Bear Bear, who were both able to drink juice.

“Bottoms up. No need to hold back,” I said, handing them a glass each of peach yogurt cider.

“Mm-mm!”

“Growl growl!”

Olto and Bear Bear tossed their heads back as they downed their drinks, hands on their hips like actors in a soda commercial. What followed were two completely different reactions.

“Mm-mmm!”

After downing his juice in one gulp, Olto wiped his mouth with the back of his free hand, letting out a loud, satisfied sigh. He seemed to like the cider a lot, and the way he drank it made it look genuinely tasty. He also had a bit of foam in the corner of his mouth that he’d failed to wipe off, making him even cuter. I had no doubt that soft-drink companies would scramble to cast Olto in their commercials if he were a real person.

“Growl growl growl!”

Bear Bear, on the other hand, furrowed their brow, shuddering all over as though they’d experienced something deeply unpleasant. They seemed to be expressing with their entire body just how much they disliked the peach yogurt cider.

“Mm-mm?”

“Growl...”

Seeing Olto cheer up Bear Bear, who was much bigger than him, was a pretty heartwarming sight. Smiling, I made a mental note not to give Bear Bear any more carbonated drinks from now on.

Now, what to do with all these leftovers?

“I can’t possibly drink *all* of them,” I muttered, staring at the various drinks lining the table. The flavors ranged from downright disgusting to passable, and almost all of them came with a different set of effects. Drinks that were both useful *and* tasty were few and far between; in that sense, the original recipe I’d added to my collection was a huge win. Not only did it taste good, but it also had a slight chance of HP recovery and bonus fire resistance for twenty minutes. Frankly, it was a miracle.

“Other than that, the foaming tree fruit, crimson grape, honey, and fruit

vinegar combo is also pretty good. I'll add that one to my collection as 'Mixed Fruit Cider (Original Recipe).'"

It would probably taste better if I swapped the honey for royal jelly, but that stuff was far too valuable to risk making juice with for now.

"Hmm, what should I do with all these leftovers?"

For dishes cooked in-game, the amount of food you ended up with depended on the quantity of ingredients you used. Since my Cooking skill level was higher now, nearly half of the drinks I'd made had two or more servings; all single-serve beverages were gone, since I'd already drunk them. If I were to attempt something like this in real life, I'd definitely be groaning on the toilet about now. That said, there was still at least one each of the drinks I'd managed to double or triple, amounting to a total of *twenty-nine* kinds of juice to consume. Saving the ones that tasted good was easy enough, but...

"What about the ones that *don't?* Seems a waste to just chuck them out."

I supposed I could sell them at my farm stand like the last time I cooked too much food, but *only* selling stuff that tasted terrible...?

"No, wait, I've got it. I can do a combination of both delicious and disgusting, Russian roulette style! Or maybe even a mystery zone?"

Mystery zones referred to a special assortment of items that you sometimes found at vending machines. The drinks that ended up in these "zones"—mainly ones that didn't sell well—were determined by the stores or companies that owned the machines and included things like Dr Capper and McMol, or out-of-season drinks like oshiruko, aka sweet red bean soup. No doubt there were countless children who had been let down by these mystery prizes. I decided to borrow inspiration from that idea and do the same at my farm stand. I was positive it'd be a hit—after all, I always ended up buying drinks from mystery zones whenever I found one, even if it turned out to be something that made me want to throttle somebody, like a can of cold corn soup in the middle of summer during one of my out-of-office business meetings.

"Gotta include a few good ones too. They can't all be terrible."

Olea could restock the stand if we sold out of something. Being a farm-bound

monster, they not only oversaw the tasks on the farm, but were also capable of registering items at farm stands.

“I’ll be testing out some paints on Sakura’s wooden crafts, so maybe we can sell those as well. I’m counting on you, Olea.”

“Triii!”

“You can arrange them in order of... Nah, forget about arranging. It’s not like you can taste anything anyway.”

“Triii...”

“Hey, no need to look so glum. Just stock these items in order from top to bottom, okay?”

“Tri-triii.”

That was probably about it for drinks.

“Aight, moving on.”

My next experiment involved testing out paints. The first step was to make the paint mixture, which was a combination of water, animal glue, and whatever ingredients you were using. Animal glue was sold everywhere, and it was easy enough to make your own by simmering animal bones, skin, or tendons. There seemed to be a relatively high demand for it, considering you could use it for a variety of things, such as woodworking.

“First, boil animal skin in water...”

“Hum.”

“Aye.”

“Hm.”

My three crafter monsters stared at the contents of my pot curiously, murmuring in wonder. I supposed they found anything related to their craft intriguing.

“Hm, doesn’t have much of a smell.”

Normally, boiled animal skin or bones were supposed to stink to high heaven, but that didn’t seem to be the case in-game. *Thank goodness for that*—it

would've been a nightmare if we had to put up with offensive odors every time we made something as frequently used as this. When I was done, I had two units of animal glue. *Hmm, two units from one squirrel pelt. I'll need a bit more glue than that.*

"All right, guys. I have a job for you."

"Aye!"

"Hum!"

"Hm-hmm!"

"Make me some animal glue with these pelts!"

As soon as they heard my command, all three companions saluted me, Himka following Fau and Reflet's example. *Aha, I knew it.* I hadn't taught Himka the customary salute yet, but part of me had expected him to do it. I instructed the trio to make animal glue using the squirrel and rat pelts that were left over in my inventory. I estimated they could make about fifty units altogether, which ought to be more than enough for our experiment. In the meantime, I set to work with the glue I'd just made.

"Let's start with the fire-resistant paint."

The ingredients for this paint were fire ores, water, one fire-attribute item, and animal glue. For the fire-attribute ingredient, I was able to select a firestarter plant. *That'll do.* It'd be a waste to use the materials I'd just obtained in the Fire Elementals' town for my experiment.

"Give 'em a good mix..."

Once I'd stirred the ingredients together in my alchemy pot and infused them with magic, the sludgy mixture glowed brightly.

"Hey! It worked!"

Before me was a small bowl of paint. Just as I'd heard, the paint was a marbled orange and red. The color looked like it might belong to something I'd find at one of those ice cream shops known for having thirty-one flavors. *Strawberry and orange, maybe?* In any case, it looked delicious.

"That turned out pretty good. Let's make some more."

Now, how were my skilled artisans doing?

“Hum-humm!”

“Hmm! Hmm!”

“Aye!”

The three of them seemed to have a good system in place. Reflet produced water and added the ingredients to the mix, while Himka stirred the pot and kept the fire going. Lastly, Fau infused the mixture with magic, and they were finished. The whole process was incredibly smooth and efficient.

“Good job making glue. Keep up the good work, guys.”

“Hum!”

“Hm-hmm!”

“Yuh-aye!”

In the meantime, I would use the glue they made to create more paint.

“Hang on. I can make other kinds of paint too, can’t I?”

Gaining Painting skills should’ve unlocked a few new entries on the list of items I could create.

“Let’s see... Looks like I can make Water-Resistant Paint and Earth-Resistant Paint. What else...? Black paint and brown paint? Those I can make if I have iron and copper.”

If I made good use of them, I could probably create some pretty stylish furniture or tableware in brown and black. Wait, was it a bad idea to use paint containing metals on plates? Then again, this *was* a game, so I didn’t think it mattered that much...

I decided to just go for it and see what would happen, making my way down the list. The water-resistant paint was a marbled blue color that reminded me of a Blue Hawaii, while the earth-resistant paint was brown and yellow, like a chocolate banana split. Crap, they were both starting to look really tasty.

“Aye aye aye!”

“Hm-hm-hmm!”

“Hum! Hum!”

“Alchemy!”

I used the animal glue my monsters made as quickly as they produced it, churning out pot after pot of paint. An hour later, I had approximately thirty containers of paint before me. *There. That ought to be enough for testing purposes.*

“Now, we move on to painting.”

“...♪”

My assistant for this experiment was obviously Sakura, given that we were mainly working with wooden crafts.

“Let’s try painting some unvarnished plates first.”

I decided to start with earth-resistant paint, as that was the paint we had the largest supply of.

“Huh?”

That was weird. Although Sakura had no problem painting, I couldn’t even select the plate as a target. I tried switching from auto to manual mode, but every time I brought my brush near the plate, I felt a slight resistance, as though an invisible wall was blocking me.

“Hmm... But why?”

If Sakura could do it and I couldn’t, then maybe it was a matter of having the right skills.

“Is it because she has Woodworking?”

Now that I remembered, I hadn’t added Sakura back to my party since we returned from the Fire Elementals’ trial. I tried adding her again, recalling that some crafting skills could be shared with other party members.

“It worked! Awesome!”

“...♪”

Woodworking *had* been the key, after all.

“Nice. Looks way more colorful now!”

Unfortunately, my plate was still an ordinary plate—the effects of the paint hadn’t transferred over to its target. Did it not work on dinnerware, then? Moreover, the quality of my plate had dropped from eight stars to three stars. Apparently, using paint decreased its quality.

“Eh, it’s just a plate, though. Shouldn’t really matter whether it’s of low quality or has zero effects.” As long as it looked good, that was all that mattered. “Still, I do wanna try using the paint on something that it’ll work on...”

“...♪”

“What’s up? That a staff?”

“...” Sakura smiled as she handed me a staff that she’d made.

“Whoa, it’s pretty powerful. Not as strong as my Blue Wood Staff, but still.”

“...♪”

“You made this, right? That’s amazing.”

“...!”

Sakura blushed, smiling sheepishly in reply. She deserved all the praise I was giving, though, for this staff was as powerful as the Giant Dogwood Staff I’d owned prior to getting an upgrade. It looked like she’d used an Olive Treant branch that Olea had produced with their Ingredient Production skills, plus a Tree Spirit’s Sacred Branch, to craft it.

Name: Sacred Olive Treant Staff

Rarity: 3 *Quality: 5*★ Durability: 200

Effect: Attack +5, Magic Attack +20, minuscule boost to tree magic potency.

Weight: 2

“You know, we could probably sell this. But you did make it for me, so I guess

we should experiment with it instead. Who knows? If all goes well, we might be able to raise its quality."

Water-resistant paint seemed like a good fit for the item.

"Yep, it worked."

For this particular staff, I only needed one container of paint. Once I was done painting, the staff glowed faintly, and the process was complete. *Talk about a major letdown, though!*

"Yikes. Is it the quality of the paint, or are these two just not compatible?"

"..."

Name: Sacred Olive Treant Staff+

Rarity: 3 *Quality: 1*★ Durability: 100

Effect: Attack +1, Magic Attack +16, water resistance (negligible).

Weight: 2

Though the staff had attained the paint's desired effect, its stats had decreased drastically. The minuscule boost to tree magic had also disappeared, rendering it pretty much useless. The experiment was a complete failure. Worse still, the blue-marbled staff was tiny beyond belief, like a toddler's toy.

"...Let's just stick to painting plates and stuff, 'kay?"

Sakura nodded silently in agreement. After tableware, we tried painting furniture. The furniture likewise experienced a decrease in quality, but at least its shape wasn't affected. This would suffice for daily use. We now had colorful boxes, chairs, and tables that looked like something you'd find at that well-known Scandinavian furniture store. Sadly, it seemed like you could only use one color per item; when I tried to paint a black-and-brown checked pattern, I found myself unable to paint over the black with brown. Evidently, you needed higher-level Painting skills to paint with multiple colors. In that sense, marble-colored was a pretty good workaround.

“Hey, we can sell these at our stand too. Sweet.”

In addition to using water from the well or water Reflet made, the majority of the ores used in the paints were from our mining machine. That would explain why we could sell them. While I wanted to use my own wood as well, I didn’t own any miscellaneous tree saplings at the moment. Despite searching high and low for one, I hadn’t found any besides my cherry blossom sapling. Could cherry blossoms be used for woodworking too...? I was nervous to test my theory, intimidated by the shrine at the foot of the tree. Granted, I could obtain wood from the trees on my farm by using my Logging skills, but that would slow down their growth, requiring several days for them to return to normal. Naturally, felled trees also wouldn’t bear any fruit during that time. Besides, I could always get wood if I traveled to the outskirts of town, so it didn’t seem wise to decrease my production output.

On the other hand, I could make all sorts of stuff by painting Sakura’s crafts, and selling the finished products at our stand would probably turn a pretty profit. *How about I reserve my green peach trees solely for logging purposes, then?* But if they bore fruit, I was bound to prioritize harvesting them instead...

“Nah, I should get a sapling.” I sighed, shaking my head. Maybe I’d find one in Zone Three? It’d be great if one of the towns sold them.

Online Forum [Roasted Alive? Oh Hell Nah] Let’s Discuss the Elemental Gates, Part 29

A place to exchange gaming tips and share your woes.

New info is always welcome.

602: Salvia

Seems like the Fire Elementals’ trial is getting way more hate than the Earth Elementals’ trial, even though there aren’t as many nasty traps in the former.

603: Shinohara

Yep, Tamers especially.

I teamed up with one of my Tamer friends, but they kept freaking out each time one of their monsters caught fire, and that sent the others into a panic as well. Our group kept falling apart.

Total disaster, I tell you.

604: Subarun

Can you blame them, though??

Even I screamed when I saw that video of a gnome being burned alive on the gnome thread.

605: Sawyer

Ooph. I can practically hear my friends’ anguished cries...

606: Subarun

The guy who posted that video got a lot of flak for it.

People were saying his video was a hundred times worse than any gore pic they'd ever seen, calling him a heartless bastard, *etc*.

Dude basically got dragged up and down the thread

607: Cedric

So he pretty much made himself every female Tamer's number one enemy.

What did he expect? No one wants to see their faves being roasted alive.

608: Subarun

Not just Tamers and women, Cedric! There are WAY more gnome fans than you think!

609: Shinohara

Yeah, the gnome thread has the highest number of posts out of all the in-game forums.

610: Salvia

No kidding?

611: Shinohara

No kidding. It's also known for having quite a few superfans who grind in the same dungeon for hours on end or spend insane amounts of money on earth crystals. You know—just living their best life after being denied gnomes for so long.

Haven't you heard the saying, "Never cross a gnome fan?"

612: Salvia

I-I'll keep that in mind.

613: Subarun

Yeah, you better.

614: Shinohara

Besides, it's not just gnome fans who're freaking out in the Fire Elementals' trial.

There are dozens more monster appreciation threads, like the bear thread, squirrel thread, female elemental thread, animal thread, *etc*.

615: Cedric

W-Wow, didn't know there were so many.

616: Shinohara

I'd say most of it is due to Silver-Haired's influence, though.

Even threads that seem completely unrelated, like the rabbit thread or snake thread, are frequented by players who became fans of monsters in general after seeing Silver-Haired's critters.

617: Salvia

And yet, the very person who started this whole trend never shows his face in any of the threads XD

618: Subarun

Well, he doesn't really read the forums, to begin with, plus I hear he's more of a lurker anyway.

I started following the squirrel thread after seeing

videos of his monsters, but I’ve never seen him post anywhere.

619: Cedric

Squirrels, eh? Sounds pretty flammable.

I can just picture them going up in a great, fiery blaze.

620: Subarun

STOP! I don’t want that mental image stuck in my head!

621: Sawyer

I’m friends with one of the leading figures in the bear thread.

As you can imagine, hearing stories about the trial sent her into a total frenzy.

622: Salvia

A teddy bear on fire... That’s gotta do a lot of emotional damage.

Even I’m wincing at the thought, and I’m not even that big a fan of bears.

623: Sawyer

That friend of mine is also good friends with Silver-Haired, so at first, she was planning on exploring the dungeon with him.

In the end, she gave up because she couldn’t stand the thought of seeing his bear going up in flames.

624: Shinohara

Imagine if someone posted a video of his monsters burning alive...

There’d be a HUGE riot rofl

625: Cedric

GNHSFNVJ tbh, all of the threads have already been going wild discussing that possibility

Long story short, Tamers should be extra cautious about attempting this dungeon.

626: Sawyer

Tamers aren’t the only ones that should be wary, though. It’s a dicey place for bomb makers too.

627: Salvia

Bombmakers? Is there such a job?

628: Cedric

Don’t think so. Never heard of it.

Besides, there’s only one person I can think of when I hear that word.

629: Sawyer

Well, I won’t name names, but...

Basically, they:

Threw a bomb, setting off an explosive chain reaction → got caught in the blast from standing too close to it → died as a result

They did manage to kill all the enemies in the vicinity because of how far-reaching the bomb was, but we probably would have *all* died if the concept of friendly fire existed in this game.

I went to pick them up later, only to have them do the

same thing all over again on our second attempt...

630: Shinohara

No need for names.

There’s only one person who owns that many powerful bombs and is bonkers enough to do something like that LMAO

631: Sawyer

In any case, do be careful if you intend to use any explosives.

632: Subarun

Why would you even use a *bomb* in the Fire Elementals’ trial in the first place...? Aren’t the enemies mostly fire-type monsters?

633: Sawyer

That’s true, but bombs aren’t completely useless either. Fire damage might not work against them, but they can still take hits from explosives.

There are also special bombs that have water or earth attributes instead of fire attributes—not that my friend used anything except regular fire bombs...

634: Subarun

They seem like the quiet type at first glance, especially with a name like a tea connoisseur, but they’re actually super unhinged.

635: Salvia

Oh, NOW I know who you’re talking about!

True, she does sound like a person of refined taste, at

least by name.

636: Cedric

Clearly, refined taste doesn’t equal refined *behavior* fndfgdfn

Guess she just happens to find explosions tasteful.

637: Shinohara

Well, I’d say she’s more like that *other* famous tea master—you know, the daimyo that blew himself up with a kettle.

638: Subarun

Blew himself up with a *kettle*? What? But how?

639: Shinohara

Ever heard of Matsunaga Hisahide?

The guy defied Oda Nobunaga’s orders, but was told he’d be forgiven on condition that he handed over his prized kettle.

Instead, he refused and stuffed his kettle with gunpowder, blowing himself and the tower keep up with it. At least, that’s how the story goes.

He’s also known as one of the top three notorious men of the Sengoku Period.

While the whole exploding kettle tale was made up by folks after his death, the part about him being a renowned tea enthusiast is true.

640: Subarun

Speaking of kettles, they were the talk of the town the other day when Silver-Haired turned one into a yokai.

The tanuki was really cute too.

641: Cedric

Who knows, maybe we'll have a tanuki thread in the near future.

Wait a minute. A tea kettle + a pyromaniac...?

642: Sawyer

In case you're wondering, the answer is yes. She befriended Silver-Haired and got permission to enter his farm.

643: Cedric

NOOOO! Run, little tanuki, and don't look back!

644: Salvia

Don't be fooled! That woman only wants you for your body!

645: Sawyer

Bod—er, well, it *is* the tea kettle that she's after, so technically, you're not wrong...

Online Forum [New Items Galore!] The Ultimate Thread for Discussing Items, Part 22

Wanted: Info on all items, excluding weapons and armor.

Can also be a vague report on an item you saw or heard about.

Special or uncommon usage hacks are always, ALWAYS welcome.

350: Kamiya Hizuki

So we can’t preorder any more of those special Ashihana wooden figurines, huh?

351: Kinokuniya

Sadly, no. They’re made-to-order only, and she’s already reached cap...

Gah! I don’t care which one, I want one of Silver-Haired’s Adorable Critters too!

352: GreenGreen

Same. I wanted a tree nymph or undine figurine, but no such luck...

353: K2

I lost out on the second preorder lotto! *sobs*

354: Kinokuniya

Did you see that catalog, though? It was amazing.

Any fan of Silver-Haired’s monsters would kill to get their hands on one of those. Thank god this game doesn’t

allow PKing, or there would've been a bloodbath.

355: K2

There were figurines of his pixie riding his squirrel, Olto saluting, and his new monster in two forms: both the mole version and the dragon version.

Man, what I wouldn't give for a squirrel rider figurine!

356: CommanDER

Why don't you guys just ask some other craftsperson to make them?/gen

Pretty sure *someone's* capable of mimicking Ashihana's style, right?

357: GreenGreen

You don't get it, do you?!

First of all, Ashihana's one of the top woodcrafters in LJO. Very few players can match her skills.

Second, she's good friends with Silver-Haired, meaning she has tons of references to work with!

Do you get it now? No one, NO ONE, can make better figurines than her!

358: Kamiya Hizuki

There's also the issue of portrait rights.

Just because they're avatars doesn't mean you're free to take photos of them or use their likeness without permission.

Any photos or videos uploaded on the forums can and will be deleted if the player in question forbids it.

Obviously, using someone else's likeness to make wooden

figurines is off-limits too.

It might be fine if it’s just for personal use, but selling said items is out of the question.

359: CommanDER

Wouldn’t that mean Ashihana’s breaking the rules, then?

360: Kinokuniya

Silver-Haired gave her his blessing, so she’s safe.

361: CommanDER

How about if you *don’t* make them look a hundred percent like Silver-Haired’s monsters?

Like, you know, make a figurine of a regular gnome instead?

362: K2

What’s the point of doing that?!

The whole point is that *they HAVE to look EXACTLY like* Silver-Haired’s monsters!

363: Kamiya Hizuki

Of course, there are just as many players who don’t care either way as long as they’re cute. More and more stalls selling wooden crafts have been popping up lately as a result.

The people who’re after Ashihana’s figurines care a lot more about the cuteness factor, though.

After all, they’re specifically fans of Silver-Haired’s monsters.

364: Kinokuniya

Exactly! I don’t want a figurine of any old undine—I want a figurine of *Reflet* specifically!

Otherwise, there’s no point!

365: CommanDER

G-Gotcha... Guess that’s what it means to be a devoted fan.

I kinda get it, though. I’d love to have a figurine of the great Lady Rikyu if I could find one.

366: K2

Lady Rikyu? Oh, you mean Bomber.

I keep forgetting her real name since I only ever hear her moniker. Same goes for Silver-Haired bnbndbnbn

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367: GreenGreen

Wait, you’re telling me Silver-Haired *isn’t* his real name?

368: Kamiya Hizuki

Nope. It’s more like a nickname.

369: GreenGreen

Dang, I had no idea.

370: K2

Well, most people refer to him by that name nowadays, so there’s no real need to learn his actual name.

371: CommanDER

Who cares about his real name?

It’s his tamed monsters that I care about—he’s nothing

more than garnish.

You know, like how Nojita’s glasses are wearing *him* instead of the other way around.

372: Kinokuniya

Shh, we don’t talk about that...

373: Kamiya Hizuki

Other famous players like Rikyu and Siegfried have their fair share of hardcore fans too, but in Silver-Haired’s case, I’d say nine out of ten people like him for his tamed monsters.

Can’t blame them, though. The guy doesn’t really have flair or charisma on his own.

374: K2

Maybe, but he’s still pretty impressive.

He might be hopeless at fighting, but everything he finds is basically the discovery of the century...

375: GreenGreen

Did you see the yokai thread?

Things weren’t so bad with the Hanami Vandal and Sunekosuri, but once people learned about the existence of Tea Kettle Tanukis, the chat started going wild lol

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376: Kinokuniya

Apparently, people have been flooding blacksmiths with orders for tea kettles.

No one’s succeeded at making one yet, though.

377: Kamiya Hizuki

By the way, I heard Silver-Haired pulled another stunt.

I’ve lost count of how many times he’s done this already, but it was another big ’un.

378: K2

Oh yeah? What’d he do this time?

379: Kamiya Hizuki

Well, you’ve all heard of his farm stand by now, haven’t you?

Anyway, he added a new section called a “mystery zone” to it, which turned out to be a fizzy-drink Russian roulette.

Loads of players ended up gagging and spitting out their drinks after one sip. That’s how bad they were LMAO

There are also several new items in the made-by-Sakura series. Lots of people fought over her retro furniture last time, but this time, it was all colorful marble-colored plates and furniture.

380: Kinokuniya

Drinks? Y’know, I missed out on the food he sold last time too.

I’ve only bought his herbal tea a few times. Think I can still get some?

381: Kamiya Hizuki

Tough luck, mate. They’re all sold out.

Someone uploaded a video, and lemme tell ya, that was the most intense rock-paper-scissors fight over soda I’d ever seen.

382: Kinokuniya

Figured as much. It’s the same every time: by the time I catch wind of a new item, it’s already too late.

But it’s not like I can just stake out his farm in the Town of Beginnings 24/7...

383: K2

Apparently, some Silver-Haired watchers are doing just that.

I hear their observation notes on his farm and their “Day in the Life of an Olive Treant at Work” blog series are pretty popular.

384: Kinokuniya

The hell are these people doing...?

Isn’t that a form of stalking?

385: K2

Well, Silver-Haired himself hasn’t caught on to their activities yet, and simply watching over his farm isn’t a crime...I think.

They’re probably safe until he reports them. Obviously, this would be super illegal IRL.

386: Kamiya Hizuki

The drinks caused a huge stir too, but nowhere near as great as the wooden crafts. They were lovingly made by his tree nymph, after all.

On top of that, they’re cute and colorful, so naturally, people are gonna fight over them.

I hear the Treant in charge of restocking the stand also has its fair share of devotees.

387: GreenGreen

I missed out on those too! *cries*

I'm trying to collect some Sakura & Co. cutlery, but because so many people are after them, they always sell out the instant they go on sale.

Now that they're even higher quality, they're definitely gonna gain premium status...

388: CommanDER

Sure, Silver-Haired's wooden crafts are nice and all, but I'd still rather have a wooden figurine made by Ashihana.

Wonder if I can get someone to make a Lady Rikyu figurine for me?

Obviously, we'll need her permission beforehand. I'll gladly be your chaperone if you're up for the task.

389: K2

Keep dreaming. Getting permission from *her* is pretty much an SSS-rank mission.

Why don't you ask for permission yourself? I hear she was last sighted in the Fire Elementals' town.

390: CommanDER

No way! I've never even talked to her directly.

391: Kamiya Hizuki

What was that you said? "I'll gladly be your chaperone if you're up for the task"?

392: CommanDER

Hopefully, I can get to know her better while I'm at it!

393: Kinokuniya

Let me rephrase that for you. What you really mean is, “Please come with me because I’m a wimp.”

394: GreenGreen

To start with, Bomber’s like, suuuuper shy. She’ll just run away if she sees a big group approaching her lolol

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395: CommanDER

True. Dammit, what should I do then?!

Should I become a Tamer too and collect lots of cute monsters?

396: K2

Can’t imagine Bomber playing with cute monsters TBH.

397: CommanDER

Me neither. Ugh, how, HOW can I possibly get her attention?!

Chapter Two: West Dungeon, Here We Come!

"Right. What do you say we take a walk around Zone Three?"

"Mm-mm!"

We were now in the Western Town. After our experiments concluded, we'd set off for Zone Three in search of the Tunnel of Detritus, which was rumored to be a gold mine for clay. I also wanted to set up a teleport point in town to save time for when I eventually unlocked the Air Elemental Gate. Ideally, I had hoped to stop by Alyssa's first to sell her new information on Reflet and Fau's new evolved forms, but unfortunately, she was offline at the moment. I decided to pay her a visit later once we'd returned from our trip.

What about the field boss, you ask? No biggie. I knocked it out in one blow.

"Squeak?"

"...?"

I'm sorry. That's a lie, and we both know it. It had taken us Sakura's paralysis and Drimo's dragon form plus tailwind-thrash combo to finally bring it down. Thankfully, both the field boss of the Western Forest and the field boss of the Forest of Talons were susceptible to status ailments, so my party had a relatively easy time. Moreover, my monsters were mostly evolved and much stronger now. With the right preparation, there was no way we could lose.

Sorry, I lied again. We *did* have one major risk factor: weak, useless old me. My job was to hide behind everyone and stay out of harm's way; as long as I didn't get myself killed, there was little else to worry about, especially since we already knew about the bosses' strengths and weaknesses.

"Still, that took longer than I thought..." I muttered, surveying our pitch-dark surroundings.

"Mm."

By the time we were done fighting, it was well past sundown. It was far too

late to explore an unfamiliar dungeon for the first time now, particularly in this darkness, so I decided to content myself with walking around town for today.

“Hum!”

“Hmm!”

“Mm-mm!”

Despite the saying about fire and water not mixing, Himka and Reflet seemed to get along just fine. If anything, they seemed pretty chummy due to sharing similar personality traits. The two of them and Olto led the way, skipping down the path hand in hand.

“La la la♪”

“Squeak.”

Behind them were Drimo and Fau, the latter perched atop the former’s helmet. Seriously, what was it with her and Rick? Was Drimo’s helmet that comfortable to sit on? Despite Fau strumming and belting her heart out directly above him, Drimo remained perfectly indifferent. Did he really not mind all that noise? If he did, he had the patience of a saint.

“...♪”

Meanwhile, Sakura and I linked arms as we strolled down the street. I could tell she was in a good mood, although I was slightly embarrassed by how much more intimate this felt than holding hands. Still, she deserved to get her own way today, after all the misery I’d put her through in the Fire Elementals’ trial; my mild discomfort was a small price to pay for her happiness.

“Looks like the Western Town is green themed. Pretty, isn’t it?”

“...♪”

The town, which was already filled with houses sporting walls and roofs in varying shades of emerald, was now bathed entirely in a pale green, illuminated by the glow of the streetlights. It was as though we were in the inmost recesses of the forest, and I felt a sense of calm wash over me. Since it was relatively early in the evening, the streets were still bustling with players and NPCs—or rather, perhaps now was the time of day when the town was most active. We

joined the festivities, stopping at a few stalls to buy food and our much-sought-after clay as we strolled through town. It was the best of both worlds: not only did we get to fill in the blank areas on our map, but we also got to have fun while we were at it.

"Yo, is that a—"

"No way."

"I-I want one t—"

Well, it would've been more enjoyable if people weren't staring at us so much. Pretty much everyone had their eyes glued to Fau. I didn't blame them, though; if I saw someone else with a fairy, I would probably have done the same, envious. Each time Fau fluttered her wings, a collective *oooh* rose from the crowd. *Heh heh. Let's give them a bit of fan service, shall we?* I grinned to myself. I wasn't doing this out of the goodness of my heart or anything—I merely wanted to show her off and bask in one of the few occasions where I could feel a sense of superiority.

"Psst, Fau. Come here."

"Aye?"

"Good girl. Go on, you can sit on my shoulder."

"Aye!"

The crowd erupted into gasps and cheers as Fau flew into the air and landed gracefully on my shoulder. *Dang. Fairies really are something.* I might have gone a little overboard, though. The onlookers had a dangerous glint in their eyes, and I could feel them closing in on us. They probably wanted to get a better look at Fau, who was too tiny to be seen from afar.

"Uh, why don't we go over there instead?"

"Aye?"

"Y-You know, so we can check the location of the dungeon and stuff!"

"...?"

"D-Don't ask questions. Just go!" I sputtered, steering everyone far, far away

from the clutches of the crowd. *They won't come after us, will they?* I sweated, old memories of the Mirei incident resurfacing, but thankfully, there was no angry mob this time. *Phew. That's what you get for getting too cocky, idiot. Have a bit of humility.*

"I didn't really pay attention to where we were going, so we're kinda far from the city center now."

We seemed to have run all the way to a residential area. It felt too soon to return to the shopping district just yet, though, so I decided to explore the area for a bit.

"Where do you wanna go?"

"Mmm?"

I turned to Olto, who was standing next to me, when I noticed something off about the wall of the house behind him.

"...Ah, I see. The gap's kinda wonky—no, more like it's wider at the bottom."

There was a gap between the walls where the houses joined that widened ever so slightly the closer it got to the ground. That appeared to be the cause of my confusion.

"Something's glowing... Or is it just the streetlight leaking in from the other side?" I wondered aloud, peering into the gap.

"Mm?" Olto copied me, gazing into the darkness.

"No, wait. Maybe it's something else..."

I could see a light shining faintly from the other side of the gap. Moreover, when I looked closely, I could see that the light source was positioned much lower than the streetlamps. There seemed to be some kind of space on the other side where the source of light was installed. Although narrow at the entrance, the gap appeared to become wider the farther inside you went.

"Can't tell what's glowing, though..."

"Mm-mm."

I tried squeezing myself into the space, twisting my body every which way,

but to no avail.

“Hmm, it *is* wider at the bottom... Maybe I can squeeze in if I get down on all fours.” Thank goodness it was nighttime, or other people would’ve seen me make a fool of myself. “Well, let’s give it a shot,” I said, after making sure the coast was clear. If my plan didn’t work, I could always have Fau scout out the place.

“Hngh... Hup... Gah!”

All right, I managed to get my shoulder in! I pushed on, determined to get through.

“Grr, talk about a tight squeeze...”

“Aye?”

Fau, who’d been leading the way, turned around, brows knitted in worry.

“I-I’m okay,” I reassured her. After crawling on all fours for about ten meters, the narrow passage finally opened out onto a wider space.

“Phew,” I breathed out a sigh of relief, stretching my arms and legs. Game or not, some habits never changed. “Right. Where are we?”

The light seemed to be coming from a small lamp embedded in the wall.

“Aye!”

“That a manhole?”

Fau was pointing at a small covered opening in the ground. While it looked like a manhole, it bore no markings or embellishments save for a handle.

“Can we open it? Hrrngh... Nope, guess not.”

I tried lifting the manhole cover, but it didn’t so much as budge. Was it locked, or did I simply lack the necessary strength to open it?

“Mm?”

“Squeak?”

“Hey, guys. You managed to squeeze through, huh?”

My monsters were all smaller than me, so it was only natural that they could

fit in a space that I could go through.

“Who’s the strongest right now? Is it you, Olto? Try opening this for me, will you?”

“Mm-mm!”

Olto rolled up his sleeves and squatted down in front of the manhole, ready to get cracking. *Attaboy!*

“Mm-mm...!”

“Hey, it moved!”

“*Mm-mmm!*”

“It’s working! It’s working, Olto!”

With some effort, he began to lift the cover off the ground. Things were looking promising.

“You can do it, buddy!”

“Aye!”

Fau flew around Olto, cheering him on. Spurred on by our encouragement, he lifted the cover even more.

“Mm-mmm!”

With one final, concentrated effort, Olto heaved the manhole cover out of the way.

“All right! Great job, Olto!”

“Mm!” he beamed proudly. I patted him on the head, gazing down into the now-open hole. All I could see was a ladder leading downwards and a bottomless darkness that threatened to swallow us up. There was no telling what was down there, which was slightly unnerving, but...

“Wanna check it out?”

“Mm!”

Olto seemed pumped and eager to go. I wasn’t about to turn back either, not after coming all this way. Moreover, this manhole hadn’t been on Alyssa’s map

—that either meant no one had discovered it yet, or the person who'd found it had decided not to share its location with anyone else. How could I not be curious about such a spot?

"Okay then... Let's go."

"Mm!"

One by one, we descended the slightly rusted ladder, taking our time so as not to fall. The sound of my shoes hitting the iron rungs echoed throughout the narrow shaft, emphasizing just how tight the space was and making me feel mildly claustrophobic. The ladder was a lot shorter than I'd thought, though, probably no more than three meters. The fact that we couldn't see the bottom from above wasn't because the hole had been too deep, but merely a gimmick of the game. When I looked up, I could see the twinkling night sky above us. Once our feet had touched ground again, we found ourselves in a small brick room with a ceiling roughly two meters in height.

"Everyone good?"

"Aye!"

"Mm-mmm!"

Obviously, Fau had no use for the ladder as she was capable of flying. Being humanoid monsters, Olto, Himka, Reflet, and Sakura had all managed to climb down too. Drimo was the one I was worried about. Although he walked on two legs like the others, he had sharp claws on each hand, not to mention his legs were pretty short. As such, I was slightly doubtful about his ability to climb down the ladder.

"Want me to support you?" I called out to him from below.

"Squeak."

Drimo shook his head at the entrance of the hole in refusal.

"S-Sure you'll be okay?"

"Squeak."

Drimo placed a foot onto the first rung, wobbling ever so slightly. Frankly, he looked far from okay. From below, I could see his short tail sticking out from the

tail hole in his overalls, swishing from side to side. He fumbled about with his short legs, making his way down the ladder cautiously.

“Squeak!”

“Eep!” I yelped, stiffening instinctively. At first, it looked as though Drimo had lost his footing and fallen off the ladder. However, I was soon proven wrong.

Whoosh!

Drimo had deliberately taken both feet off the ladder, using his hands to shinny down the ladder instead. He controlled the speed of his descent by gripping the sides of the ladder tightly; under ordinary circumstances, this would no doubt have resulted in a graceful landing.

Thud!

“Guh!”

“Sq-Squeak?”

...*If* I hadn’t been right below him, that is. Although I’d thrust my arms wide open in order to catch Drimo, there was no way I could have, given how low my Strength was. My weak arms were unable to withstand the force of his cute butt slamming into me, and I face-planted right into Drimo’s back.

“Ouch...”

Of course, it didn’t *actually* hurt—the game was designed so that you felt very little pain, after all. It was simply more of a reflex at this point. Drimo seemed at a loss as to what to do, sandwiched between my face and the ladder.

“You okay, Drimo?”

“Squeak.”

Phew. I was relieved to know I hadn’t hurt him when his butt landed on my arm. Drimo stood up first, dusting himself off before grabbing my hand and pulling me to my feet.

“Thanks, buddy.”

“Squeak.” He nodded, nonchalant as ever. That attitude was precisely what made him so badass, though! *Gosh, tough guy! Sweep me off my feet, why*

don't you?!

"Mm?"

"Aye?"

In the meantime, Olto and Fau peered inside the connecting corridor. Since they both possessed Night Vision, they could probably tell what lay ahead.

"What's the 411? Any enemies?"

"Mm-mm!"

"Aye!"

The two of them shook their heads; the coast appeared to be clear. Still, it was unwise to let our guard down. This was our first time exploring this dungeon, so it paid to be extra cautious.

"Okay, let's proceed. Olto, Drimo, you two lead the way. You guys are in the middle, Himka and Reflet. Sakura, I want you behind me, and Fau, you can ride on my shoulder. Let me know if you sense any enemies."

"Aye!"

Fau nodded and flexed her right arm, pretending to roll her right sleeve up with her left hand. What would I do without her?

"...Looks like we're in a sewerage."

After walking for some time, we came to a spot where water ran beside us. It wasn't very sewer-like, however; it seemed more like a place to drain and collect rainwater instead. The water was surprisingly clear and free of serious contaminants or offensive odors, so it felt more accurate to assume this was a gray water system.

"A sewer map, eh...?"

While this sort of dungeon was pretty common in RPGs, I wasn't a huge fan of them. They tended to be mazelike and were a literal pain in the neck, forcing you to go up and down a series of ladders.

"Can't turn back now, though. Come on, let's go."

"Mm!"

“Squeak!”

Onwards we went, and sure enough, we soon ran into a dead end. An iron grille stood between the towpath and the sewer, blocking our way. The gaps between the bars were so small that not even Fau could squeeze through them.

“Usually, in scenarios like this, you can remove a few bars from the gate, but...” I shrugged at the unyielding obstacle. At first, I thought I was just too weak to get the bars to budge, but Olto and Drimo had no better luck. Destroying them with magic wasn’t an option either.

“Also, the fact that we can let rip offensive spells here means this is most definitely a dungeon.”

Offensive magic couldn’t be used in towns—this meant we were unmistakably out of bounds now. We’d have to be far more vigilant from here on.

“What are we supposed to do, though? Find a hidden passage somewhere? Or do we need a key or something?”

It was possible that we needed a key to make it past a certain point, as was the case with the Elementals’ altars. As I pondered what to do in front of the iron grille, Reflet suddenly dived into the water and disappeared.

“R-Reflet? What’s gotten into you?”

“Humm!”

“Huh?”

To my surprise, Reflet was waving at me from the other side of the gate. *Aha.* So there was a gap we could burrow through underwater.

“Knew it was too clean to be a sewer... Should’ve realized that might be an option. Are you okay with getting wet, though, Himka?”

“Hm...”

Himka nodded in reply. Even though he was a Fire Elemental, it wasn’t as if his body itself was made out of flames, so there didn’t seem to be any serious harm in him swimming or diving. Still, it was plain that he detested the idea, and he looked absolutely miserable standing in the waist-deep water. What if this affected my favorability score with him? It was highly unlikely this would be the

only instance we entered the water, and I didn't want to keep forcing him to do something he didn't like.

I decided to use my Tamed Monster's Orb to swap Himka out for Rick. Although I'd made it using Olto's Tamed Monster's Heart, that didn't mean it only worked on him. Ultimately, it was an item that worked on *all* of my tamed monsters; whose heart I used was of little importance.

"See you later at the farm, Himka."

"Hm."

"I hereby summon you, Rick!"

I wavered a little between Bear Bear and Rick, but I eventually settled on the latter for his foraging skills.

"Chirp... *Chiiirp!*"

"Crap! Quick, grab on to this, Rick!"

"Chirp!"

Because Himka had been in the sewer when I swapped the two, Rick fell into the water the instant I summoned him. I quickly rescued my panicking squirrel before he drowned.

"You okay, bud?"

"Chirp chirp..."

Rick nodded, shaking himself dry on my palms. Thankfully, he hadn't taken any physical damage from the fall, only receiving a mild shock from being caught off guard.

"Sorry to make you do this all over again when you nearly just drowned, but you're gonna have to go underwater again."

"Chirp?!"

"All right, guys, let's go."

"C*hirrppp!*"

Sorry, Rick, I apologized silently, ignoring his squeals. Eventually, we managed

to cross over to the other side by swimming through the gap. Despite a few hiccups on the way, things were surprisingly smooth sailing thanks to Reflet's Aquamobilize. This skill turned out to be far more valuable than I'd expected, with powerful corrective and enhancement capabilities. The skill made Rick a much better swimmer than usual. Not that he was ever bad to begin with—he'd merely been taken by surprise.

Clumps of luminous moss could be spotted here and there, casting a dim glow around us. While our visibility wasn't great, it wasn't pitch-dark either. Besides, Olto and Fau's Night Vision allowed us to progress at a moderate pace. Somewhere along the way, I got curious and scooped some water into my hands to taste. Sadly, it was just plain water, and the lowest quality at that. My crafter side would've been ecstatic if this had been some kind of high-grade water, but alas, things were never that easy. Regardless, we continued onwards in search of items we could use. Just then, Rick let out a shrill noise from his perch on my shoulder; the next instant, I noticed something part the water's surface and rise up out of the sewer.

"Ew... What the hell is *that*? Trash?"

"Blub..."

A monster resembling a pile of waste-ridden goop stood before us, blocking our path. The creature looked foul, and I refused to be anywhere near it.

"'Muckus'... Gotcha, so it's a sludge monster."

Although I could choose to tame it if I wished, I had no desire to do such a thing. *Time to smite this disgusting muck.*

"There's only one of them, but we don't have much space to move around. Be careful, guys!"

"Mm-mm!"

"Squeak!"

The towpath adjacent to the sewer was only about two meters wide, which made this place troublesome in a way the other dungeons we'd visited so far hadn't been.

“Blub-blub!”

“Mm-mm!”

Fortunately, the sludge monster was incredibly weak. Olto’s hoe deflected its mud balls with ease, as well as its body slam attacks. Between that and Drimo’s pickax, Rick’s acorn bomb, and Sakura’s whip, the thing didn’t stand a snowball’s chance in hell. All in all, our battle lasted less than a minute. Perhaps to make up for the complexity of the dungeon, the devs had made the enemy monsters easier to deal with.

“Oh yeah?! Think again, wise guy!”

We moved through the dungeon at a snail’s pace, dipping in and out of the water and crawling on our stomachs through narrow spaces. I was right—this wasn’t easy at all. The dungeon itself had an incredibly complex structure, making it hard to navigate.

“Well, the enemies are nothing special, so I guess that balances things out,” I mumbled. No sooner had I spoken than a new monster appeared before us. The creature was called a Water Skeeeter, an insect-type monster the size of a large dog that resembled a giant water strider. Worse still, I could see four Muckuses approaching us: two from the front and two from behind.

“W-We’ve been surrounded!”

I’d heard people say in the past, “Be careful of what you say; it might just come true,” but this wasn’t what they meant by it, right? If anything, this had to be my punishment for jinxing myself with a death flag.

“Skrrrttt!”

“Bluh-blub!”

“Eek!”

“...!”

Due to how narrow the passage was, we struggled to swap positions, and I was ambushed by two Muckuses from behind, followed by some kind of spitting attack from a Water Skeeeter. Though Sakura threw herself in front of me to protect me, she was unable to shield us from all three attacks at once.

“Ugh, that blows!”

Those Muckuses’ attacks were no joke! Although they didn’t do much damage to Olto, the very same attack had just taken twenty percent of my HP. Worse still, it wreaked utter havoc on my equipment’s durability! *Must be due to the mud.* I grimaced. The liquid the Water Skeeeter had spat out of its mouth could also be some type of acid attack that burned through your equipment.

“Who’s the dumbass that said the monsters here were *easy*?!”

Surprise! That idiot would be me*!* Eventually, we were able to defeat them all, but not without taking a fair amount of damage. My robe had taken the worst beating, its durability having dropped by 10 in that fight alone. Considering I usually only lost about 2 points on average, I was wearing out my robe *five times* faster than normal. While my durability was still around 100, if we continued at this rate, I could potentially lose my protection before we made it out of the dungeon.

“We’ll have to be even more careful from now on...”

“Mmm!”

“I’m counting on you too, Rick!”

“Chirp!”

The reason I’d singled Rick out was because he’d contributed the most to this fight. Thanks to his small frame, he was able to move freely in the narrow passage, using the walls, ceiling, and sometimes even one of his siblings’ backs to propel himself forward, lucha libre-style, and target the Muckuses with precision. He also pulled aggro for us and drew the enemies’ attention to himself. He was, without a doubt, the MVP of this fight. Warily, we ventured even deeper into the dungeon, enduring several more fierce battles with the Muckus and Water Skeeeter joint forces.

“Well, I’ll be...”

Roughly an hour after we entered the manhole, we ran into our biggest hurdle yet: a water slope. The water in the canal was now flowing downwards on an inclined plane, and the towpath had ended, cutting off access to secure footing. We were left with no other option but to go against the flow and travel

uphill.

“There’s a grille halfway up the slope too. Mind checking if we can go under it, Reflet?”

“Hum!”

Reflet snapped to attention, giving a practiced military salute before climbing the slope. Judging by the ease with which she climbed, neither the water level nor the current appeared to pose a problem for her.

“Hum!” Reflet signaled to us, resurfacing on the other side of the grille.

“Guess that’s a yes.”

Of course, her advanced Aquamotion skills no doubt made things easier for her. For the rest of us, climbing up the steep water slope and diving underwater beneath the grille would require considerable effort.

“No point standing around all day, though. C’mon, guys!”

“Chirp!”

“Squeak!”

Good, that’s what I like to hear.

“As the only member with Swimming skills, I’ll take the lead!”

Unfortunately, climbing the slope turned out to be far more challenging than I’d thought. Aside from the water level being pretty high, the force of the current threatened to push you back all the way to the bottom if you slipped so much as slipped. Even with the aid of Reflet’s Aquamobilize, it was still no easy feat.

“...No way could I climb this thing unassisted.”

“Hum!”

“...!”

“Ah, gotcha. Good thinking.”

Reflet was busy tying a vine that Sakura had conjured around one of the bars of the grille, presumably as a means of making the climb easier. Even with the

help of the lifeline rope, however, I still ended up failing at least ten times, if not more.

“Shit! This is hard!” I sputtered, gasping for air.

“Chirp!”

“You can do it, Rick! I believe in you!”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Fau! Hang on tight!”

“Aye!”

No matter how hard they tried, Rick and Fau were unable to withstand the current while attempting to go under the grille. Left with no other choice, they clung to my robe for dear life while I braved the uphill battle.

“Hum-hum!”

Reflet nudged us from behind, giving us a leg up. *Damn, should’ve thought of that earlier.* With her help, we were able to get through the gap under the grille. I could scarcely believe the ease with which we succeeded after all those failed attempts.

“W-We made it somehow...”

“Chirp...”

“Aye...”

The three of us groaned, utterly spent. Shortly, Sakura and Drimo joined us too, and we were able to press onwards, our group wholly intact.

“We’re pretty far inside the tunnel now.” I stroked my chin, thinking. By now, my robe’s Durability had dipped below 50. Another 10 points, and we’d have to give up our search and head back—no doubt we would have to endure a few more battles on the way home. We proceeded with caution, staying on our toes at all times in case of a sneak attack. We weren’t safe, not even while gathering items; we’d already been attacked once while fishing some water ores out of the canal. Incidentally, you could find water and copper ores in this sewer, and fungi along the towpath. While I went ahead with harvesting them to sell later,

they weren't exactly what I considered "rich" pickings, given how many of each I already owned.

"Sorry to use you two as a shield, Olto and Sakura, but I'm gonna need you guys to cover for me."

"Mm!"

"...!"

However, despite being on the alert, we encountered no further battles, and we presently made it to a large room. From the looks of it, the path seemed to hit a dead end here. The farther you went inside the room, the farther downwards it gently sloped, like a shallow basin.

"Looks like the coast is clear."

"Hum."

As far as I could see, the room was empty—no altar or bosses. I took a step forward, intent on looking for a hidden passage, when...

Fwoosh-clang!

"Hum!"

"W-We're trapped!"

An iron grille descended and clanged shut behind us, sealing off the entrance.

"Keep your eyes peeled, guys!"

"Mm-mm!"

"Doubt it'll work, but think we can pry the gate open?"

"Squeak squeak!"

I tried rattling the bars of the grille, but to no avail. Clearly, brute force wasn't the answer.

"Whose bright idea was it to set up a trap in an ordinary sewer?! There weren't any on the way, so why *now*?! This is *way* too convenient, even for a game!"

Sure, I'd been saved countless times by plot vouchers and the occasional deus

ex machina, but I only appreciated them when they worked in *my* favor—it was no fun at all when they worked against me.

"Damn it!" I cursed, resigning myself to the inevitable battle. We swiftly got into formation, bracing ourselves in front of the grille. Moments later, the ceiling burst open with a loud *ka-thunk*, unleashing a torrent of water onto us.

"Crap! It's a flood attack!"

It was unlikely that the people who'd designed this dungeon were trying to drown us, though. Due to its basin-like shape, most of the water pooled in the center of the room, while the rest passed freely through the grille's iron bars, even if *we* couldn't do the same. Sure enough, the water stopped once it was nearly level with the bottom of the grille. The entire room was flooded now, and the basin had transformed into a gym-sized pool. That wasn't all, though. Something else was raining down on us from the hole in the ceiling.

"A swarm of Water Skeeeters?! Seriously?!"

There were more than ten of the pests, one of them noticeably larger than the others and red in color. The creature was called a Water Skeeeeter: the top of the Water Skeeeter hierarchy, aka the boss. *That's it? One extra "e"? Wow, it's like they didn't even try.* Regardless, we couldn't afford to let our guard down. We were on their turf; they had the upper hand in this fight.

"Not looking good..."

Currently, the water came up to our ankles where we stood in front of the grille. However, the water level rose the closer to the center we got. Even at my height, I would be neck-deep in water at the center; my monsters would be completely submerged. The only remaining foothold was the wall surrounding this basin-shaped room, and even then, we wouldn't be able to move as freely due to the flooding.

"Calm down. Breathe. Panicking won't help..."

Relax. Don't try to kill them off all at once. Stay in formation and deal with one enemy monster at a time. Breaking formation would mean making myself vulnerable to attack. If I so much as stepped forward and got targeted, I'd be dead in an instant. My death spelled death for the entire team—I had to avoid

getting killed at all costs.

“Olto, Sakura! Cover for me!”

“Mm!”

“...!”

Olto and Sakura immediately took up position in front of me, shielding me from enemy attack. The Water Skeeeters were mean bastards, and their long-range attacks weren’t to be underestimated.

“Fau, use your singing and Fire Summoning to back us up! Rick, hit ’em with all the nut bombs you got! I don’t care what you use—do whatever you think is best! I’ll leave the timing up to you!”

“Aye!”

“Chirp chirp!”

We would be a lot safer if Fau could draw the enemy’s attention away from us. I wasn’t sure how useful Rick would be, though, given that there weren’t any footholds for him to make use of. The most he could do in this situation was try to deal as much damage as possible from afar with his nut bombs, using each of us to secure his footing.

“Drimo, start by attacking the enemy closest to you! Reflet, I want you to focus on healing!”

“Squeak squeak!”

“Hummm!”

Thus began our battle against the boss and its minions. For better or for worse, the fight wasn’t quite what I’d anticipated.

“Crap! Not an AoE attack!”

I’d assumed—wrongly—that the Water Skeeeeter would take advantage of its large frame and hurl itself at us. Instead of overwhelming us by sheer force, however, it chose to attack from a distance, spraying some kind of sweeping, acidic dissolvent at us. Dang, I’d totally taken it for a speed-first, high-mobility type! *It’s* red*, for goodness’ sake! Isn’t it supposed to move three times faster?!*

In any case, it seemed that we no longer had the luxury of dealing with our enemies one at a time. While the damage was nowhere near fatal, I wasn't sure how much more my robe could endure.

Another thing that surprised me was the relative lack of friction we experienced when moving through the water, courtesy of Reflet's Aquamobilize. Drimo and Olto were able to fight more or less the same as on dry land, as long as they stayed in the shallows. I was especially grateful for my mole, whose blows packed a hefty punch largely thanks to his nimbleness. I also hadn't counted on Fau's Fire Summoning skill being so effective. Fire appeared to be the Water Skeeeters' main weakness; I simply hadn't realized it until now since hardly anyone else in our party was capable of fire-based attacks.

"...That's it!"

Seeing Fau in action made me recall that I still had a few of the Miniature Flame Bombs Rikyu had given me. Not being brave enough to use the "New and Improved" version just yet, I decided to stick with the regular Rikyu Special. Grabbing one of the metal bombs, I took aim and threw it with all my might.

"Hrarrrgh! Take this!"

I'd done my best to aim for a spot that would simultaneously deal maximum damage to the boss and take out as many Water Skeeeters as possible. The bomb went off almost instantly, resulting in a much smaller explosion than I'd anticipated, but still blowing up quite a few of the creatures in the process. Using it near a body of water evidently reduced its coverage and power. Actually, I could probably use that to our advantage: by using the New and Improved Rikyu Specials in the Water Elementals' trial, I could minimize my chances of killing myself. *Why not use them here, you ask? Are you kidding me?* Reduced potency or not, I would one hundred percent get caught in the explosion if I were to use *those* palm-sized nukes in such an enclosed space as this.

To my surprise, the explosion caused a tidal wave, threatening to carry us away. Though the wave towered above me, I was just about able to withstand it.

"Ch-Chirp!"

“A-Aye!”

The same couldn’t be said for my smallest companions, however, and they were instantly swept away by the tide, disappearing from my sight. Even though this game didn’t have friendly fire, I hadn’t accounted for the possibility of secondary damage.

“Rick! Fau!” I yelled, trying to rush to their aid when Sakura stopped me.

“...!”

“Rats. Sorry, you’re right.”

Rikyu’s bomb might have taken out most of the enemies, but we still had the boss to deal with. *Definitely not a good idea to run into the path of danger.*

“...” Sakura pointed wordlessly at something. I followed her gaze and saw Fau and Rick getting to their feet right next to the boss. *Phew.* It looked like they were unharmed.

“Aight. Wasn’t as smooth as I hoped it’d be, but we managed to get rid of most of the bastards! Time to wipe out the rest, guys!”

“Squeak squeak!”

“Mmm!”

The only enemy monsters left were two Water Skeeeters and their boss, who was down to fifty percent health. The former, while skilled at evading attacks, had paper-thin defenses. Thanks to the disturbance created by the wave, they were unable to move, now nothing more than sitting ducks, and Drimo and Sakura were able to defeat them in one go. All that was left now was the boss. However, a sudden change overcame the giant once we defeated its minions.

“Sk-Skrrrrtttt!”

“Are those wings? You mean this thing can *fly*?” I muttered, staring at the translucent wings that had sprouted from the boss’s back. I supposed that wasn’t too weird, considering it was an insect. The ceiling was so *low*, though—did it even have space to take flight? I soon learned, however, that its wings had a different purpose. Using its new appendages to propel itself, the creature began gliding across the surface of the water at an alarming speed.

“Damn it! Guess this is phase two, huh?!”

The Water Skeeeeter alternated between charging at us and unleashing AoE attacks, gliding effortlessly along the water. This new phase proved to be far more of a nuisance to deal with, its speed making it more difficult for us to get a clean hit in. Furthermore, it was able to dodge our tanks and attack those of us at the rear.

“Crap! Aqua Heal!”

“Hum-hum!”

Reflet and I were forced to concentrate all our efforts on healing the others, unable to spare any energy for offensive moves. Though Olto and Sakura were giving it all they had, the boss evaded their attacks with ease, showing no signs of slowing down. With Sakura and I out of commission, the only damage dealers left on our team were Drimo and Rick. Even if it hadn’t been dodging Drimo’s blows, that was hardly enough to take the boss down.

“At this rate, we’re just marching slowly towards death... Okay, let’s take our chances! Sakura, restrain the boss so Drimo can get in more hits!”

“...!”

“Return, Rick! Come forth, Bear Bear!”

“Chirp!”

“Growl growl!”

Rick vanished, instantly replaced by Bear Bear.

“All right, just as I planned!”

Bear Bear had materialized exactly where Rick had been mere moments ago: on top of the boss’s massive back. There was a lot more to summoning than I’d ever thought, especially if you planned your moves strategically like this.

“Bear Bear! Go full throttle!”

“Growl!”

The insect bucked wildly, sensing a new foe. Bear Bear got down on one knee, using their left arm to cling to the creature’s back, determined not to get

thrown off. They raised their other sharp-clawed teddy bear paw to the heavens and froze in place—a sure sign that they were activating their Charge Ramp-Up skill. With their entire arm bathed in red light, they looked incredibly badass, like the protagonist of a superhero manga or anime.

"Grooowl...!"

"This right hand of mine glows with an awesome power...!"

"Grooowl growl, growl growl!"

"Its burning grip tells me to defeat my enemies!"

"Growl growl, grawr growl growl growl GROWL!"

"Take this! My love, my anger, and all of my sorrow! *Extra Fluffy Advanced Claw Attack!*" I roared. *What can I say? I couldn't resist.* As if on cue, Bear Bear slammed their glowing red claws into the Water Skeeeeter's back. The timing was perfect—no way that wasn't on purpose. Providing comic relief had always been one of Bear Bear's greatest strengths, after all. As epic as the move was, however, it wasn't enough to finish off the boss. Still, the blow had destroyed its wings, and I could see the creature start to slow down.

"All right, this oughta do it! Time for an all-out attack! Drimo, use your Dragon Blood Awakening! But *no* Thrashing, okay?"

"Squeak squeak!"

"...!"

"Growl!"

Dang! Drimo's dragon mode was always super badass, not to mention strong as hell! Propelled by his Tailwind skill, Drimo's sharp horns tore into the boss's body, eating up a huge chunk of its HP. Finally, Bear Bear used their second Charge Ramp-Up of the day and delivered the finishing blow to the creature's head, and its massive body slumped to the ground, defeated.

"That was close... Good work, everyone!"

"Growl."

"Squeak."

All of my monsters had leveled up from the battle. Rick, specifically, had learned a new skill called Camouflage at level 30, which made it less likely for enemies to spot him. That would definitely come in handy, considering he often took the lead when we explored dungeons and hidden passages. Since most of the boss drops were crafting materials, I figured I could bring them to either Shuella or Lewin once we were above ground again.

“Let’s continue once we’re done healing ourselves. Honestly, I’d much rather get straight outta here, but we don’t really have a choice.”

Despite having defeated the boss, the exit remained barred. Instead, the wall on the other side of the room slid open, revealing another passage. The corridor beckoned us, its silence unrelenting. It looked like we had no choice but to keep going.

“Okay. Lead the way, buddy.”

“Mmm!”

Imagine if, after all that trouble, the Water Skeeeeter turned out to be just the mini-boss...

“What if we run into the *actual* boss inside...?” I gulped. That would mean almost certain death.

“...!”

“Growl!”

“Sorry, you’re right. It’s too early to give up yet.”

“Squeak.”

“Aye!”

“Yeah, I’ll do my best. We’ll fight hard and dirty till the very end.”

“Mm!”

“Hum!”

Even if we do end up losing, it won’t be without a good ol’ fashioned fight!

We needn’t have worried so much, however, as we encountered zero

monsters after that. Eventually, the corridor led us to a small room. I gingerly took a step inside, but fortunately received no sign that a boss battle was about to start. There was something peculiar lying in the center of the room, though. By that, I didn't mean it was too dark to make out what the object was—there was more than enough light in the room, thanks to the square paper lamps hanging from all four corners—but more that I genuinely didn't know what to make of it.

"Looks like...a scrap of cloth?"

At a glance, all I saw was a white piece of fabric lying on the floor. The object's marker indicated otherwise, though: evidently, this "cloth" was an NPC. Upon assessing it, I learned that the cloth scrap was actually an "Obake," plain and simple. Aha, so this thing was a ghost; what I'd mistaken for a scrap of fabric was actually its body. Rather than a realistic yurei—as in, a type of spirit akin to the typical depiction of ghosts in Western culture—it had more of a cartoonish vibe, like Little Ghost Q-Taro or the white, balloon-like creature in that famous adventure game series where a plumber rescues a princess for some reason. Now that I had a better look at it, I could see something resembling a face in the center of the cloth, albeit a poorly scribbled one. The obake had two horizontal lines for eyes and an upside-down triangle for a mouth. Shapewise, it was as round as a bowling ball, with two triangular, fingerless hands on each side. It didn't seem to have any legs, nor was I able to find any under the cloth; all I could see was endless darkness. Since it was labeled as an NPC, it couldn't be an enemy monster, although I supposed you could never be too careful.

"Boo..."

As I tiptoed towards it, the obake on the ground slowly opened its eyes. So it didn't actually have lines for eyes: they had simply been closed. Now that they were open, its eyes resembled two black, hand-drawn circles. Why did it sound so weak, though?

"B-Boo..." the obake moaned, their voice barely above a whisper.

GROOAR-GULNK!

"Wh-What the heck was that?!" I stuttered as a low, intimidating rumble suddenly echoed throughout the room. It sounded like a giant toad or some

kind of tropical bird squawking at its natural predator. Could it be that the obake had been attacked by whatever was making this noise? *Damn it, don't tell me there's* another *boss battle?! What is this, the ending to* [redacted] Quest III*?!*

"Watch out! There's something in here!" I warned, tensing up.

"Mm-mm?"

"Hum?"

"Aye?"

Wait, what? Despite my urgent tone and serious expression, my companions remained where they were, staring at me curiously.

"Huh? Guys, aren't you gonna get ready to fight?"

"Growl?"

"Squeak?"

"...?"

Not Sakura too! Was it because we couldn't see our opponent yet? *So be it*—at least one of us had to be on guard! I steeled myself, searching for the source of the sound. Once again, the same rumbling noise shook the room. It appeared to be coming from somewhere ahead, presumably beyond the obake. Could there be a monster waiting on the other side of the wall?

GROOAWRRNK!

No, it sounded much closer—close to where the obake was lying. Wait, was it coming *from* the obake?

"Ooo... Boo..."

"Don't tell me...?"

I approached the obake and knelt beside it. Now that I was closer, its cheeks looked sunken, making it appear slightly emaciated.

GROOAWRRNK!

Welp, mystery solved. Now I knew why none of my monsters had bothered

moving. There was, in fact, no enemy awaiting in the shadows—only the sound of the obake's grumbling stomach. The obake wasn't weak from pain or exhaustion, but had simply collapsed from hunger.

"Ooo... Booo..."

GROOOAR-GULNK!

The cloth-like obake in the center of the room gazed up at me with a pleading look in its eyes. Being an NPC, I doubted it would harm us. Neither was it a yokai, as my Yokai Detection skill returned zero hits.

"Boo..."

Although part of me wanted to help it, I was at a complete loss as to what to do. Did ghosts even require sustenance in the first place? They were incorporeal beings, after all—oh, but this one did have a sheet for a body...

"Do I, like, let you feed off my energy or something?" I asked.

"Boo..."

Nope, that wasn't it. The obake shook its head—or rather, its entire body, since it didn't really have one—ever so slightly.

"So you *do* eat food?"

"Boo..." The creature nodded more firmly this time. *Seriously? A ghost that actually eats?* Well, I *was* looking at one now. *You need to stop thinking of obake as spirits,* I reminded myself. Clearly, the two were dissimilar in this game.

"What do obake like to eat, though...?"

Didn't Q-Taro like white rice? Or was it chocolate? Not that it mattered, as I owned neither of those items.

"*You* wouldn't happen to know, would you?" I shot a hopeful glance at Reflet.

"Hum?" she cocked her head in reply. *Figured as much.* Seeing as there was no point thinking about it, I decided to lay out all of the food items I currently had. Besides meat and fish dishes, drinks, and sweets, I also took out all of my uncooked ingredients, such as raw meat, vegetables, and herbs, just in case it

preferred eating them as is. Evidently, I had more food than I thought in my inventory, judging by the myriad items that now surrounded the obake. The way they were laid out, it looked like I was about to start some sort of weird ceremonial ritual.

"Well? See anything you like?"

"B-Boo... Ooo..." The obake shook its head. *Really? This isn't good enough?* There had to be *something* I could offer it, though. I decided to take out everything I could think of from my inventory, including stuff that couldn't be eaten as is, such as edible grass, weeds, medicinal herbs, and water. Once I was done, the obake stretched out its tiny hands, trying to reach one of the items. Apparently, it had spotted something it liked.

"Shit!" I cried, realizing what the obake had grabbed. It was holding a white poisonous mushroom: a mutated red panther cap. It seemed to have accidentally gotten mixed up with the other items. Before I could snatch it back, however, the white and blue polka-dotted mushroom disappeared into the obake's mouth.

"Stop! That thing's poisonous!" I yelled, despite it being too late. Was it going to be okay?

"Boo?"

The obake seemed unaffected by the poison, munching happily on the mutated red panther cap.

"R-Really? You're okay?"

"Boo!"

I needn't have worried after all. As soon as it finished eating the mushroom, the obake regained its energy and moved from a lying position to a sitting one. It then sprang to its feet—or rather, floated off the ground, bobbing about and flapping its hands excitedly in the air.

"Boo-woo!"

The obake circled me, doing a happy little jig. Even my companions started dancing, affected by its jolly mood.



“La di da da♪”

“Mm-mmm!”

“Hum!”

“Growl!”

“Boo-woo!”

Okay, what now? Seeing as we were now on good terms, a fight seemed unlikely. Still, I had no idea what to do next. After dancing with my monsters for a bit, the obake seemed satisfied, coming to a halt midair, though its body continued to bob up and down.

“Boo-ooo!”

The obake beamed, its entire cartoonish face lighting up. It then reached under its cloth and began rummaging around, humming cheerfully all the while.

“Boo!” it exclaimed, pulling something out from underneath and offering it to me.

“Huh. ...What is this?”

It seemed like the obake had given me a cracked, dirty marble.

```
Name: Cracked Marble
Rarity: 1 / Quality: 10★
Effect: Can’t be sold or given away.
```

The marble appeared to be an event-related item, given that I couldn’t transfer it in any way.

“Um, is this for me?”

“Boo!” The obake nodded firmly as if to say, *Consider it a token of my appreciation.*

“But how do I use i—”

“Boo!”

Before I could question it further, the obake gave me a little wave and vanished with a poof; I'd scarcely had time to stop it. *Wait, that's it? The event's over?*

"Right... What was *that* all about?"

I stared at the mysterious item in my hand, but I hadn't the faintest clue how to use it.

"Maybe I should look it up."

I looked through the forums briefly but found nothing on the subject except for information about regular marbles. The regular ones were drops from Lesser Ghosts, and I had quite a few of those already. Nothing about *cracked* event marbles, though. I didn't find anything particularly noteworthy about obake either. There was, however, one piece of information that captured my interest.

"Someone found a hidden passage in the Eastern Town, huh? Didn't know there was one there too. 'Discovered by Hamakaze...' Damn, this person was also the first to discover a Sunekosuri?! That's amazing!"

So it wasn't just the Western Town that had a secret underground passage. However, instead of an obake, Hamakaze had encountered a yokai called a Mini Kappa. According to their post, they had also found the kappa lying on the ground, weak from hunger like the obake I'd encountered. Unfortunately, they had been unable to trigger an event due to not owning any items the kappa could eat.

"Hmm, says here how to enter the hidden passage..."

Might be a good idea to check it out, I mused. Now that I knew there were secret tunnels in the east and west, there was a strong possibility they existed in the north and south too.

"Could be worth searching for them."

It was just as well, since I'd planned on visiting each of the towns in Zone Three anyway. This way, I could cross two things off my list at once. Initially, I'd planned on doing another dungeon crawl in one of the trials, but I decided to prioritize exploring Zone Three first. As important as money and XP were, I couldn't say no to the prospect of discovering something new. Besides, we still

had a long way to go before we were strong enough to clear the dungeons on our own.

“All right! Time to return to ground level, guys.”

“Mmm!”

Incidentally, although Drimo had managed to slide his way down when we entered the tunnel, climbing back up was a whole nother ordeal. It took a whole lot of pushing and pulling from both ends to finally get him up the ladder. That said, it was incredibly endearing to see the usually coolheaded Drimo failing so awkwardly at something!

Chapter Three: We Found Another One, Chief! It's the North This Time!

The day after our encounter with the obake, I logged in as usual and headed to our farm. My plan for today was to stroll around each of the towns in Zone Three. I figured I could sell my info to Alyssa once I was done exploring. Ideally, I wanted to have obtained information about the remaining tunnels by then, though I doubted things would go that smoothly. Before heading out, I went through the crops my companions had harvested that morning. As usual, we had a bountiful harvest, including prized provisions like royal jelly. I was especially taken aback by the green peach—not because it was a rarity, but because the quality was much higher than usual.

"Must be the first time we got an eight-star fruit..."

Our first eight-star that *wasn't* an herb, in fact. I could have sworn we couldn't grow such high-quality crops in the Town of Beginnings, though...

"'Sup, Yuto? Why the long face?" Tagosack, the manly beauty in coveralls, peered over at me from next door.

"Hey, Tagosack," I greeted her back. Greeting each other had become a near-daily routine by this point, given that we were essentially farming neighbors. "Check this out."

"Hey, it's a genetic mutation! Fancy that!"

Ever the perceptive farmer, Tagosack immediately figured out the mystery of my green peach, informing me that it was the result of a quality mutation. There were several types of mutations that could occur in field crops, as I had already learned from the examples of my medicinal herb transforming into a firestarter plant and my red panther cap turning white. Apparently, there were cases where only the quality of the crops was affected, which was precisely what had happened with my green peach. This was the first time I had encountered this particular mutation. Even Tagosack had only experienced it a

few times with her crops, so it had to be pretty rare.

“Gotcha. Thanks for explaining it to me.”

“Nah, don’t mention it. Sharin’ is caring, y’know? We farmers gotta stick together.” Tagosack brushed off my gratitude, waving without looking back as she returned to her farm. *Wowee.* She seriously was a hundred times manlier than me.

“Well, that clears things up. Might as well return to work—got a full day ahead of us.”

I had intended to get our chores on both farms out of the way as quickly as possible before setting off. However, a shocking sight awaited me when I approached the barn, banishing all thoughts of traveling from my mind instantly.

“Shit, it’s an egg!” I exclaimed, staring at the red-and-brown-marbled egg sitting in front of the barn.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Aye!”

Rick and Fau greeted me and resumed their usual positions on my shoulders, grinning proudly. I assessed the egg, and sure enough, it was theirs.

“Whoa. This is great!”

“Chirp!”

“Aye!”

The egg seemed awfully big, though, considering how tiny Fau and Rick were. It was the same size as Olto and Sakura’s egg—a giant in comparison to them. Oh well, I supposed the parents’ sizes were irrelevant since eggs were born via magical synthesis in-game.

“Guess this means we need a new incubator... Himka, mind making me an iron ingot?”

“Hm!”

For attribute crystals, I currently had a fire crystal. All I needed now was an

incubator to combine it with. Leaving my monsters in charge of the farm, I set off for the Magical Beasts Guild in high spirits, breaking into a skip every now and then. How could I *not*, though, knowing this was our first egg in a while?! While I debated between a Crafting Skill Incubator and a Battle Skill Incubator at the guild, I ultimately chose the latter, seeing as I already had plenty of monsters with crafting abilities. By the time I returned, Himka was finished making my iron ingot, so I set to work immediately.

Name: Battle Skill Incubator with a Fire Attribute

Rarity: 4 / Quality: 6★

Effect: An incubator that grants a +5 initial stat boost at random to the monster that hatches from it. Also grants a random battle skill to its initial skill set, as well as a fire-attribute skill and fire resistance.

Despite not asking for Sawyer's help this time, my incubator turned out unexpectedly solid. *Hey, would you look at that?!* That probably meant my Alchemy skill was at a decent level now, which meant that I would no longer have to rely on Sawyer for help. Once I had placed Rick and Fau's egg in the incubator, I moved it inside the barn as usual. In a few days' time, our family would have a new member.

"Wonder what your kid will look like?"

"Chirp?"

"Aye?"

The two tilted their heads questioningly. They didn't seem to know either. To begin with, they were both completely different in appearance and ability. Would our new monster be a fairylike animal? A fairy with ears or a tail? It would be super cute if it turned out to be an anthropomorphic squirrel in overalls, like one of the mice who bravely fought a wicked white weasel in that series from the seventies. They and Drimo would complement each other nicely as old anime references. *We'll have to wait and see, though.*

“Right. Let’s finish up our work for real this time and get going.”

“Chirp!”

“Aye!”

For starters, I wanted to install the greenhouse I bought. I’d actually wanted to do that yesterday, but with everything that happened, I’d totally forgotten about it. After asking for Olto’s opinion, it seemed like he wanted the greenhouse to be installed in the orchard.

“Here? Just like this?” I looked to him for confirmation.

“Mm!” he nodded in reply, giving me the go-ahead. As soon as I pressed Install, a gigantic glass greenhouse covered the entire orchard.

“Whoa! That’s cool A.F.!”

“Mm-mmm!”

Our orchard looked like a real botanical garden from the outside. The greenhouse was no ordinary glass structure, though: the frame was decorated in a rococo style, parts of it gleaming brilliantly due to their gold plating. The overall effect was less like a modern, industrial greenhouse and more like a private conservatory of old that one might have found at an aristocrat’s manor. The glass was also slightly frosted, adding to its quaintness.

“Neat.”

“Mm!”

According to its description, the greenhouse was capable of speeding up the growth of trees and special plants, as well as raising their quality. If all went well, we would be able to harvest more fruit in the future.

An hour later, having taken care of our tasks for the day, we found ourselves in the Western Town square again. Although I was in a hurry to make my way east, there was one place I had to stop by first: Shuella’s shop. Although I’d considered visiting Lewin’s shop as well, I figured I would swing by Shuella’s stall first, as that was where I’d bought my robe the last time.

“Long time no see, Shuella,” I greeted her.

“Hey, Silver-Haired! Good to see ya again.” The sly loli (of legal age) greeted me in her usual fashion. She seemed to be manning the stall by herself today. I felt a little nervous that Seki wasn’t there to rein her in, but I steeled myself before showing her my robe’s current durability score.

“It’s a wreck,” I explained.

“Whew,” she whistled, assessing the damage. “You sure put this one through the wringer. What’s it gonna be? Wanna repair it, or just make a new one?”

“Hmm, let me think.”

While it was possible to repair the durability for a fee, the trade-off was that its performance would decline ever so slightly. There was some complicated math behind it, but basically, the more durability you tried to restore at once, the more likely you were to experience an overall downgrade. That said, it was also cheaper to repair everything in one go. Essentially, you would have to make periodic repairs, even if it cost you more, if you wanted to continue using your favorite equipment for as long as possible. In the case of my Fish Scales Robe, a decrease in its protective abilities seemed unavoidable, as its Durability had plummeted to 20 during the boss fight.

“Maybe I’ll get a new one.”

“Smart. You’ll buy it from *me*, won’t you?”

“Let’s see what you have to offer, then.”

“Heh heh, is that a challenge? Very well. Feast your eyes upon my masterpieces!” Shuella grinned, showing me several options. She wasn’t exaggerating either; every one of them had noteworthy specs, although that obviously meant they came with a steep price to match.

Name: Fireproof Robe

Rarity: 4 / Quality: 7★ / Durability: 240

Effect: Defense +41, minor fire resistance, minor heat (weather) resistance.

Requirement: Sanity 10 or higher.

Weight: 3

Name: Elemental Cloth Robe

Rarity: 4 / Quality: 7★ / Durability: 200

Effect: Defense +46, slight magic resistance.

Weight: 3

Name: Silver-Spun Elemental Cloth Robe

Rarity: 4 / Quality: 5★ / Durability: 170

Effect: Defense +40, Sanity +1, Intelligence +1, minor magic resistance.

Weight: 4

Name: Boaz Soldier Robe

Rarity: 5 / Quality: 5★ / Durability: 330

Effect: Defense +67, Intelligence -2.

Requirement: Endurance 13 or higher.

Weight: 5

Name: Hard-Shell Insect Robe

Rarity: 5 / Quality: 4★ / Durability: 290

Effect: Defense +69, Sanity +1, Intelligence +1, minor fire damage debuff.

Requirement: Strength 15 or higher.

Weight: 6

Most of the robes had been made with materials found in the Elemental Gates. Naturally, all of them were higher performance than my current Fish

Scales Robe.

“What do you think? Pretty neat, eh?”

“For sure. I can wear all of them, except for the last two.”

“No good, huh? Too bad—they’re our strongest robes too. We made them with materials from Zones Five and Six.”

“Guess stuff made with materials from those areas has stricter requirements.”

“Unfortunately, yeah. I did try to lower the threshold by adding a couple of debuffs, but I guess they’re still out of your league.”

Yes, I know. Thanks for the accurate assessment. Out of the five, the Elemental Cloth Robe or Silver-Spun Elemental Cloth Robe seemed like the best options. The question was, which did I want to prioritize: physical damage reduction, or magic damage reduction? After some thought, I decided to go with the former. My magic defense stats were pretty decent—that is, average—after all. In my case, it was far more important to strengthen my ability to withstand physical damage so I wouldn’t get KO’d in a single blow. With that, I settled on the Elemental Cloth Robe.

“Heh heh, thanks, pal! By the way, got any materials for sale again? If you’re lucky, we might be able to offset the cost of your robe.”

“Hmm, lemme check...”

For starters, I produced the items I’d obtained in the Fire Elementals’ trial, setting aside a few of each in case they came in handy later.

“Nice. Plenty to work with!”

“What else...? Oh, I have these too.”

Might as well show her the Water Skeeeter and Muckus drops too, I figured. Since I wanted to bring some for Alyssa to inspect as well, I only laid out half of my findings. I also decided to save the Water Skeeeeter drops for myself for the time being.

“H-Holy... How do you keep finding all these unusual items? Hee hee, hee... Woo-hoo! All riiiight!”

“Er, thanks...?”

“Okay, sure thing! I’ll give you an extra special discount. How’s this?”

“Seriously? This much?”

“Abso-hecking-lutely! These are brand-new, never-before-seen items. ’Course they’re worth shelling out for!”

The robe, which was originally priced at over 100k, was now only 30,000 G. *For real?* She was the one who suggested it, though, so I supposed there was no need to feel bad for taking her up on her offer.

“Okay, I’ll take it.”

“Hee hee, what shall I make with these? Since Seki’s not around, I can have them all to myself! Mwa ha ha!”

It looked like Seki’s absence had actually worked in my favor. No doubt Shuella had ignored the market value when buying my items in order to get her hands on them. I hadn’t realized Muckuses and Water Skeeeters were undiscovered monsters, though. That meant I might encounter monsters unfamiliar to me in the passage in the Eastern Town too. I wondered if any of them were tameable like the Muckuses were; it would be cool if I ran into something interesting.

“All right. Eastern Town, here we come!”

“Mmm!”

We teleported to our next destination after bidding Shuella farewell, eager to find the underground passage where the Mini Kappa had been sighted. While walking around, I read the summary notes about the passage that Hamakaze had posted in the forums. They seemed to be a player blessed with incredible luck; incredibly, when they were on the brink of defeat in the boss battle, they’d stumbled upon a safety zone by accident from where they could attack the boss from a distance, wearing it down bit by bit before narrowly beating it. Hamakaze had also included the boss’s attack patterns, so it seemed like we had a good chance of success.

Additionally, people in the forums were arguing about whether the safety

zone had been a bug or not. There was nothing to worry about if the devs had intentionally set up one there, but if it was a bug, it would get fixed before long. The consensus was that it was best to act as soon as possible, just to be safe. Having read that, I hurried to the tunnel. My plans were disrupted, however, by the long queue in front of the windmill where the entrance had been discovered. Apparently, every single person in line was waiting their turn to attempt the dungeon.

"...Nope. Not a chance."

"Mm-mm..."

I should've known tons of people would show up, considering how detailed the forum post was. It seemed highly unlikely that we would get in anytime soon. Moreover, Fau was drawing a lot of attention to herself.

"L-Let's move somewhere else." I ushered my monsters away, fearing a repeat of the commotion in the Western Town.

"Aye."

What now, though? I didn't want to waste time standing in line.

"Maybe we should check out the Northern and Southern Towns while we're waiting."

"Mm!"

"Question is, which one do we visit first? ...Olto? North or south?"

"Mm?" He cocked his head in response. My other companions reacted similarly.

"Guess you wouldn't know either... Okay, buddy, I challenge you to a game of rock, paper, scissors! If you win, we go north. If I win, we head south."

"Mm!"

It didn't really matter who won, but Olto already had one arm crossed over the other in a sort of prayer pose, peeking through his clasped hands—a pose that was said to guarantee you victory in this game. His competitive side was showing, and he seemed determined to win. Where on earth had he learned *that*, though?

“Okay, ready? Rock, paper...”

“Mm...” Olto gulped, his expression utterly serious. He looked like he was about to unleash some kind of superpower move.

“Scissors... Go!”

“Mm-mm!”

Olto had beat my scissors with his rock. Seeing this, he roared in victory, punching the air.



“Mmm-mmm!”

“Right, north it is.”

“Mm!”

So far, our expedition in the Northern Town was going great. Well, perhaps not *great*, since we had yet to find a sign of the underground passage, but at least we hadn’t run into trouble with other players. We strolled around town at a leisurely pace, unbothered by players trying to steal a peek at Fau, which allowed us to stock up on ingredients that were only available in this town, such as goat’s milk.

“La la la♪”

“Mm-mm.”

“Hum-hum.”

“Growl growl.”

Our group today consisted of Olto, Rick, Bear Bear, Fau, Reflet, and Drimo. Since our goal was to find the entrance to the passage, I had chosen my members based on their ability to find things. I could always switch out my monsters when we entered the dungeon, depending on what its enemies were like.

“Listen, don’t just look between buildings. I want you guys to report anything that looks even remotely suspicious, okay?”

“Squeak.”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Aye!”

Was Drimo’s helmet really that comfortable to sit on? The two little ones were perched atop it, Rick serving as Fau’s sofa.

“Hmm... The entrance in the Western Town was a manhole between the walls of some houses, and the one in the Eastern Town was a set of stairs inside a windmill, which led to the basement.”

Other than the fact that they both led you below ground level, I couldn't find anything else in common. As other people on the forums mentioned, it seemed like we had no choice but to search every location that appeared suspect.

"Map's looking pretty good too."

Before coming here, I had actually undertaken a mapping quest similar to the one I had done in the Town of Beginnings. By filling in this map, I could get at least one thing done, and our trip wouldn't be a complete waste, even if we didn't find the dungeon. I also used my skills to put out feelers for any yokai that might be lurking in the area.

"La di da di da...♪"

"Chirp chirp."

"Hum-hum-hum."

As a matter of fact, seeing my monsters happy already made the trip worthwhile. Still, it wouldn't hurt to make a lucky discovery or two along the way.

"Welp, the map's complete now..."

Half a day had passed, but we were still nowhere close to finding the dungeon, nor had I detected any yokai. *Can't expect to succeed every time, I guess.* Our search hadn't been entirely fruitless, though. While working on my quest, I also happened upon a comfortable-looking meadow the size of a school playground on the edge of town. The empty lot had a few scattered trees, and though it wasn't as well maintained as a park, the grass was trimmed short. There were also some wild tulips and cosmos flowers swaying in the wind. It seemed like the perfect location to take a nap or have a picnic. We could have lunch here, and my companions could play in the field while I took photos of them.

"Aight, time for a lunch break, guys! Help me get everything ready!"

First, I took out the straw mat that I'd purchased for the flower-viewing party and handed it to Olto. I was glad I'd bought it, as it was perfect to have on hand in situations like this.

“Spread that out, will you?”

“Mmm!”

“Hum!”

With the sheet spread, all that was left now was the food.

“We have the following snacks—royal jelly for Bear Bear, walnuts for Rick, juice for Olto, acqua pazza for Reflet, and vegetables for Fau and Drimo!”

“Squeak.”

“Aye!”

“Growl!”

“Chirp!”

“Uh-uh, don’t start eating yet. Gotta toast first, okay?”

After a brief toast, we kicked off our picnic. Within minutes, my monsters had finished eating and gone off to play in the field.

“La la la♪”

“Squeak.”

Only Drimo and Fau stayed behind, the latter plucking her lute atop Drimo’s head. As always, she seemed to find his “Ain’t afraid of no sunlight” helmet a comfortable perch. Ah, this was the life—there was a gentle breeze blowing, my companions were chasing each other playfully in the meadow, and I got to pet Drimo’s soft fur from time to time, all while being soothed by Fau’s music. It’d been a while since I’d relaxed like this; I’d completely forgotten how good it felt.

“Ahhh... We should do this more often,” I sighed.

“Squeak.”

“La la...♪”

However, our cozy picnic was short-lived.

“Hm? That you, Silver-Haired? Yoo-hoo!”

“Amelia? What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question.”

The lull was suddenly interrupted by one of my Tamer friends, Amelia, who was accompanied by four gnomes, a rabbit on her shoulder.

“Me? I’m having a picnic. Thought it was the perfect place to have one,” I replied.

“Gotcha. Looks like fun!”

“And you?”

“I’m here for a photo shoot! I’m gonna take lots and *lots* of pics of my gnomes among the flowers!” she chirped happily.

“I see.”

Maybe we Tamers weren’t all that different when it came to our monsters. What truly impressed me, however, were Amelia’s gnomes. She had managed to complete the full set of evolutions: Gnome Farmer, Knocker, Gnome Fighter, and Gnome Leader. Noticing my gaze, she introduced me to her quartet, beaming like a proud parent. Each of them bowed and greeted me with a cheery “Mm!” in reply.

“Your Gnome Farmer doesn’t look that different from a regular gnome. *Has* it changed?”

“Its hoe is slightly more ornate than before, and it has a new lapel pin!”

“Uh-huh... Definitely wouldn’t have noticed unless you told me.”

“Really? I wouldn’t say that. Pretty sure you’d be able to tell them apart in no time, Silver-Haired.”

Er, sure, if *I were as crazy about gnomes as you are.* As much as I loved gnomes, I could never compete with Amelia’s overzealous adoration for them.

“The Knocker looks pretty different, though.”

In comparison to its pre-evolved form, the Knocker had grown slightly taller and looked more grown up. Its hair had also turned black, and in place of a hoe, it carried a pickax much like the one Drimo owned over its shoulder. The Gnome Fighter was clad in some sort of clunky tin armor that looked hard to

move around in, making me doubt how skilled a fighter it truly was. Before I knew it, my companions were tugging at the gnomes' hands, inviting them to a lighthearted game of chase. The way they ran after one another in the field reminded me of kindergarteners at play.

"Sorry, Amelia, didn't mean to ruin your shoot. I'll call them back," I apologized.

"No, don't be! If anything, it's an absolute blessing! I can take screenshots of my gnomes anytime, but this, THIS is something I can only witness in *this very moment*! You don't mind if I take pics of them, do you?"

"N-Not at all. Be my guest."

"Hee hee... I'm in heaven!" Amelia grinned like an idiot. Well, she seemed happy, and that was what mattered most. Even her normally attractive avatar couldn't mask how goofy she looked now, gazing dreamily at the scene before us with her mouth half open. By chance, my eyes met with the rabbit perched atop Amelia's head.

"..."

"..."

"...I feel your pain, buddy."

"...Pwee."

I was certain that, in that instant, the two of us shared a moment of understanding.

Thirty minutes later...

"Ahh... That was amazing!" Amelia sighed contentedly.

"Satisfied?"

"Yep, very!"

I would hope so, considering how many screenshots she took. In fact, it seemed like she was taking photos every single time I saw her.

"Do you have enough storage, though?" I asked.

“Not to worry! I bought an extra large hard drive for this very purpose!”

Since there was a limit to the amount of data you could store in-game, I’d heard that die-hard photoholics often paid for additional space, be it cloud storage or external storage devices. I should have known Amelia was one of those people too.

“All right, I’m off to join in on the fun now! Whee!”

I had to hand it to her—the girl’s energy knew no bounds. Amelia dashed off to join our monsters without so much as a moment’s rest, laughing and chasing them before long. Under ordinary circumstances, a beautiful girl frolicking with children and animals should have made for a heartwarming sight. However...

“Guuuys, wait uuup!”

“Mmm!”

“Heh, hee hee. Aww, come back!”

“*Mm-mm!*”

Amelia was grinning uncontrollably, eyes glazed over and unfocused as though in a trance. If I had to describe her current vibe in two words, “child molester” would probably be the most fitting.

After five minutes of keeping a watchful eye on her and my monsters—a scene that would no doubt have prompted other players to file a report had they been around—Amelia’s blissful respite came to an abrupt end.

“Huh? Where’d she go?”

Amelia had vanished from sight. One moment she was chasing her gnomes, the next she was gone. Had she been forced to log out? There would’ve been a sign if that were the case, though. Besides, her gnomes hadn’t disappeared, which meant she was still logged in to the game.

“Amelia?”

Where on earth had she gone? I wondered, as her gnomes and I hurried to the spot where she’d vanished from.

“Amelia? Where are you?” I hollered, pushing aside the taller weeds and

cosmos flowers in search of her.

“Mm-mm?”

“Silver-Haired!” Amelia’s voice echoed faintly. It sounded as though she was in a tunnel of sorts. I trod carefully towards the source of her voice and soon discovered why.

“Ah. That’ll explain it.”

“Don’t just stand there! Help me!”

Amelia had fallen into an oblong hole roughly three meters deep. Evidently, it had been hidden by some overgrown turfgrass, which was why she hadn’t spotted it in time—a booby trap, so to speak.

“Mm!”

“Mmm!”

“Mm-mm!”

“Mm-mm-mmm!”

“Huh? Eek!”

Amelia’s Knocker, either from sheer panic or in a genuine attempt to help its master, dived into the hole, and the other gnomes quickly followed suit. Amelia, failing to catch them, toppled to the ground. The five of them were all smooshed on top of one another inside the narrow hole, a situation that would undoubtedly have been fairly disastrous in real life.

“You okay down there?” I called out to her.

“I-I think so... Honestly, guys! You can’t just jump in like that!”

“Mm...”

“Mm-mm...”

“Gosh... You look adorable as ever, even when you’re ashamed.”

“Mm?”

Yep, same Amelia as always. I was glad she wasn’t hurt.

“Hang in there! We’ll let a rope down for y—”

“No, wait!” Amelia cut me off abruptly. For some reason, her gaze was fixed on a spot beside her instead of above.

“What’s wrong?”

“I see something! There’s some kind of gap!”

“A gap?” I echoed.

“Yeah!”

It seemed like she had noticed a thin gap between the wall of the pit and the ground when she got bowled over. As much as I wanted to check it out as well, there was no way another person could fit in the hole.

“Think there might be something down there?”

“Hmm... Gimme a minute. Attention, everyone! I need you to search this place!”

“Mm-mm!” the gnomes replied in unison.

“Ack, wait! Let me get up first!”

The gnomes started investigating the narrow hole, squashing Amelia even further in the process. Just then, her Knocker gestured towards a spot on the wall.

“Mm-mm!”

“You find something? ...Right here?”

“Mm.”

“Let’s see... There’s some kinda stone here. Is this...?” Amelia trailed off, stretching her hand towards it. Squinting, I was able to make out a black business-card-sized stone embedded in the wall. The moment her fingers touched it, the ground began to rumble. After a few seconds, the rumbling stopped to reveal...

“We did it! It’s a hidden passage!”

“Mmm!”

“Great work, Amelia.”

“Booyah! How’s *that* for a breakthrough?!”

“Mm-mm!”

Amelia and her gnomes grinned smugly. Not that I minded; they’d totally earned the right to be boastful.

“Does it look like we can go in there?”

“Yep. Looks pretty long too.”

“Oho? That so?”

Could this be the underground tunnel we’d been searching for? It had to be. *Jackpot!*

“What do you think, Silver-Haired?”

“Hmm. *I’m* really curious to see what’s inside. How about you, Amelia?”

“Likewise! Hang on, I’ll send you a team request now!”

Awesome. That made things much easier. Thus began my joint expedition with Amelia and her companions. Once I’d confirmed her party had entered the tunnel, my monsters and I jumped into the pit and followed suit.

“Huh. Looks like it’s slightly wider inside,” I commented. Whereas the entrance was only big enough for one person to enter at a time, the passage soon widened once we ducked through it. I reckoned it was about the same width as the sewer in the Western Town.

“All right, everyone! Let the search begin!”

“Mm-mm!” the gnomes exclaimed and pumped their fists, Olto included. They seemed to have become pretty close within the past hour or so. *Five* gnomes, though? Wasn’t that a bit much?

“Er, Amelia?”

“Yes?”

“Sure you wanna go ahead with the search?”

“What do you mean? Of course.”

“Okay, if you say so.”

Picking up on the slight edge to her voice, I held my tongue. In any case, it seemed like she did dungeon crawls regularly with her all-gnome party, so I supposed we could make it work.

“Right. Shall we?”

“Woo-hoo!”

“*Mmm!*”

Despite starting on a high note, however, Amelia soon came to a halt after a few meters.

“I can’t see anything!” she cried.

“Hmm... First time we’ve been in a dungeon with zero light.”

It was as Amelia said: there wasn’t a single lamp nor clump of luminous moss in the cave. No matter how much I squinted, squeezing my eyes shut for a few seconds before opening them again, the path ahead remained as dark as ever.

“Got a torch, Amelia?”

“Nope. Wish I did, though.”

“I see. Fau, you know what to do.”

“Aye!”

Seeing as we had no other choice, I asked Fau to create a ball of fire for us with her Fire Summoning skill. Unfortunately, due to the skill’s summoning time limit, she would have to reactivate it every few minutes in order to use it continuously. Since evolving, the cost of her Singing (Advanced) skill had increased by a significant margin. The drain on her MP was extremely worrying if I factored in the extended usage of her Fire Summoning as well. I would have to use my mana potions wisely and ask her to refrain from getting too involved during battles lest she run out of MP too soon.

“Ooh, fairy to the rescue! Wouldn’t expect less from a cutie!” Amelia cooed.

“...What does being cute have to do with it? Didn’t know Fau was also on your radar, though...”

“’Course she is! When did she grow wings, by the way?”

“Really? You’ve only *just* noticed?”

“I was so busy admiring her cuteness that it didn’t register until now.”

“Uh-huh... Well, she evolved just the other day.”

“Really? Lucky you. If only I had a fairy too!” Amelia sighed enviously.

“Didn’t you tame a Salamander recently? Pretty sure pixies are born between Elementals, so I’d say you’re well on your way to getting one.”

“You don’t know if that’s for certain, though, right? Isn’t Fau a cross between a gnome and a tree nymph?”

“Yeah, she is.”

“Then there’s no guarantee that a union between a Salamander and a gnome will result in a pixie.”

She had a point. I’d figured it was as simple as pairing two Elementals, but perhaps the requirements were stricter than that. It could be that one or the other was necessary, or that only tree nymph-gnome pairings gave birth to pixies.

“Still, I’d really like to get a tree nymph at some point.”

“Are they that rare?”

“More like *super* rare! Only three people have managed to tame one, as far as I know.”

Though we were slow to make headway in the tunnel, it wasn’t our constant chitchatting that was to blame.

“Eep!”

“Whoa!”

“Owie...”

“D’aah! S-Sorry, Olto.”

Even with Fau lighting the way, the uneven cave floor caused me and Amelia to lose our footing countless times. Moreover, because our party was mostly made up of gnomes, we were severely lacking in firepower. While the excessive

number of tanks meant we sustained very little damage, it also meant we took far longer than necessary to defeat our enemies. You would think that with Drimo, Bear Bear, and Amelia's Knocker and Gnome Fighter on our team, fighting would be a breeze. Unfortunately...

"Bear Bear, time to swap places with Olto!"

"Mm...!"

"Growl...!"

Due to the sheer narrowness of the cave, our monsters constantly got in one another's way and struggled to switch places. Ideally, Olto would either stop or deflect our opponent's blows, giving Bear Bear or Drimo an opportunity to attack. Most of the time, however, things didn't go as planned. Frankly speaking, teaming up with one another had actually worked to our disadvantage in this case. This dungeon was likely better suited for single parties. Thankfully, the situation wasn't too bad *so* far, considering we had a solid defense system.

"Eek, not another one! Gross!"

"Amelia, use your magic!"

"Ew..."

The other reason our fights were so prolonged had to do with the enemies we faced. There were two types of monsters in this dungeon: Poltergeists and Hairballers. Poltergeists were skeleton-like creatures formed out of mist. Hairballers were, as the name suggested, round, hairball-shaped monsters with doggish facial features. They were hideous and unsettling in appearance, resembling a drooling pug with its eyes rolled back into its head. Amelia seemed unnerved by both monster types, squealing whenever we encountered one or the other. Given the decreased rate of attack from our vanguard, those of us at the rear had to compensate by using magic. However, because Amelia struggled to even look our opponents in the eye, she was slow to react, which only delayed our progress even further.

Although the Hairballers were tameable, I had absolutely no desire to tame one. As "fluffy" as they were, I highly doubted I would ever find them cute.

While there was a slight possibility that they would become cute once tamed, like the Deranged Elementals, I didn't want to risk sacrificing one of my slots on the off chance that they did. In any case, I only had two slots left, and I intended to save them for Rick and Fau's child, plus the Sylph (TBD) that I planned on taming at the Air Elemental Gate.

"Eh, maybe I'll try taming one if I have the capacity."

"No way, you wanna tame *that* thing? But it's hideous!" Amelia stared at me, aghast. I explained my theory about them transforming once tamed.

"Why don't you try finding out for yourself, if you can spare a slot?" I suggested.

"You really think that's a good idea?"

"You can always sell it at the guild later if it stays ugly."

"Hmm..." Amelia fell silent, mulling over my suggestion. "...Nuh-uh, no can do! Not in a million years!" she yelled after several seconds, adamant in her refusal. *Oh well, to each their own.*

Beep beep beep!

Almost immediately, an alarm sounded out of nowhere. What was *that*? Was it some kind of dungeon gimmick?

"Any idea what that is?" I asked.

"Huh? ...Shoot!" Amelia gasped after checking her status window. She seemed to recognize the sound.

"Wh-What's wrong?"

"This is the alarm that notifies you of your daily playing limit! Haven't you heard it before?"

"So that's what it sounds like... I make sure to log off regularly, so this is the first time I've actually heard it."

Amelia groaned. "If I don't hurry, I'll be automatically logged out in thirty minutes' time!"

"C-Crap, that ain't good."

It wasn't too big of a deal if you were forced to log out while in town; you simply disappeared, and when you logged in again, you would either reappear in the same spot or at one of the teleportation circles in the town you logged out from. However, if you experienced an auto logout while on the playing field or in a dungeon, your avatar would be left behind, leaving you vulnerable to attack and certain death. The harassment block feature also prevented other players from touching you or transporting you to safety. Additionally, even if you were presently being clobbered to death, it was still considered a battle from the game's standpoint. Bystanders were unable to intervene or attack monsters that were already engaged in a fight with another player—a measure aimed at preventing strangers from kill stealing. Players couldn't swoop in to heal someone without their consent either—consent which was obviously impossible to obtain if the person in question was logged out. Naturally, if Amelia was to log out of the game in this dungeon, I would be left watching over her lifeless avatar with zero means of saving her.

"Well, rules are rules. Let's head back for now."

"No, you go on without me. No need for both of us to give up our search."

"Nah, I'm not properly equipped anyway. I'll stock up on torches and stuff and come back later."

"Okay, if you say so."

That marked the end of our expedition for the time being, and we raced to the exit as fast as we could. Going back was much faster than coming here, although it still took more than twenty minutes overall due to enemy respawns. At long last, however, we were out of the cave.

"We made it!" Amelia panted. She had less than a minute left until she was automatically logged out of the game. "I'll leave the rest to you, Silver-Haired!"

"Sure you don't want me to wait for you?"

"Don't worry about me! Just promise you'll share the map with me afterwards!"

"Roger."

"You're free to sell the info if you want, but I want my cut, okay?! Gotta go for

real now! Bye, Olto!”

No sooner had she said that than Amelia vanished into thin air. She had finally been forced to log off.

“Of course her parting words would be for Olto.”

“Mm?”

“Anyway. Shall we continue on our own then?”

“Mm!”

As for the profits earned by selling the info on this dungeon, I figured it would be best to split them equally between us. After all, I would never have discovered this cave if it hadn’t been for Amelia. It wouldn’t be fair to her if I didn’t do my part and map the rest of it.

“All right, let’s tackle this baby!”

“Mm-mmm!”

“But first, the general store.”

“Mm?”

Shortly after, we arrived at the general store facing onto the public square. I decided to browse their offerings and see what might be useful for our dungeon crawl. For starters, we needed better light sources. While my Night Vision Necklace allowed me to see in the dark, not all of my monsters had been blessed with that skill.

“Aye...”

“Guess torches aren’t really an option for you two.”

“Chirp...”

I had initially planned on buying torches for all of us, but I soon realized they were far too big for Fau and Rick to carry. Fortunately, there were a few other options available.

“Lamps and white light orbs, eh? And this one is...a bamboo moss holder?”

Lamps were a grade above torches and stayed lit for longer. Since the wick

was protected by a lampshade, they were also fairly wind-and water-resistant. The downside was that, like torches, they had to be carried, therefore rendering one hand useless. In that sense, they were actually less useful than torches, as those *could* be attached to your head if you had the appropriate headgear. I had hoped that we could tie the lamps to our waists instead, but unfortunately they were incredibly fragile and broke easily.

White light orbs were pretty self-explanatory. Although the orbs disintegrated if they received a direct blow, they were long-lasting and, most importantly, could be floated above your head, freeing up your hands.

The bamboo moss holders intrigued me as well. These were basically softball-sized baskets woven out of thin strips of bamboo, each containing a clump of luminous moss. Apparently, you could attach the baskets to your waist or chest via one of your accessory slots.

“You could probably make one of these too, Sakura,” I said, gesturing to the moss holders. “I’ll just buy torches and white light orbs for now. They seem the brightest anyway.”

At 3,000 G apiece, white light orbs weren’t exactly the most cost-effective, considering they weren’t even reusable. Still, they were probably a wise investment, so I decided to buy a few. It wasn’t until fairly recently that I’d begun depositing my gold and rare items at the Adventurers’ Guild for safekeeping, choosing to carry only a limited amount of cash with me. Thankfully, I had enough money for a bit of shopping.

“Hmm, what else... Are those *birds*? What’re they doing here?”

For some reason, there were several yellow bird ornaments sitting next to the lighting devices. They didn’t seem to be parrots, though; their beaks were a tad too small for that.

“Wait, I recognize them. They’re canaries—like Brazil’s national soccer team, Canarinha.”

I checked the price tag on one, and sure enough, it said “Canary Figurine” on it. Why a *canary*, though? At first, I thought it was some kind of household object, but it seemed a bit odd that the item didn’t come in at least a few other variations. Once I read the description, however, it finally clicked.

“Of course! The canary in a coal mine!”

The item appeared to allude to the fact that miners used to bring real canaries down to the coal mines with them. Essentially, these figurines acted as sentinels in dungeons, chirping whenever you approached an area filled with poisonous gas.

“Maybe I’ll buy one of these too, just in case.”

Once I’d bought the items I needed, I rushed back to my farm to select the party members I wanted to deploy in battle. Given how narrow the cave was, I could only have two frontliners at most. In the end, I chose Olto and Drimo as our tanks, Sakura as our magic-wielding rear guard, and Reflet as our healer. Fau and Rick were also indispensable, since space wasn’t an issue for them. As much as I wanted to bring Himka along as well for leveling, he would have to sit this one out. Things might have been different were he able to act as a torchbearer, but sadly, he wasn’t the type of Salamander that breathed fire. In the meantime, I handed him a hefty supply of tinstones and copper ores so he could keep his hands busy.

“Look after the farm for us while we’re away, okay?”

“Hm!”

“Growl!”

“Poko!”

“Triii!”

Our family sure has grown, I thought, looking at the four faces saluting at us. *Guess that means even more screenshots for me.*

“You guys ready?”

“Mm!”

I was extra cautious on our way back to the square, glancing around furtively to make sure we weren’t being watched. I wouldn’t have bothered with secrecy if the dungeon had solely been my find, but I had Amelia to think about. Although she’d told me I could go ahead and sell the info about the dungeon, I had to make sure no one else got wind of it first. It was crucial to keep things

under wraps as much as possible. I ducked out of sight, trying to make myself as small as I could, occasionally poking my head out from behind a wall to make sure the coast was clear. Before long, we were back at the meadow—although, in hindsight, the excessive tiptoeing around might have actually made us *more* conspicuous. *Could you blame me, though? Who* doesn't *enjoy the thought of being a spy on a secret mission?*

"...Well, no use fretting about it now. Let's just go in already."

"Mm!"

After my monsters had jumped into the hole, it was my turn. Frankly, I was the least athletic member of our group. I could see the rest of my companions anxiously awaiting me below, ready to break my fall if necessary. *Relax, guys. I can handle this much.*

"Welp, here goes n— Oooaaahh!"

"Mm-mm!"

"...!"

"Th-Thanks, guys."

"Mm!"

"...!"

As my monsters predicted, I wobbled and lost my footing upon landing, and they swiftly steeled themselves to catch me. I could understand Fau pulling my hair upwards to keep me upright, but Rick... *I appreciate you clinging to my leg, buddy, but let's be real—there's no way* you *can support my weight.*

"Mmm."

"C-C'mon, don't look at me like that. I'm sorry, okay? I overestimated myself."

"Mm-mm..." Olto sighed—*sighed!*—in disappointment.

"A-Anyway! T-Time to explore this cave!"

"..."

"Squeak."

Not you guys too...

Despite getting off to a rocky start, the search itself went relatively smoothly. “The fewer the better” was definitely true for this particular dungeon. Amelia’s gnome party, lacking in horsepower as it had been, wasn’t the best choice for this anyway, as forming a team meant we would encounter stronger enemies. I vowed to myself to always form a balanced party when venturing into dungeons.

“Graieee!”

“Crap, three Hairballers! Olto, Drimo, hold them back!”

“Mm!”

“Squeak!”

“Yaaoooww!”

“Shit, a poltergeist too?! Sakura, you handle the one in the back! I trust you!”

“...!”

“La la♪”

“Chirp chirp!”

The farther in we went, the more frequent the enemy spawns were. Fau and Rick switched to hit-and-run tactics whenever the situation called for it, while the others focused on taking down the enemies. The poltergeists were especially annoying to deal with; not only were they immune to physical damage like Lesser Ghosts, but they were also capable of long-range attacks that were hard to detect with the naked eye. It seemed to be a form of psychokinesis. Fortunately, their HP wasn’t very high—as long as we dealt them a solid magical blow they went down easily. We continued fighting our way through the droves of enemy monsters, venturing farther underground. After an hour or so, however, we hit a slight roadblock.

“Another slope...and a really steep one at that.”

Were all of the secret underground dungeons like this? I wondered. The thing was practically half slope, half cliff.

“Chirp.”

“Hum.”

Reflet brought her hand to her forehead, trying to get a glimpse of what lay beyond the slope. Rick, who was perched atop her head, did the same. Judging by the quizzical expressions on their faces, though, it seemed like they were just as clueless as the rest of us. Due to the slope extending beyond the light orb’s reach, I couldn’t see the top of it either.

“Olto, Drimo. Can you guys see anything?”

“Mm!”

“Squeak!”

The end point appeared to be visible to our two Night Vision holders. That was good news; at the very least, we could rule out the possibility of a several-hundred-meter climb.

“Might not be as bad as full-on cliff scaling, but it still won’t be easy. Gotta make sure we don’t fall.”

No doubt we would have to restart from the very bottom if we slipped halfway. Slipping could even result in instant death, depending on how far the fall was.

“Think you can create some footholds for us, Olto?” I asked.

“Mm! Mmm-mm-mmm-mm!”

Olto responded by activating his Earth Magic with exaggerated flair. I could almost hear him saying, *Finally! It’s my time to shine!* Within seconds, the slope was dotted with footholds the size of two bricks side by side, each arranged in alternating order.

“Whoa, nice work. That makes things way easier!”

“Mm!”

We began our ascent, using Olto’s footholds as assistance. Olto went first to scout out the top, shortly followed by Reflet. Both of them climbed the slope with ease. If they could do it, I could probably manage too. I grabbed a narrow

ledge with each hand, then hoisted myself up, finding my footing as I climbed the slope bit by bit.

“Hey, I’m doing it! Not bad!”

I seemed to be managing just fine until around the halfway point—or so I’d thought, when things took a turn for the worse.

“Hup! ...Eek!”

One of the ledges suddenly crumbled beneath my fingers. I quickly tried to find another handhold to grab onto, but it was too late; I felt my stomach drop as my body began to slide down the slope.

“AAAHHH!”

“...!”

“Squeak!”

“Aye!”

Fau quickly flew down and tugged at my robe, but her tiny arms were far too weak to slow my fall. Thankfully, Sakura and Drimo caught me in time, though I still sustained a fair amount of damage. Thank goodness you felt no pain in this game; if something like this were to happen in real life, I would be lucky if all I got were a few broken bones. Even so, I was still left with the sensation of my body smacking down against the slope, which made me all too aware that I had fallen.

“Damn, that was terrifying...”

“...?”

“Thanks, Sakura. Don’t worry, I’m okay.”

“...” Sakura looked at me worriedly. I didn’t blame her; I *had* nearly plummeted to my death before her eyes, after all.

“Gotta be extra careful from now on.”

“...”

“Hm? What’s up?” I hesitated, sensing a gentle tug at my robe. I turned around and saw Sakura offering me the vine she’d been holding onto.

“Let me guess—you want me to use this as a safety rope?”

“...!”

No way. How had I not realized sooner? This was essentially the same situation as the water slope we had climbed in the sewerage. I could easily have asked either Fau or Rick to tie a rope around a ledge for me to hold on to while I climbed. *Nice going, genius...*

“Thanks. This’ll be super useful.”

“...♪”

“Squeak!”

“Hm? You wanna give it a go first?”

“Squeak.”

Apparently, Drimo wanted to test the rope first to see whether it was safe enough to climb with. I had a strong feeling he had taken it upon himself to be my protector.

“G-Great, I’ll leave it to you then.”

“Squeak!”

Things went pretty smoothly after that, as I no longer had to fear falling all the way down again. Moreover, thanks to Drimo guiding me from above, I was able to take the easiest route up. Regardless, I still lost my footing a few times due to parts of the slope crumbling, and from encountering surprise slippery moss-covered areas. While some damage was inevitable, I managed to avoid dying by steering clear of the ground. If it hadn’t been for Sakura’s safety rope, I would never have made it even that far.

“All *right*! I did it!”

“Hum!”

“Mm-mm!”

“Squeak.”

My monsters celebrated my success, Olto and Reflet throwing their arms up in victory while Fau and Rick danced the Mayim Mayim. Drimo clapped me on

the back as if to say, *Well done.* Frankly, it was kind of embarrassing to receive this much praise for such a small feat. All I'd done was climb a steeper-than-average slope.

"Wow, I'm pooped..." I muttered, suddenly exhausted. Even if it hadn't hurt, falling from a height had been a frightening experience and a mental strain for me. "Maybe we should take a break... Sakura's not here yet anyway, so we might as well."

"Chirp!"

Rick's paw shot up immediately, seconding my proposal. *Wait a minute. There's no way* you're *tired!* This slope should have been a breeze for him; he most likely simply wanted an excuse to have a snack.

"Eh, whatever. Let's sit down for a while."

I wasn't sure when we'd run into another monster again, but surely a short tea break couldn't hurt. Once I'd finished handing everyone their drinks, I pulled out a bottle of soda for myself and took a swig.

"Aah!" I sighed. "Making this was definitely the right move!" *Nothing like soda to quench your thirst after a strenuous climb.* "Sure you guys don't want anything else?"

"Aye."

"Squeak."

Although Drimo and Fau couldn't drink juice, it seemed like they were still able to drink water. I doubted drinking it had any special benefits, but at least they wouldn't feel left out this way.

"Hmm. I really oughta make you a proper cup, Fau."

"Aye?"

Fau was struggling to drink water from her cup. Given that it was about the same size as her, she had to stick her head inside it, rather than lift it to her lips. It was akin to me trying to drink directly from a barrel, which was no way to drink. I made a mental note to make her her own cup later.

"Might be hard to make a miniature copper tumbler, though. How about a

wooden one then? Sakura?”

“...♪”

Sakura, who’d finally made it to the top and joined our little circle, smiled in reply. Thankfully, size didn’t seem to be an issue for her Woodworking skills. For now, a wooden cup ought to suffice for Fau. Once we’d gathered all the necessary materials, though, Himka would finally be able to make glassware. My goal was for everyone to eventually have their own tailor-made drinking glasses.

Though enemy spawns were more frequent from there, there weren’t that many dangerous places now that we’d gotten over the steep slope. However, an unexpected gimmick awaited us at the very end. Midway down a slope, the ground beneath us vanished without warning, causing us to drop straight down below. Evidently it wasn’t considered a trap, as my Trap Detection skill failed to pick it up. We landed in a circular open area, where a white plume of smoke rose from the center. *Was it some kind of gas?* I wondered.

“Yoowwr!”

“Ack! A giant poltergeist!”

The smoke was actually a massive skull-shaped creature, wailing loudly as it undulated in midair. Poltergeists were already creepy enough as they were; supersizing them merely made them all the eerier. According to my Appraisal skill, the giant skull-shaped smoke was called a Poltergeizst—the boss of this dungeon. *No way! I’m so* not *ready for a boss fight! And what the hell was with that name?!*

“First the Water Skeeeeter, and now this?! Who named these monsters?! You can barely tell them apart!”

“Yoo-oo-oowwrr!”

“Damn it! Get ready to fight, guys!”

“Mm-mmm!”

“Squeak squeak!”

Olto and Drimo seemed to be aware that they were the backbone of our

party. Instantly they sprang into action, jumping in front of me.

“First, we’ll fight them the same way we did the poltergeists! Sakura, I want you to prioritize attacking!”

“...!”

“Hum!”

The poltergeists we’d encountered until now had mainly used long-range attacks. Although they could only be defeated using magic, their blows were fairly weak, which was a relief. I’d foolishly assumed the boss would be the same.

“Yoo-oowwrr!”

“What the heck is *that*?!”

The boss suddenly spat out a white object the size of an exercise ball. At first, I thought it was simply a ball of cool air, but when Olto tried to stop it, the thing went right through his body, sapping a noticeable amount of his HP as it did.

“Yoo-oowwrr!”

“What the...?! Did it just spit out a *poltergeist*?”

The ball of air turned out to be a regular poltergeist, much to my surprise. It immediately joined the boss, readying itself to launch an attack on us. So it wasn’t just the one monster we had to deal with—this was the type of boss that spawned multiple enemies.

“Okay, let’s focus on getting rid of the poltergeists first before they get out of hand!”

“...!”

“Squeak!”

The only members of our team who could deal magic damage to the poltergeists were Sakura, Drimo, and I, plus Fau. That said, Fau’s Fire Summoning skill was too costly to be used consecutively, not to mention doing so meant discontinuing her buffs. It was virtually just us three against the peeving ghosts.

“Fau, focus on strengthening our defenses!”

“La la la♪”

“Olto! Preventing the boss’s psychokinesis attack is your number one priority!”

“Mmm!”

All we had to do was prevent the poltergeists from multiplying, and gradually wear down the boss—nothing we couldn’t handle. *We’ll get there in the end! I have faith in our abilities!*

“Olto! Hang in there a bit longer!”

“Mm!”

“Drimo, focus on the enemies closest to you first! You too, Sakura! Ignore the boss for now!”

“Squeak!”

“...!”

“Fau, use your Fire Summoning as much as possible! Rick! Think you can pull aggro for us somehow? Reflet, quick! Heal Olto!”

“Aye!”

“Chirp!”

“Hum-hum!”

“Damn it! These bastards just keep coming!”

Fifteen minutes later, we were still fighting. Rather than getting closer to defeating the boss and its minions, we found ourselves surrounded by a swarm of poltergeists instead. In the beginning we had made good progress in eliminating the lesser monsters, but unfortunately, things took a turn for the worse once we’d reduced the boss’s HP by a certain percentage. The boss then changed its mode of attack, charging at us and forcing our group to break up. Before long, the tables had turned on us, and we were no longer able to keep up with the ever-increasing number of poltergeists. Worse still, they were

multiplying at an even faster pace now, the boss spitting out two at a time instead of one.

"Yoo-ooo-oowwrr!"

Seven of the creatures wailed in unison as they surrounded and attacked us from all sides. Out of the corner of my eye, I spied Reflet being blown away by a poltergeist who had sneaked up behind us—the result of a critical hit. *Why now, of all times?!*

"Yoowwr!"

"Hum...!"

"No! Reflet!" I yelled as she faded into thin air. *Crap, there goes our healer!* The poltergeist had charged a second time before she could get to her feet, leaving the defenseless undine unable to dodge the attack. These monsters were not the type of enemy to let up on a fallen prey. Until then, we'd just about been hanging on by the skin of our teeth; now that Reflet was dead, we were pretty much reduced to mere punching bags. Unable to heal everyone in time, our HP plummeted at an alarming pace.

"Yoowwr!"

Crap! I desperately tried to get out of harm's way, but as luck would have it, a poltergeist ambushed me from behind, causing my body to go rigid. Powerless to move, all I could do was stare at the massive, mist-like Poltergeizst as it closed in on me.

"God *damn* it!"

I felt no pain as the Poltergeizst collided with me. Instead, a chilling sensation enveloped my entire body, much like the one I experienced when fighting normal ghost monsters. I watched my life meter plummet to zero, and a white fog filled my vision before turning dark. The next instant, I was back in the Northern Town square.

"...Ugh, been a while since I last died..."

"Mmm..."

"You're all here, huh? It's my fault we ended up with a total party wipe. Sorry,

everyone.”

“...!”

My companions immediately shook their heads at my apology, insisting it wasn’t my fault. Only Drimo had his back turned to me, playing it cool. Though he was a mole of few words, his actions clearly spoke for themselves.

“Hum...”

“Cheer up, Reflet. You did nothing wrong.”

“Hum?”

“I’m to blame for not thinking things through. I’ll do better next time, promise. Think you can give me a hand again, then?”

“Hum!”

Phew. That seemed to do the trick. I couldn’t bear to see Reflet upset; she reminded me too much of a small and lost child.

“Right then... What’d I lose?”

Since I’d long used up my three free respawns, I checked my status to see what possessions I’d lost. The death penalty had cost me 5,000 G and two of the items I’d obtained in the underground cave. All things considered, that wasn’t too bad; I could live with that. The main issue was my halved stats, which would take half a day of in-game time to fully recover. Until then, I had no choice but to stay put and out of harm’s reach.

“Eh, not like I have any other choice.” I shrugged. “Guess today’s gonna be a crafting kinda day.”

On the way back to our farm, however, I received a call from Alyssa. That was unusual; normally, I was the one to call her.

“Hello? What’s up?” I answered tentatively.

“Yeeello, Yuto! I actually wanted to show you something. Are you free?”

“I am now.”

“Wanna come over then? I’m in the Town of Beginnings now.”

“Sure thing. And what is it you want to show me?”

“Well... ‘Wait and see’ is all I have to say for now,” Alyssa replied cryptically. She sounded as though she was itching to surprise me. I guessed it was just as well that she’d called, as I’d planned on visiting her later to sell information anyway.

“Got it. I’ll be right there.”

“I’ll drop you a pin, so just follow the directions on the map. See you in a bit!” she said before hanging up. *What could she be so eager to show me?* I wondered. I was starting to get curious.

“I mean, it’s Alyssa,” I mused. “Bet it’s something amazing.”

“Hmm, should be somewhere around here... Could it be an NPC shop? Keep your eyes peeled, guys.”

“Growl!”

“Hm!”

We had arrived in the Town of Beginnings and were busy looking for the meeting place Alyssa had specified. For this trip, I had brought along Bear Bear and Himka, who had sat out our last dungeon crawl, Fau and Reflet, whose info I planned on selling, and Rick and Drimo, who were rarely involved in crafting activities. According to the map data, we were supposed to meet somewhere along the main street leading to the large plaza, specifically in some kind of building.

“Where could—”

“Ah, there you are! Psst! Over here, Yuto!” Alyssa waved at me. Thank goodness she had been waiting outside for us.

“Hey, Alyssa. Good to see you again. Been a whole day since we last met.”

“Likewise! Thanks for coming!” she beamed. The way she was grinning, it was almost as if she’d won the lottery.

“You said you wanted to show me something?”

“That’s right. Follow me!” Alyssa beckoned, entering the building in front of us. It appeared to be some kind of store, and I could see a counter within. What really caught my attention, though, was the sign outside. A fancy, Western-style wooden sign hung from the awning, with a logo of a black-and-white cat and the words “Quick-Eared Cats” displayed on it.

“Alyssa! Is this what I think it is...?”

“Heh heh, so you’ve noticed. Ta-da! Welcome to our clan house-slash-shop!”

“No way!”

So she hadn’t wanted to show me a rare *item*—she’d wanted to show me the Cats’ headquarters itself! Now *that* was something I hadn’t expected to see. *You win, Alyssa.*

“Wasn’t it expensive to build a shop here, though? I mean, the location’s great.”

“Not as expensive as you’d think. The clan houses in the Town of Beginnings are actually pretty reasonable.”

Alyssa whispered, “I’ll let you in on a little secret,” and told me the requirements for buying a clan house. It was, indeed, easier than I’d imagined: as long as your clan had more than ten members, you could buy one for 500,000 G.

“Five hundred thousand... That’s pretty expensive.”

“Not really, if you think about it—that’s only 50,000 G per person. I’d say it’s a steal for something as big as a house.”

“I guess, if you put it that way.”

“Trust me, it is. Can’t deny it’s a bit of a tight squeeze, though.”

Alyssa then proceeded to give me a tour of the place. She wasn’t being modest about its size; it *was* a pretty humble abode. The shop area was only about nine square meters, and the living area in the back was roughly the size of a small studio apartment. While it might’ve sufficed for a single person, it was far too small for a group of over ten people.

“Another downside of clan houses in the Town of Beginnings is that although

you can tweak the interior, you can't expand it any further. You can't even use some of the features that supposedly come with other clan houses."

"So, like, a defective house?"

"More like a try-it-on-for-size house, I guess. Seems like every town has clan houses for sale, so as long as you meet the requirements, you're good."

From the looks of it, the clan houses in the Town of Beginnings were like trial products; if you wanted the real deal, you had to go to other towns.

"And that door in the back? This is the only room, right? Is that the back door?"

"Not sure, to be honest."

"Wait, what? What do you mean?"

"It won't open, so we haven't been able to find out. Probably related to one of the features we don't have access to," Alyssa shrugged. *Pretty sure "defective" is the right word.* "Anyway, we'll also be buying and selling info here from now on, so feel free to come by anytime."

"By 'also,' does that mean you'll continue to do business at your stall too?"

"Yep. The more points of contact, the better, right? In any case, we figured it'd be better for our clients if we had a shop where someone's always present."

"Oh, totally. I actually have a ton of new info that I've been dying to share with you."

"...A *t-ton*, you say? But I've only been gone a day. Gimme a sec, I need to prepare myself."

"Prepare yourself?" I echoed.

"Yes." Alyssa began taking deep breaths as if to steady herself. What did she need to do that for, though?

"Phew... Okay, I'm ready! Hit me with it! You're officially customer number one at our new shop!"

Oh, so *that* was why she had been so nervous. *Understandable.*

"I feel honored. Okay, I'll start with my tamed monsters."

“Mm-hm. Figured as much,” Alyssa muttered, her eyes glued to Fau. I didn’t blame her; it *was* a pretty huge transformation, after all.

“Aye!”

“Hum!”

Sensing Alyssa’s eyes on them, Reflet and Fau, who was standing atop Reflet’s head, grinned and puffed up with pride.

“Fau is now a Fairy, and Reflet an Undine Fräulein,” I explained, pulling up the duo’s stats and recounting what it had been like when they evolved.

“Uh-huh, uh-huh... Gotcha. People are definitely gonna go gaga over fairies now.”

“Loads of people stared at us in town too.”

“I don’t blame them—look at how cute she is! I’d want a fairy myself, to be perfectly honest. Bet more people will go for Taming skills once word gets out.”

I could imagine. Even I knew that most, if not all, people would kill for a cute, pocket-sized fairy girl.

“Liking your undine’s stats too. There aren’t that many monsters that can act as healers, after all. Incidentally, people have been taming undines like crazy today, but seems like hardly anyone’s managed to tame a unique one.”

To my surprise, there seemed to be a considerable number of non-Tamers who had obtained Taming and Command skills in hopes of getting an undine. Undines were cute too, so that was understandable. Now, if only more people would consider making the switch to the Tamer class...

I also shared a few minor details, such as Kettle’s green tea and my failure to pickle the cherry blossom petals, before moving on to my final discovery.

“The last thing I have to sh—”

“Wait! Th-There’s *more*?”

“Yup. Saved the best for last.”

“Ugh, ’course you did... Okay, let’s hear it! It’ll take more than a minor revelation to shock the submaster of the Quick-Eared Cats!”

Alyssa seemed awfully fired up as I related the details of the underground dungeons I'd discovered. I began with the sewerage in the Western Town, as the map for that was almost complete. I also had the battle logs of the boss fight, plus I knew what food you needed to feed the obake.

"I-Is this the same type of dungeon as the underground passage that was discovered in the Eastern Town...?" Alyssa breathed. Her expression was blank as she stared at the data on my screen, though—hardly the face of a person who'd just received eye-opening news. Having expected her to show some surprise, I felt slightly disappointed.

"I think so. And," I continued, "this is the info on the underground cave we discovered in the Northern Town."

"Huh? Wait, what? Y-You found another one?" Alyssa stammered, her cat ears perking up. Clearly, she hadn't expected me to disclose the whereabouts of another dungeon. "You're kidding, right? You can't be serious."

"Ha ha, fooled ya."

"Thank g— Huh?"

"Just pulling your leg. Come on, why would I lie to you? I'm telling the truth."

"...Ha ha. Right. Of course you are..." Alyssa chuckled dryly before sighing out loud. *Ouch.* Judging by her reaction, my joke hadn't landed as well as I'd hoped. Clearly, I wasn't cut out to be a comedian.

"Um, sorry about that."

"I don't think we're quite on the same wavelength, but anyway. What was the dungeon in the Northern Town like?"

"This is all the info I have on it," I said, handing Alyssa my findings. "I got nuked by the boss, though, so I couldn't find out what's at the very end."

"No no no, this is great, seriously! *Revelatory*, I tell you!"

"Also, Amelia's the one who found it, not me, so we're planning on splitting the profits for this one."

"Gosh darn it, Yuto. Every. Single. Time. I don't know how you do it."

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m chuffed, but haven’t there been, like, loads of discoveries lately? You know, like that person who found the underground passage in the east.”

“Oh right, Hamakaze. Well, she’s not willing to sell me anything, although I do appreciate her sharing in the forums... Gotta say, though, most of the info these days has been coming from Tamer and Summoner types.”

“Huh, that so? Interesting.”

“Honestly... And who do you think is responsible for that?”

“Come again?”

“Nothing, ignore me. I know all too well what kind of person you are.”

“Um... Not sure I understand, but sorry, I guess...?”

I reckoned I’d already shared everything worth selling, so that was probably it for the time being. Now that I was done with that, I could move on to buying. There were several pieces of information I wanted to buy, the first one being the particulars of the underground passage in the Eastern Town. As curious as I was about the Mini Kappa, I also hoped to obtain information about cucumbers, since kappa were well-known for their love of them. As if she’d read my mind, Alyssa whipped out an object for me to see. It was a slim, cylindrical object, red in color and roughly the size and shape of a recorder. Unlike a recorder, however, it was slightly bent, and the surface had a warty appearance to it.

“Is this...a red cucumber? People have already found cucumbers in this game?!” I gushed excitedly. I hadn’t actually expected to gain any leads on them, so I was taken aback to see one right before me.

“Oh, so you really didn’t know, huh? They were recently discovered here. Hardly anyone knows about this yet, though, and there’ve probably been less than ten players who’ve managed to obtain one so far.”

“Really? That’s amazing.”

“A new NPC stall popped up, and someone found them selling cucumbers there. You do need to possess Farming skills of a certain level or above to find it, but that shouldn’t be a problem for you.”

“Do they sell seeds too?”

“Nope, only the fruit.”

So there weren’t any cucumber seeds yet. That was a shame.

“Apparently, they were added during the recent update. My guess is that the underground dungeons you and Hamakaze found were added around the same time too.”

Aha. I knew something was off. No matter how well hidden they were, it seemed ridiculous that we were truly the first to discover those dungeons. Given the number of active players in the four towns, someone else ought to have found them much sooner. As Alyssa deduced, it made far more sense that I’d stumbled upon them by accident right after the map had been updated.

“Remember the server-wide announcement the other day?” Alyssa continued. “The one about the number of homeowners surpassing a certain number? They mentioned something about new features being unlocked then.”

“Oh yeah, now that you mention it.”

I hadn’t really been paying attention since it didn’t concern me, but there had been announcements of the sort every few days. In real-world time, that was roughly the pace of one announcement per day. At that rate, it was entirely plausible that new features were being added to the first town or fields that had already been cleared.

“Still, no one knows for sure, though. But enough about that. Wanna hear the latest scoop on the passage in the Eastern Town?”

“Huh? There’s *more* news?”

“Heh heh, duh. As a matter of fact, Tagosack, who was the first to find this cucumber, managed to feed the Mini Kappa one.”

According to Alyssa, Tagosack had received a Flattened Beigoma, a traditional Japanese spinning top, in return. *Were all of the items supposed to be nostalgic toys?* I wondered, remembering how the obake had given me a cracked marble.

“Lemme guess—no one knows what the beigoma is for yet?”

“You guessed right. It’s still a total mystery.”

Aw, too bad. I would've been more willing to tackle the dungeon if only I knew what it was for. I didn't want to risk my life for something that, for all I knew, was completely worthless.

"Sure you don't mind our party clearing this underground cave?" Alyssa asked.

"Not at all. I doubt I'll be able to anyway. I'll think about what I wanna do once my stats have fully recovered—maybe I can go with Amelia when she logs back in."

"Gotcha. Thanks! Heh heh, who shall I send on this expedition?"

I paid for several new farming-and crafting-related discoveries after that, then it was time to tally everything up.

"Th-The money we saved for our grand opening... No, it's fine. We'll recover the cost in no time... Oh, but our clan should get dungeon crawling first, and, and—"

"Everything okay?"

"Yes, don't mind me!"

After subtracting the fees for what I bought, my total earnings came out to 550,000 G. Eh, it was all right. *Correction*—it was actually a hefty sum, but after the affluence I'd experienced during the Elemental Gate economic bubble, I was slightly out of touch with normalcy. Apparently, I had gotten an extra large payment at the time due to the information I provided on gnomes. This time around, I received 350,000 G for the sewerage in the Western Town and 200,000 G for the underground cave in the Northern Town; the rest was offset by the information I'd purchased. As a bonus, Alyssa even threw in a cucumber for me to feed the Mini Kappa. I would set aside 100K for Amelia and keep the rest.

"Well, I'm off now," I bid Alyssa farewell.

"...Please come again," she mumbled. She sounded oddly exhausted for some reason. I left the Quick-Eared Cats' clan house, taking a stroll around the Town of Beginnings.

“Wonder how the Sunekosuri’s doing?”

Curious, I decided to check on the field where players could befriend a Sunekosuri.

“Hmm. Still busy, huh.”

Though not as busy as before, there were still around ten people queuing in front of the field. That said, I had a bit of time now. *Might as well wait in line, no?*

“All right then. Sunekosuri, here I come!”

My mind made up, I went to the Adventurers’ Guild and accepted the grass-cutting quest. Evidently, the Sunekosuri wouldn’t show itself unless you did. Once I’d accepted the quest, I hurried back to the field.

“Let’s go, guys!”

“Growl growl!”

“Hum!”

Bear Bear and Reflet dashed off to join the queue. *Good monsters.* I smiled to myself as I saw them pause and let a player who’d tried to queue up get in line first. For some reason, I could feel the eyes of the people in front of us boring into us. I supposed I couldn’t blame them; my monsters *did* stand out a lot. At least they didn’t try to talk to us or anything, though.

“Hmm, what shall I do in the meantime?”

I decided to do a bit of observing myself. Some players kept to themselves and waited in silence, while others chatted with their party members. Some had even sat down and started crafting on the spot. Each person had their own ideal way of killing time.

“Maybe I’ll work on my Alchemy skills while I wait,” I considered after taking stock of my inventory. I discovered I owned a decent amount of low-quality poison hemlock and paralyzing plants that I could fuse together and increase the quality of.

“How about— Eh, they’ll be fine.” I relaxed, noting a game that was already underway. My companions were busy playing topple-the-pole; it didn’t seem

like they would need supervision.

One hour later...

“It’s our turn next, but... What now?”

“Growl... Growl!”

“Hum...”

“Squeak...!”

My monsters’ game of topple-the-pole had become extremely heated, their expressions as intense as those of Nobuyuki Fukumoto manga characters as they scooped away bits of sand. There was even a large crowd of spectators—around thirty people—gathered around my companions, watching their match with bated breath. No one uttered a word, presumably not to break my monsters’ concentration.

“Aye... Aye!”

“...”

“Hm...!”

“...”

The only sounds that could be heard were the occasional strained voice or effortful groan from one of my monsters. It was an incredibly eerie sight, and I found it nearly impossible to interrupt them and put a stop to their game. Man, where was a convenient accident when you needed one...? *All right, Rick, now’s your time to shine! Just scrape away an extra bit of sand and topple that baby to the ground!*

“Chirp...”

Damn it, he’s safe. Bear Bear! I’m counting on you!

“Growl...!”

Nope, still going strong. That was close, though.

Another three minutes passed in this manner. It was almost our turn—did I have no choice but to step in and pause their game? Just then, Drimo looked

my way, and our eyes met for a split second.

“Squeak!”

“Oh, bugger.”

“Well, there goes that.”

Drimo scraped away a bit more sand than was safe to get rid of, and the pole toppled over, ending the game. The crowd of onlookers sighed, then dispersed as each person returned to what they were doing before.

“Drimo, did you...?”

“Squeak,” he replied, patting my waist as he walked past me. So he *had* understood my plea! *Oh, Drimo, what would I ever do without you?!*

Shortly, I found myself up against one of the most troublesome opponents I’d encountered since beginning this game. Obviously, I had faced countless formidable foes until now: some had been extremely swift, some large in size, and some capable of magic. I’d just been killed by a boss too. Even so, I was ready to proclaim this creature the worst of them all!

“Eee...eee hee hee hee!”

“Sneeh.”

“Aha ha ha, hee hee haw!”

“Sneeh.”

I was currently engaged in a one-on-one match with the infamous Sunekosuri, trying to endure its furious tickling the best I could. My bare feet were hidden by the grass, and I could feel an invisible force tickling my soles and my ankles. My guess was that it was using a combination of telekinesis and its tail. Imagine if someone tickled your soles with their fingers, then switched to tickling with a foxtail frond, then went back to using telekinesis—the sensation I felt was indescribable. I wanted nothing more than to kick away the creature responsible for my torment, but if I did that or tried to look through the grass for it, it would run away immediately. Once it’d escaped, you had no hopes of seeing it again until you accepted another grass-cutting quest. I had one shot at

this—I had to endure it no matter what.

“Bwah ha ha ha ha!”

“Sneeh.”

A minute and a half left?! D’aaah! I refuse to succumb to this wretch!

“Aye!”

“Chirp chirp!”

I twitched uncontrollably, hands clasped together next to my face, as Fau and Rick cheered me on. Despite how pitiful I looked right now, they continued to be supportive, never once ridiculing me. *What angels I’ve been blessed with!* The rest of my companions were busy cutting the grass, which was basically what the quest required us to do. That said, most players gave up on the quest once they’d registered the Sunekosuri in their encyclopedias; the pittance simply wasn’t worth the time and effort. Although I considered doing the same at first, I ultimately decided against it, not wanting it to feel like a cop-out. Besides, I wanted to earn more guild contribution points, and it wasn’t as if I had anything better to do while waiting for my stats to recover.

“Sneeh.”

“Hee, mweh heh heh heh!”

“Aye aye!”

“Chirp chirp!”

One trick you could use in real life whenever you felt ticklish was to pinch yourself. I happened to be the type of person who got ticklish easily; even the slightest wrong touch at the barber’s or chiropractor’s could set me off. However, I couldn’t very well writhe about in my seat when I was the one who’d chosen to visit them in the first place. As a matter of fact, I had done just that in the past when the barber was using a pair of hair clippers on me, and as you can imagine, that ended in a total disaster. Having learned from that incident, I came up with a solution to fight ticklish sensations with pain. By pinching my thigh, I would be distracted by the pain instead of whatever body part was being tickled. From past experience, that helped alleviate about sixty

percent of the discomfort, even if it didn't get rid of the ticklishness completely.

"Sneeh."

"Aiee hee haw haw!"

Unfortunately, since this game was entirely pain-free, I felt no pain no matter how hard I pinched myself. I supposed "pain-free" wasn't quite accurate; it was more that the game dulled any sensations above a certain threshold so you wouldn't feel them. While I could feel the tiniest hint of something in the areas I pinched, naturally, that did nothing to lessen the ticklishness.

"Sneeh sneeh."

"Oho ho ho, hee hee hwarh!"

In the end, I had no choice but to grit my teeth and bear it. That reminded me—wasn't tickling used as a *legitimate torture method*? I now understood why the success rate of this quest was only forty percent. Ultimately, however, I managed to stick it out for the entire hellish duration.

"I...I did it...!" I gasped, heaving from the effort of the last three minutes, which had indeed been nothing short of torture.

"Sneeh."

Before my eyes was a cute, fluffy creature with the face of a cat and the body of a cream-colored ferret, just as the rumors had said.

"Sneeh♪"

Gradually, the Sunekosuri faded away, disappearing into nothingness. Though unfortunate, there was nothing I could do about it: you couldn't tame a yokai unless you were an Onmyoji. While it might be possible to summon one if you possessed a yokai-summoning skill, nothing of the sort was available yet. For regular players like me, the Sunekosuri would be registered in the Yokai section of your encyclopedia as proof that you'd befriended it. In addition, Onmyoji would be added as an option to your list of available job classes, and the skill Telekinesis would become available to obtain.

"Good, I see it in my encyclopedia," I said, confirming the entry titled "Sunekosuri" on the page. As for the skill Telekinesis... Hmm. While I *could*

obtain it by using some of my bonus points, I didn't feel particularly compelled to do so. Hamakaze, who had acquired the skill, had mentioned in the forums that though it was less powerful than magic, the fact that it was more or less invisible raised the skill's hit rate. She had also mentioned that you could use it to throw stones, but I felt I would be much better off learning earth magic instead. At any rate, it didn't seem like something I needed to go out of my way to obtain. If the need for it arose later on, I could reconsider it then.

"Guess we should help cut the grass too. Come on, you two."

"Aye."

"Chirp chirp."

Although the little ones weren't of much help with a task like this, it still felt nice to have them cheer us on. After the face-off with the Sunekosuri, we went around town cutting more grass. I had more monsters to help me now than in the past, which helped me finish my labor quests much faster. If it had been just Olto and me, the job would have taken all day.

"Aight. Time to report back to the Adventurers' Guild."

"Growl!"

"Hm!"

Himka and Bear Bear nodded and took my hands. *A cute monster on each arm—would you look at that?* Was this what it meant to be "doubly blessed?" I was positive some people would kill to be in a situation like this. While our farm was on the way to the Adventurers' Guild, I didn't think there was any real need to make a pit stop there. We could always just holler at Olto and the others when we passed by—or at least, that's what I'd thought...

"Whoa. What's going on?"

"Sneeh."

"What're *you* doing here?"

I'd never heard of a Sunekosuri appearing at someone's home base before. And yet, here was one right before my very eyes. Kettle and the Hanami Vandal I could understand, as each had its own object tying it to my farm, such as a tea

kettle or shrine. But as far as I was aware, there was nothing for a Sunekosuri.

“Can’t imagine why... Is it because I own a farm?”

That couldn’t be it; surely, farm owners couldn’t have that big of an advantage. It made sense for them to appear on home bases, but not on farms.

“A bug, maybe? I dunno...”

“Sneeh.”

“Hey, what’re you doing on our farm?”

“Sneeh?”

Of course, there was no point asking it. Maybe this was more up Alyssa’s alley; chances were she had some information I didn’t know about yet.

Alyssa seemed surprised to see me walk through the Cats’ clan house doors again.

“Oh, hi there. Back so soon? I take it you’ve heard the news, then?”

“Huh? What news?” I blinked.

“Wait, that’s not what you’re here for? Thought you came for this,” Alyssa said, showing me an item called a Weight-Down Stone. Not only could it be used as an ore, but it also served as an ingredient for potion making. I’d heard you couldn’t obtain these stones until you got to Zone Six or so, but evidently they were slowly becoming available in the Town of Beginnings too.

“Can I? I’d love one!”

I had wanted one for the longest time, but I certainly hadn’t expected to find one here. I happily paid for the item, ecstatic at my purchase. Once the transaction was complete, Alyssa asked me the purpose of my visit again.

“Well then, I suppose you’re here on other business.”

Whoops. I’d almost forgotten why I had come in the first place.

“I wanted to ask you something, actually.”

“Oh, really? About what?”

“You’ve heard about the Sunekosuri, right?”

“Of course.”

“What happens after you befriend it?”

“What happens...? Well, it gets registered in your encyclopedia, you unlock a new skill, and if you’re an Onmyoji, you’ll be able to summon it, that’s all...”

“Really? Is that it?” I pressed, catching a glint in Alyssa’s eye.

“Sounds like you’ve discovered something else. You *have*, haven’t you?”

“Take a look at this.”

I pulled up a video I’d filmed of the Sunekosuri playing with Kettle and my monsters on our farm. Upon seeing it, Alyssa’s eyes flew open.

“How did...? Since when were you an Onmyoji, Yuto?”

“I’m not. As you can see, I’m still very much a Tamer. But you knew that, right?”

“Yep, but just thought I’d check anyway.”

When you assessed someone up close, you could tell what their job class was right away. Naturally, my class was still Commander Tamer.

“So, what happened exactly?”

“I cleared the Sunekosuri trial not too long ago and successfully befriended it. Like everyone said, it vanished into thin air, I got a new entry in my encyclopedia, and that was it.”

No matter how many times I cast my mind back to that exact moment, I couldn’t recall anything out of the ordinary happening.

“But,” I continued, “for some reason, when I returned to my farm, I found the Sunekosuri waiting for me there.”

“And you really didn’t do anything?”

“Nope, nada.”

I was just as lost as anyone else. I then recounted my intense grapple with the Sunekosuri in the field and the events that followed the best I could.

“Couldn’t be related to that then...” Alyssa mused once I’d finished.

“Something to do with your farm, perhaps?”

“But my farm really is just a regular farm. It’s not like my barn is special either, since other farmers have one as well.”

“That’s true. Well, it could be that you own a special household object or crop, in which case I can think of a few possibilities.”

Something that only I *owned?* Now that she mentioned it, I was probably the only one so far who had a Lakeside Tree, Miniature Otherworldly Cherry Blossom Shrine, and cherry blossom tree.

“Hmm, none of those seem obviously related to the Sunekosuri, though...” Alyssa pondered. “The only thing that seems kinda plausible is the shrine.”

“Well, it *does* concern yokai, I guess.”

Though it was probable that having a household object or item related to yokai in your home area was one of the requirements, it still wasn’t a decisive enough factor.

“Another possibility is your skills. You have a few yokai-related skills, don’t you?”

There were four that fit the description: Yokai Knowledge, Yokai Detection, Yokai Searcher, and Yokai Whisperer. Alyssa opened her status window, eyes moving rapidly as she scrolled through. She seemed to be scanning the most recent summary report on LJO’s in-game data.

“Looks like you’re the only one who possesses the skill Yokai Whisperer,” she confirmed after a while. “That could be it. It’s a skill that makes it easier to befriend yokai, right?”

“Yeah. It’s supposed to raise your favorability score with them.”

“That might mean there’s a chance you can invite a Sunekosuri to your home, depending on your favorability score. Maybe yours was already high from the get-go due to your skill.”

That did seem likely, now that she mentioned it. Moreover, it was clear that favorability was indeed a factor, based on the skill’s description.

“My guess is that the Hanami Vandal event is key to obtaining Yokai

Whisperer, though. Rather than aim for that skill, it might be better to try improving the Sunekosuri's favorability score through other means... Gotta put it to the test ASAP. Maybe if I ask the Onmyoji for her cooperation in exchange for this info... Hmm, what if we repeated the trial over and over again? We'd need some brave sacrifices to endure the tickling in that case... Or is it crucial that you complete the quest?" Alyssa muttered to herself, contemplating various methods of testing her hypothesis. *Be strong, my brave warriors.* I offered up a silent prayer for the unfortunate souls fated to undergo the torture. Unfortunately, we didn't get much further than that in figuring out the truth.

"Sorry I couldn't be of much help," Alyssa apologized.

"No, don't be. I learned a lot."

"This info is sure to sell, though. Think about it—it's a chance for players who aren't Tamers or Onmyoji to get their hands on a cute pet. People are bound to want that... Welp, there goes our funds again..." Alyssa sighed. Despite it supposedly being a valuable piece of information, she didn't sound too thrilled. Begrudgingly, she paid me 50,000 G.

"Fifty thousand..."

I understood that it was a considerable sum, given that we didn't know for certain how to invite a Sunekosuri to your home yet. However, it paled in comparison to the profits I'd earned from the Elemental Gates and underground dungeons, and I couldn't help but feel slightly disappointed. Alyssa glared at me tearfully, apparently having heard the dissatisfaction in my voice. My god, was I being an ass right now. What happened to those days when I'd been perfectly content with 3,000 G...? *Nope, not good. Remember your humble beginnings, Yuto. Stop acting so haughty and have a little humility.*

"I'm so sorry! Please forgive me!" I blurted.

"Huh? What for?"

"I was an idiot!"

"Wait, what do y—"

I dashed out of the shop before Alyssa could finish her sentence. No point

staying and apologizing all day long—I would only be a nuisance. Bringing her valuable news would be a far more effective way to demonstrate my remorse than a mere empty apology. I returned to my farm, an idea having occurred to me while brainstorming possible avenues I could pursue. I'd just remembered there was something I had yet to test on the Sunekosuri.

"Sneeh," the creature greeted me upon my return.

"Hey. Do you need any food, Sunekosuri?" I asked.

"Sneeh?"

If the favorability system existed for yokai as well, then there had to be a way to raise it. I made an offering to the Hanami Vandal and Kettle every day; perhaps I needed to give the Sunekosuri something too?

"Or do you require an offering of some sort?"

"Sneeh?"

What a cutie p— No, focus, Yuto. There wasn't much point in asking it what it liked. Once again, I laid out every food item I owned in front of the Sunekosuri, just as I had when I was trying to find out what the obake liked. Out of the full spread, the Sunekosuri chose only purified water. Despite looking like a cat, it didn't drink like one, sticking its face inside the glass and sucking up the water as though through a straw.

"Sneeh♪"

Since it chose purified water over regular well water, it probably preferred water of higher quality. Now, for the moment of truth: would the Sunekosuri give me something in return, like Kettle or the Hanami Vandal, or not?

"Sneeh?"

As I looked at the Sunekosuri in anticipation, our eyes met. The catlike yokai fixed its small round eyes on me for a few seconds, but soon grew bored and ran off.

"Guess that's a no."

Not that it mattered that much; it was just water, and I had plenty of that to spare. Would things perhaps be different if I raised my favorability score some

more, though?

“I’ll just have to be patient and keep experimenting. It’ll be a bit longer till my stats are fully recovered, so I guess I’ll just do some crafting in the meanwhile.”

I rolled up my sleeves and got to work crafting various kinds of food items and potions. My biggest win of this session was succeeding in breeding a new type of crop. Other farmers had taught me the recipe during the flower-viewing picnic, which required four types of potions: poison, a paralyzing potion, a sleeping draught, and a weight-down potion. Until now, however, I hadn’t had the ingredients for the final item. Once I concocted all four potions and mixed them together with my Selective Breeding skill, I was left with yet another mysterious seed. So far, no one had managed to grow this crop to full maturity. I was looking forward to seeing what it would turn into.

“Okay, what now? I’m all done with work for the day...” I mused. My stats hadn’t fully recovered yet either. “Hmm... I know! Maybe I’ll go to the Southern Town, where no one’s discovered the secret dungeon yet!”

I didn’t need to be at peak performance if all I wanted was to find its location. That was decided then: to the south it was!

Chapter Four: North, East, West, and Finally, the South

“All right, let’s look for this thing!”

“Mm-mm!”

We were now in the Southern Town, eager to find where the secret dungeon was located. So far, there had been one in each town, so it only made sense that there would be one here too.

“Hey, I see some people over there.”

“Mm.”

I spotted a group of five players chatting in the middle of the graveyard at the edge of town. What were they doing *here*? Surely, there were far better places than this to have a conversation... Out of curiosity, I edged a bit closer. There was an especially large tombstone in the center of the graveyard, and to my surprise, a set of stairs right behind it.

“Huh? Why’re there stairs here?” I blurted. The players immediately ceased chatting and turned around at the sound of my voice. *Crap, I was totally being a Peeping Tom right now.* Had I committed a gaming faux pas?

“Oh my god, it’s Silver-Haired!” one of them exclaimed.

“Wait, no kidding? Whoa, it’s really him!”

I didn’t sense any hostility from them; if anything, they approached me with friendly smiles.

“Your monsters are adorable!”

“C-Can I pet them?”

“S-Sure. Go ahead.”

“Yay!”

“I call dibs on Gnomey!”

“I’ll take the tree nymph—kidding, I want the squirrel!”

Thank goodness I’d been blessed with cute companions. *Good, work your magic, guys. Win these people over with your charm.*

The last to greet me was a woman with silver hair done up in bunches on each side of her head.

“Good to see you again, Silver-Haired. I doubt you remember me, though.” She glanced at me hopefully.

“Um... Hamakaze?” I said, scanning her profile. Her job description read “Onmyoji.” So this was the famous Hamakaze everyone was talking about. She was an ex-Tamer turned Onmyoji, and was responsible for a number of impressive discoveries, such as the Sunekosuri and the underground dungeon in the east.

“That’s me,” she replied. Why could I see her name, though? Names were supposed to be private unless you were friends with that player...

“Sorry, have we met somewhere?”

As forgetful as I was, at the very least, I remembered the faces of every Tamer or Onmyoji I met. However, I didn’t recognize Hamakaze at all.

“Oh, I changed my hair color recently—I used to have black hair before that. Besides, we only spoke briefly at the picnic, so I don’t blame you for not remembering me.”

Ah, no wonder. I didn’t realize she’d been at the picnic too.

“I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Really? You have? Heh heh,” Hamakaze smiled sheepishly, scratching her head. I asked her about the tombstone and the stairs—sure enough, it turned out to be the entrance to a dungeon. She appeared to have stumbled upon it with her friends.

“I hit up a few people who had similar play styles to mine and proposed we search for it together. Can never have too many helping hands, right? Ugh, if only I’d arrived sooner, I could’ve been the first to discover it...”

Apparently, the person who first discovered the dungeon had already sold the information to the Quick-Eared Cats, so it wouldn't be long before other players got wind of it and arrived. Judging by the timing, it seemed like we had just missed each other.

"Did you buy the info too, Silver-Haired? Is that why you're here? Heh heh, guess all that hard work and nonstop searching paid off..."

"Oh, I don't check the forums that often—just figured there'd be a dungeon in the Southern Town too. I was walking around in search of it when I spotted you guys, so I got curious and decided to check it out."

"Oh, right. Of course..." Hamakaze deflated like a balloon, her expression crestfallen. Was she disappointed that news about the dungeon hadn't spread as fast as she'd hoped? "Anyway, please be careful. I hear there are some pretty nasty monsters in there."

"Thanks. Wait, you're leaving already?"

"Submaster's orders. She wants me to help her out with something." Hamakaze shrugged. Although she tried to sound as though she couldn't be bothered, her grin immediately gave her away. "Looks like even the Cats consider me a force to be reckoned with!"

She seemed thrilled that a big-name clan such as the Quick-Eared Cats had reached out to her specifically for assistance. I understood the feeling, though; getting recognized by them did give you a tiny taste of fame.

"Well, loads of people have been talking about you lately, Hamakaze. Pretty sure it's not just the Cats who are waiting to see what you'll do next."

"Heh heh heh heh. You think so?"

"Yeah, totally. Look at all the discoveries you've made. I'll be rooting for you."

"Thank you! I'll do my best to surpass you one day!"

Wow. That was extremely generous of her. Not only did she belong to a rare job class, but she also posted her findings online and shared them freely with others without keeping them to herself. In that regard, she was already far more outstanding than me. Still, it did feel nice to receive praise from someone

as famous as her.

“Aw, shucks. Thanks, I appreciate it—it makes me wanna work harder. Let’s both do our best.”

“Absolutely!”

From the sound of it, Alyssa had already started the verification process concerning the Sunekosuri’s favorability score. I really hoped she’d be successful and manage to get to the bottom of it.

“Okay, time to give this dungeon a shot!”

“Mm-mm!”

By now, my stats were more than ninety percent recovered, so I figured we would be all right as long as we were careful. I was more concerned about the time; if players started gathering in larger numbers, I’d have to queue up again to enter the dungeon.

“Let’s see... Yup, that oughta do it.”

For this round, I had chosen Olto, Rick, Sakura, Bear Bear, Himka, and Drimo as my party members. Fau stood out too much, and besides, she’d been accompanying me a lot recently. Reflet had also respawned not too long ago, so I felt it was best to give her some time to recover.

“Lead the way, buddy.”

“Mmm!”

Hamakaze had informed me that the dungeon was an incredibly eerie place—and it was. So far, there’d been a sewerage, an underground tunnel, and an underground cave; the final hidden dungeon was an underground tomb.

“It’s pretty spacious.”

“Mm.”

Compared to the other three, this dungeon had a lot more floor space, and had probably been a beautifully cobblestoned area in the past. Unfortunately, the cobblestones had come loose in places over the years, and the gravestones and ground were covered in moss and ivy.

“A moss-covered mausoleum, huh... Pretty unsettling.”

“...”

Fortunately, there was enough light for us to find our way around, thanks to the candles in the small recesses lining the walls. At the same time, they also contributed to the eerie atmosphere, flickering and swaying as though blown by a nonexistent wind.

“Betcha anything the enemies we encounter will be undead.”

“Hm...”

“Please no zombies, though!”

Running into a zombie in an underground tomb would just be ghastly. Thankfully, my prayers were answered as no zombies appeared.

Click-clack-clack!

“Hunh!”

“A skeleton! And the other one’s a...Coal Golem?” I muttered, eying the skeleton and lumpy stone figure before us. Though equally creepy, I would choose skeletons any day over zombies. *Thank goodness... Not.* Both creatures were powerful, especially the Coal Golem. The giant was over two meters tall with a gorillalike physique, its body made of ebony-colored stone. As the name implied, it seemed to be composed partially of hot coal, evidenced by its glowing red arms. Not only were its blows heavy, but they also came with an added layer of heat damage. If I were to take a hit from it, I would die in an instant.

Although physically weaker than the Coal Golem, the skeleton couldn’t be underestimated either. In addition to being equipped with a sword, the fact that it was fairly resistant to both water and tree magic made it difficult for my team to land a decisive blow. It seemed to be weak against fire-type attacks, though, which made me regret not bringing along Fau and her Fire Summoning. Not having Reflet around to help heal us only exacerbated our situation further; even the normally resilient Olto was taking a lot of damage from the Coal Golem.

Still, the Coal Golem was easier to defeat than I'd initially anticipated. As it turned out, Drimo's pickax had a decimating effect on the golem. Moreover, since its weakness was water magic, we were able to kill it in just a few turns by concentrating our attacks on it.

"Give it to 'em, Drimo!"

"Squeak squeak!"

"Whoa! An instant KO!"

"Squeak."

Drimo, my man! Landing a critical hit almost always meant certain death.

Click-clack!

"Growl growl!"

I let Bear Bear handle the skeleton, as their teddy bear punches were especially effective against its bony (no pun intended) frame.

After about thirty minutes, however, I decided to pack things up for the time being so I could contact Amelia; I'd just noticed she was online again.

"Time to head back. Let's reposition and regroup, everyone."

"Squeak."

"Growl!"

Thankfully, we didn't have to worry about respawns on the way, and our return journey was incredibly smooth sailing. *I'll message Amelia as soon as we get out,* I promised myself. The first thing I saw when we reemerged above ground, though, was a crowd of roughly twenty people assembled in front of the entrance. Come to think of it, Hamakaze had mentioned posting about this place in the forums, but I hadn't expected this many players to gather so quickly. However, I soon learned that these people weren't necessarily queuing up to enter the dungeon.

"What the hell's your problem, freak?!"

"Wh-Why are you being so mean to me...?"

It seemed like two players were having a quarrel. No, that wasn't right: from the sound of it, one side was bullying the other mercilessly while the rest of the crowd watched. None of the bystanders made any move to intervene, most likely wanting to stay out of trouble. Some players even appeared to be rooting for the man who was jeering at his victim.

"What's up with that outfit, anyway?! You're a *man*, for Christ's sake!" he spat in disgust. The other player sniffled, bottom lip quivering as he choked back his tears. I recognized him: it was Chris, the super girly femboy Necromancer.

"Even your monsters are freaks! You make me sick. Get lost!"

"B-But..."

This sentiment was met with some agreement from the crowd of onlookers. I wasn't a huge fan of the undead either, so I could understand their displeasure to an extent, but still...

"How *dare* you get in my way, you f*****!"

"I-I'm sorry..."

"What's that? I can't hear you! Why dontcha start by putting away those disgusting creatures, eh?"

Whoa. Although Chris had his own faults, that guy was *way* out of line. I found it hard to believe that Chris had really done something so unforgivable. By now, he was full-on sobbing. Surely, he'd suffered enough already...?

At any rate, I wanted to know what had happened between them, so I decided to approach the nearest player.

"Hey, what happened?" I asked.

"Huh? Oh. Silver-Haired?"

"Yeah, I guess you could call me that."

"Um. So, that Necromancer, she—well, he—was trying to form a pickup group, you see," they explained. That wasn't unheard of—we *were* outside a dungeon, after all. "At first, he was just calling out to random people, but no one paid him any attention."

“Uh-huh.”

“Anyway, I guess he got desperate, because he started approaching people individually to see if they would join him.”

“That’s not against the rules, though, is it?”

“Well, no, but... As you might’ve guessed, some people don’t find that sort of thing their cup of tea.”

“Ah, right...”

Admittedly, there were a few reasons one might not want to team up with Chris: some people disliked undead creatures, while others were prejudiced against people who cross-dressed. *Was that why this man was berating him?* I wondered. There appeared to be more to the story than that, though.

“Apparently, the guy yelling at him was trying to form an ad hoc party too, but because the Necromancer dude scared away a lot of people, he failed to do so.”

“Isn’t that kind of a reach? Sounds a bit unfair.”

“Hmm, maaaybe. I wouldn’t say the Necromancer was *completely* free of blame for what happened, though,” the player said thoughtfully. “Anyway, things only got worse from there. Turns out the other guy *hates* the undead, so he started taking out his anger on the Necromancer.”

Who was more at fault here? Chris hadn’t exactly been in the right to approach strangers with his undead monsters, considering how many people were scared by them. That said, I also had an increasing dislike for the douchebag railing at him. *Bullying a cutie like Chris?* Did he not realize how that looked from a bystander’s standpoint? Truthfully, I didn’t really get Chris’s obsession with the undead, but I could tell that he loved and cared for them deeply. Hearing the man’s tirade had made me think, *What if some stranger were to come up to me and say Olto or Sakura was repulsive?* I was sure I’d be sad and incredibly pissed.

I didn’t understand the hate towards Chris’s appearance either. What was so wrong with a man wearing a skirt? *I* might not want to wear one or actively seek out a friend who enjoyed cross-dressing, but that didn’t give me the right to judge other people. Besides, he looked great. Why make such a big deal out of

it?

Basically, I felt sorry for Chris. Seeing him being yelled at also reminded me of how people used to make fun of my title, and I couldn't help but empathize. The guy talking down to Chris and the spectators sneering from the sidelines were just like the players who had ridiculed me at the beginning of the game. How could they be so self-centered and patronizing towards other people? I didn't get it at all.

"Hmm..."

What should I do? I wanted to help Chris, even though I knew it was overstepping bounds and low-key virtue signaling. *So what, though?* Playing the hero was far less cringey in-game than in real life, even if this wasn't exactly your typical damsel-in-distress scenario. That said, I wasn't sure how to go about it; if I wasn't tactful enough, it would only add fuel to the fire, and I doubted anybody wanted that.

"Peace, my friend. That's enough."

"The hell?"

"Yeah, you heard him. This cutie might share some of the blame too, but that's just brutal, dude. Downright unacceptable, I say."

Oops, someone beat me to it. A handsome purple-haired knight made his way through the crowd from the opposite side, followed by a man with hunched shoulders. I recognized the pair immediately.

"Huh. Fancy seeing them here."

One of them was Siegfried, aka the Purple-Haired Adventurer. True to his knight persona, he was an impassioned and righteous guy, but I didn't dislike him. Though I sincerely doubted we would ever be friends in real life, he was a dependable ally in-game, not to mention he'd helped me countless times.

The other player was Sukegawa, the self-proclaimed lewd blacksmith who offered generous discounts to his female clients. The man was a womanizer through and through, to the point where it was almost impressive. It wasn't as if he despised men, however, and his good-natured personality made it surprisingly easy to get along with him. He was the type of guy you might

consider “the friend who’s a slightly bad influence” in a bishojo game.

Siegfried, I could understand. As a virtuous knight, he wasn’t the type of guy who could overlook situations like this. He looked as noble and upstanding as ever, accompanied by his trusty white steed like always. But Sukegawa? He wasn’t a bad dude, but I hadn’t taken him as the type to jump to someone’s defense like that. Judging by the fact he had called Chris a cutie and the way he was looking at him now, he probably thought Chris was a girl.

“Can’t you see Chris is crying?” Siegfried admonished the player who was being a jerk.

“Yeah. C’mon, man. Lay off,” Sukegawa added. Unfortunately, the man was far too riled up to back down just yet.

“The hell do you think you are? Ya really think I’m gonna let him off the hook just because he’s crying? *Look at him!* Not only is he dressed like a woman, but he even has those creepy-ass monsters! *Someone’s* gotta teach him a lesson!” he spat. That made me see red. Who the heck did he think he was, preaching about punishment and justice? Chris hadn’t committed any grave offenses. Why did *he* have to beg for forgiveness from this piece of scum? In an instant, it all became clear to me: I despised this man just as much as he loathed Chris. Perhaps that was why I found myself speaking up reflexively.

“So what? Who are you to police what other people like or dislike?” I blurted out.

“...”

Oh, crap. Because I had spoken during a lull in the conversation, my voice rang out louder than I’d expected. Suddenly, all eyes were on me, including the attacker, who was glaring daggers. Surprisingly enough, my outburst seemed to encourage the other players to speak up as well, and they began voicing their opinions in earnest. Most of them disapproved of the man’s behavior, and it appeared that many of them had secretly been resenting him.

“Quit looking down on people, dude. It’s super cringe, especially in-game. Frankly, what’s disgusting is *your* behavior. Get off your frigging high horse.”

“Hello? This game is set in a *fantasy* world, so you knew there would be

undead creatures from the start. If you can't handle them, then you should've put on a filter like any sensible person would."

"Necromancers are totally valid, plus there's no rule prohibiting them from walking around with their monsters. Quit whining."

The color drained from the man's face as he realized he was being torn into.

"Sh-Shaddup...! Why're you all bashing *me*...? It's h-his fault for being a freak! Right? You guys agree, dontcha?!" he stammered, shooting a desperate look at the glaring onlookers.

"..."

"Damn it!"

No matter what he said, the man no longer had anyone to back him up. Even the players who had sided with him at the beginning had turned a corner and were now criticizing him. People like them weren't the type to actively voice their opinions or even have one, changing their stance without much thought depending on the general consensus.

In the end, the man who had been harassing Chris fled in a panic, bringing the drama to a close. Siegfried and Chris were discussing something, their gazes pointed in my direction as they did so. I had a bad feeling about how they were beaming at me, but I couldn't just leave—I *had* sort of served as a tipping point, no matter how small.

"Hello, Yuto!" Siegfried approached me cheerfully.

"Hey, Siegfried. Good to see you again," I greeted him back.

"Thank you for speaking up back there. You gave the other players just the push they needed to call out that man's behavior."

"I wasn't really thinking, though. It just sort of came out."

"Is that so? Well, if you insist."

It was true, though. I wasn't being modest or anything; it had genuinely been a spontaneous act rather than a planned one. Regardless, Siegfried had apparently chosen to interpret it as an honorable deed. Before I could correct him, Chris and Sukegawa cut me off.

“Thank you so much, Silver-Haired!” Chris thanked me profusely.

“Nah, don’t mention it...” I replied, averting my eyes. Don’t get me wrong—it wasn’t that his girlish mannerisms turned me off; quite the opposite, in fact. I simply felt the need to protect myself from his overwhelming cuteness before my brain short-circuited. As I redirected my gaze away from Chris, my eyes met with Sukegawa, whose face had turned ashen.

“Silver-Haired... I, I...” he stuttered, staggering towards me like a zombie. “I hadn’t assessed him earlier... I mean, you’d think he was a girl, right?”

“Shh, don’t. It’s okay. I understand.”

“I didn’t know he was a guy...” Sukegawa moaned. So he *had* mistaken him for a girl. *Damn, talk about changing his tune, though.* What had happened to that smug face he had while defending Chris earlier? As Sukegawa and I exchanged a wordless look of understanding, Siegfried and Chris joined us.

“Would you happen to be free after this, Yuto?” Siegfried asked.

“Why do you ask?”

“I was wondering if you might want to do a dungeon crawl with us if you had time.”

“Won’t you join us?” Chris chimed in. Ah, so that’s what they’d been discussing.

“It seems like Chris has been having some trouble, so Sukegawa and I have decided to help him. I was hoping you would accompany us.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fun if we all go together!”

Hmm. I knew from past experience that Siegfried and Sukegawa were extremely competent, and I would probably be safer if I explored the dungeon with them. That said, I was somewhat drained from our earlier attempt. As curious as I was about seeing a Necromancer in action, I decided to turn down their offer.

“Nah, I think I’ll—”

“Silver-Haired.”

Before I could finish my sentence, however, Sukegawa interrupted me. His gaze held mine, begging me not to desert him. I had never seen such a desperate and accusatory glare before. I wasn't a huge fan of Chris either, though. *Sorry, dude. No can do,* I communicated through eye contact.

"Come *ooon*, Silver-Haired! Please?" Sukegawa begged, changing tactics.

"But..."

"Please, I'm begging you."

"Why should I?"

"C'mon, be a sport!"

"I'd prefer not to."

"Surely you can make an exception!"

There was no need to mention the obstacle we were referring to—we both understood what the other was thinking perfectly. Not that we hated Chris or anything; we were merely desperate to hold on to a part of ourselves that we deemed integral to our identity.

"I'm begging you, Silver-Haired!"

Goddammit! The guy was actually prostrating himself now!

"Psst! What're you doing?!" I hissed. "There are still loads of people around."

"Pleeease!"

The bastard clearly refused to get up until I gave in. I probably could have just ignored him and left, but...

"Ugh, quit playing dirty! Get up, will you?!"

Seeing Sukegawa on his knees with his head pressed against the ground made me wince. Although his avatar was a handsome young man, and he was most likely around the same age as me in real life, he looked absolutely pitiful at the moment. I couldn't really desert him, not in that state.

"But, but..."

"Either way, I'm too drained to go on. I can't accompany you guys."

“No way...” Sukegawa sobbed.

“That’s a pity, Yuto. Chris has a lot to learn, and I thought you’d be an excellent role model for him as someone belonging to a similar job class,” Siegfried said. Evidently, he intended to educate Chris on a few things about gaming. “He seems to be a complete novice, so he doesn’t have a good grasp of gaming etiquette yet.”

“Right, that’s kinda true. I feel like that guy wasn’t one hundred percent to blame, even if he was an asshole...”

Emotion versus logic, unspoken rules, the bare minimum courtesy... Was it really acceptable to do whatever the game permitted you to do, even at the expense of other people’s comfort? Things weren’t always cut-and-dried when it came to gaming protocol. Regardless, that guy had clearly been in the wrong for losing his cool and blowing up like that.

“Everyone has to start somewhere. That said, yelling like that person did is never acceptable. As people who have been playing this game for longer, I believe it’s our responsibility to provide guidance to those who need it.”

“Yeah, that I agree with.”

As a matter of fact,I had once been rebuked for committing a faux pas myself. It was in a VR martial arts game I played prior to LJO, which had an unspoken rule that winners refrain from striking a victory pose out of respect for the loser. Unfortunately, due to being a novice at the time, I unknowingly struck a victory pose on my first win. After the match, I received an extremely long message from my opponent calling me every kind of name under the sun. Although it was my fault for not studying up on gaming etiquette beforehand, I also felt like they were being unreasonably angry for no reason. Sure, losing was annoying, but that didn’t give you a free pass to take out your frustration on someone else. I ended up quitting that game soon after. Perhaps if that player had explained what I’d done wrong in a less judgmental manner, things might have turned out differently.

“Here, take this,” I said, offering my map data to Siegfried.

“Is that the map data for this dungeon? Are you sure?”

“Yep. It’s the least I can do.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

With Siegfried in charge, I knew Chris was in good hands. Sukegawa, on the other hand, didn’t seem like he’d be of much help at the moment. I was also keenly aware of the other players staring at us, although I could hardly blame them: Siegfried and Sukegawa were both well-known players, and Chris stood out a lot too.

“Siegfried will help you out, Chris. Take notes, and you’ll be fine.”

“I will,” he nodded at me in reply. He then turned around to face the crowd and bowed gracefully with his undead monsters.

“I’m really sorry for causing drama! Thank you for all your help!”

“Rrr-aaghh.”

Clickety-clack!

At that, several screams rose from the crowd. Were they scared of his monsters? *No, hang on.* Those weren’t screams of terror—if anything, they sounded delighted.

“H-Have you ever seen such an adorable half rabbit?!”

“A femboy with a skeleton... I kinda vibe with that.”

“Wonder if he’s into gothic lolita outfits? I hope he wears one.”

“Nuh-uh! Frilly idol all the way!”

Most people were surprisingly quick to take to Chris, acting warmly towards him. I also spotted a few men blushing in the crowd. *Oi, you lot over there. I suggest you tread lightly.* Chris was a good person at heart, though, so I was sure he’d run into fewer problems once Siegfried educated him and he got more accustomed to the game. *Best of luck, dude.*

“Anyway, we’ll be going now. See you around.” I bade the trio farewell.

“Thanks for everything!” Chris said, beaming.

“S-Silver-Haired...”

“Sorry...”

“Hnn...”

After seeing off the motivated pair and a mournful Sukegawa, I returned to my farm to contact Amelia and switch out my party members. I decided to call Amelia first.

After a few rings, she picked up. “Hello hello! Long time no chat!”

“Hey, Amelia, about that dungeon. What are your plans?”

“I’m going, of course! How about you?”

“I’d like to join you if you don’t mind.”

“Yay! I get to hang out with Olto and co!”

Welp, now I *definitely* had to bring him with me.

“Cool. See you in front of the dungeon then?”

“Nah, I’ll go pick you up. You’re at your farm in the Town of Beginnings, right?”

“You sure?”

“Positive. Besides, I wanna see your farm.”

Hmm, I didn’t see why not. It would certainly make things easier for me.

“Okay, I’ll be waiting.”

“See you soon!”

All right, now it was time to swap my members before Amelia arrived.

“Let’s go with Olto, Rick, Reflet, Fau, Drimo, and Sakura this time.”

Sadly, Bear Bear and Himka’s attacks weren’t that effective against the Poltergeizst, so they had to sit this one out.

“Look after the farm with Olea, okay?”

“Hm!”

“Growl!”

“Triii!”

The trio saluted, and the chosen party members returned the gesture. It was interesting to note that even the usually nonchalant Drimo always participated in this group activity. Next to them, my yokai jumped up and down frantically, determined not to be excluded.

“Relax, I haven’t forgotten about you guys. I’m counting on you too, Kettle and Sunekosuri.”

“Pom!”

“Sneeh!”

I patted the two affectionately, and they narrowed their eyes in contentment. I was glad to know they had warmed up to me. Naturally, my monsters soon began clamoring for attention as well.

“Mm-mm!”

“Hum-hum!”

“Growl!”

What about us? they seemed to be saying. I obliged, ruffling Olto’s and Reflet’s hair while giving Bear Bear belly rubs. *Ah, that felt great.*

“Hm!”

“...!”

“Triii!”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. C’mere, you.”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Aye!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll get to you too.”

In the end, I ended up petting everyone. Only Drimo kept his distance, eyeing us warily. Obviously, it would be a crime not to pet him.

“Drimooo,” I cooed, flapping my arms.

“Squeak.”

“Hey, why’re you backing away?”

“Squeak...”

For some reason, he seemed afraid of me.

“Give it up, Drimo.”

“Sq-Squeak...”

He wriggled about as I grabbed him and stuck my hand inside his overalls.

“Heh heh, you like that?”

“Squeak.”

“Here? Is that the spot?”

“Squeak...”

Man, this was pure bliss. The fur on his stomach was longer than Bear Bear’s, and it felt oddly satisfying to twist the strands around my fingers. It reminded me of my dog, Fran, back at my parents’ house. However, my petting session was cut short by an intense gaze boring into my back.

“Silver-Haired... Heh heh.”

“A-Amelia.”

Amelia was staring at me, eyebrow quirked and a smirk on her face. I was sure she was secretly exasperated with me, though; I probably looked like a massive pervert to an outsider.

“...Sorry to keep you waiting,” I apologized.

“Oh? Done already?”

Stop! Not another word! I’m sorry for getting carried away!

“Sh-Shall we?”

“You can play with them a bit longer. In fact, why don’t you?”

“No, it’s fine! We should get going!”

“Aww. No need to rush. You really should.”

“Never mind that. Time to go!”

Thirty minutes later, we were once again in front of the underground cave in the Northern Town. I could see a scattering of players near the entrance.

“Looks like Alyssa’s already begun selling the details of this location. Oh, speaking of, I haven’t given you your cut of the profits yet. My bad, I forgot.”

“Oh! I’d totally forgotten about it as well—I was too busy shipping Silmo and swooning over the Sunekosuri.”

“Anyway, here’s half of the profits, as promised. Go on, take it.”

“Huh? *Half?* Wait, what?” Amelia’s eyes widened at the transfer request I sent her. Why did she seem so surprised?

“Hold up! I can’t accept this much money!”

“But we agreed to split it fifty-fifty, didn’t we? And our info sold for 200,000 G.”

“Th-That much? Is that the norm? No, this must be the so-called Silver-Haired effect... Normally, information wouldn’t fetch so much money... At least, I don’t think so...”

“Something wrong?”

“N-Nothing. Just didn’t expect it to sell for that much, that’s all. That’s including that info you discovered *after* I left, though, right?”

“If anything, are you sure you don’t want a bigger cut? You made the most important discovery, after all.”

As long as you knew where the entrance was, the rest was easy to obtain. Anyone could share information about their maps, items, and enemy spawns. As the first person to discover the hidden entrance, Amelia’s contribution was far more significant than mine.

“You know what? Fifty-fifty isn’t fair. How about you take sevent—”

“No no no, fifty is fine!”

“You sure?”

“Yes, absolutely!”

Well, I supposed that would cause the least amount of problems down the

road.

“Come on then. Let’s get going!” Amelia announced.

“Right. Gotta say, you got quite the party there.”

“I know, right? Isn’t this the cutest party you’ve ever seen?”

“Er, I guess...”

Amelia’s party wasn’t so much as cute as it was unbalanced. After all, it consisted of three rabbits and two gnomes. In addition to her Gnome Fighter and Knocker, she had a Heart Rabbit, a Translucent Rabbit, and a Black Rabbit.

“I knew four gnomes was a bit much. This is way more balanced, don’t you think? I did give it some thought, you know!”

“Uh-huh... ’Course you did.”

I sincerely doubted someone who *actually* valued balancing their stats would form a party made up solely of rabbits and gnomes. Oh well, I was sure Amelia’s rabbits were more than competent...

“I’ve learned my lesson after last time’s failure! This time, my party is all about adaptability!”

[Famous Players Megathread] Players Currently Rising to Fame, Part 11

This is a thread that discusses players who are already becoming household names due to all the ruckus they've been creating.

444: Anonymous

So the jerk that picked the fight just ran off? End of story?

445: Poof

Yep. Siegfried was super cool.

Sukegawa...not so much, but that's nothing new lmao

446: Quagsire

Loads of famous players were there, Silver-Haired included. If anything, he ended up stealing the show lol

If it had been anyone else, they would've been accused of waiting for the perfect timing to jump in, but weirdly enough, Silver-Haired's actions come off as perfectly genuine.

Regardless of if it's meant in a good way or bad way, "Dang, Silver-Haired!" seems to be the default response for a lot of cases.

447: Poof

Can you believe it? The *nerve* of that douchebag.

How DARE he make the femboy Necromancer cry? It's not

every day you come across such an all-encompassing gem of a character!

448: Dog Who Prefers Cats

A surprising number of people in the forums seem to be sympathetic towards the perp, though.

I'm Team Femboy, of course, but those who are creeped out by the undead say they can empathize with the other dude.

449: Knocker

Other threads have been discussing that too, but c'mon, the guy was totally in the wrong to pick a fight.

He should've just put on a filter if he's so scared.

450: Poof

Exactly!

Some people say it's too much work or that it'll ruin the fantasy, but hellooo? Selfish much?

In the first place, what's so creepy about the undead?

I, for one, think skeletons are pretty cute

451: Knocker

I swear, you women will call literally *anything* cute!

Anyway, to each their own, I guess.

I personally use a filter since I DO find them creepy.

As for the whole gender thing... Now *that's* truly up to each person, isn't it?

Besides, what's the point of debating that sorta stuff in a fictional game world? I find it kinda stupid tbh

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452: Anonymous

Eh, let people discuss gaming etiquette on the other thread.

Changing the subject—been hearing a lot about the femboy Necromancer lately.

Necromancers used to be outshone by Tamers, Summoners, Elementalers, and Onmyoji, but thanks to him, they've suddenly come into the spotlight.

453: Quagsire

True. Pretty unusual for a player to become this famous solely for their looks and antics too.

He's still nowhere near as famous as Silver-Haired or Hamakaze, though.

454: Knocker

Well, Silver-Haired's in a whole nother league, so...

Ever since word got out that a Sunekosuri's been hanging around his farm for some reason, the number of people visiting his farm has more than doubled. Everyone wants to catch a glimpse of it.

Most players' reactions are just "well, what'd you expect" or "there he goes again," though.

The way people don't even get jealous anymore NDBDBDBDN

455: Dog Who Prefers Cats

HXHDHDHDJF that's Silver-Haired for you

456: Namie

I have a question BTW.

Remember the job Dark Tamer that generated some buzz a while back?

What’s the difference between that and a Necromancer?

457: Quagsire

Um, everything? They’re completely different jobs.

I can see how they might seem similar, though, since both job classes can only command the undead or spirit-type monsters...

458: Knocker

First of all, Dark Tamer is a secondary job available for Tamers—they’re like Journeyman Tamers in that regard.

Dark Tamers also don’t have any skills unique to their job and merely inherit the same Monster Taming skills from their primary class.

Meanwhile, Necromancer is a primary job class, the same way Summoners and Tamers are one.

They have their own unique skills, such as Necromancy and Necromancification, and belong to an entirely separate group. The way things work for them is totally different.

459: Namie

So Necromancer isn’t necessarily a bad job class then?

460: Quagsire

Dark Tamers aren’t *inherently* bad either.

Sure, they tend to get a bad rep due to the recent monster craze, but I’m pretty sure some players would’ve deliberately switched to that class if Silver-Haired hadn’t made Tamers and monsters so popular.

461: Anonymous

Agreed.

No shade, but it doesn’t seem like a bad option for people who don’t care much about doting on their monsters.

462: Dog Who Prefers Cats

True, but that’s just reality. People have been judging them even more harshly since word got out that abusing your monsters is the requirement for becoming a Dark Tamer.

Even the sole Dark Tamer has apparently switched to a Mage now—the looks of disgust they got from other people were just too much for them.

I’d say the fact that there are very few monsters Dark Tamers can command is also a pretty big factor, though. Guess they made the switch too soon.

463: Poof

Serves ’em right for bullying such an adorable Chicky! How *could* they?!

Same goes for the people harassing the femboy Necromancer!

Like, are you kidding me? Femboys are a treasure to humankind!

464: Knocker

I wouldn’t go so far as to call them a “treasure,” but I do agree that a job as rare as Necromancer ought to be protected.

465: Poof

Thought you didn’t like the undead, though.

466: Knocker

I don’t mind them as long as I have a filter on. Besides,

my desire for knowledge far outweighs any fears I might have.

Like Silver-Haired, I hear the femboy Necromancer is pretty much a lurker.

>465

I’m counting on you to befriend him and get more info on Necromancers out of him.

467: Poof

Why don’t you befriend him yourself?

468: Knocker

Well... See, it’s not that easy for me.

469: Namie

Why not?

470: Knocker

Take a hint, will ya?!

I don’t wanna go “opening no doors,” if you get my drift!

471: Quagsire

No no, I totally get you!

I don’t hate the guy at all—I just don’t trust myself!

472: Anonymous

Same! I’m nervous to approach him for the same reason.

What if I like, catch feelings for him or something...?

473: Dog Who Prefers Cats

Who knows? Maybe the dude who harassed him felt the same

way lmao

The aggressive assholery could've all been a cover-up for his true feelings

---

474: Anonymous

Whoa, *definitely* a possibility.

475: Poof

Oooh♪ Wait a minute...

Is that like, "Wh-What is this feeling? C-Could it be...? No, shut up! I refuse to be led astray! Grr, wait till I wipe that innocent look off your cute little face!"

476: Namie

Omigosh eeek! I might just forgive him, then!

477: Dog Who Prefers Cats

Eep, don't go spreading unfounded rumors!

The guy's already being bashed enough as it is!

478: Quagsire

Personally, I find fujoshis more unsettling than femboys...

[New Discoveries Galore!] A Discussion Thread for New Discoveries Made in LJO, Part 31

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.

189: Heartman

Who knew there were dungeons in all four cardinal directions?

Guess we oughta explore the starting areas more thoroughly.

190: Fuka

Too bad there aren't any new food items, though.

191: Hiruma

The nonfood items aren't too shabby.

Qualitywise, they don't really go higher than you'd find in Zone Four or Five, but it's still pretty neat that you can get their equivalent in one of the earlier zones.

192: Hendrickson

And get this—apparently, Silver-Haired's the one who discovered the secret dungeons in the north and west.

The north is pretty much confirmed at this point since he and the bunny-gnome Tamer were spotted talking about it

outside the dungeon.

193: Voyage

Looks like the dungeon in the east is still the most popular, though.

After all, red cucumbers are the easiest to get, even if they ARE hella expensive.

194: Fuka

That’s to be expected tbh

It’s not like there’s an endless supply of them due to the purchase limit.

195: Hiruma

Apparently, there’s a butterfly-like NPC called a Tefu-Tefu in the northern dungeon.

The NPC in the south is called a Fluffaball—kinda like a cuter version of a Hairballer.

No one knows what their favorite foods are yet, though.

196: Voyage

Well, at least we know what the Obake likes...although where on earth would you find a WHITE red panther cap? That’s not something you can get your hands on easily.

197: Hendrickson

Dang, to think all four dungeons were discovered by Tamers or players akin to them.

Monsters must come in handy during searches, huh?

198: Heartman

Nah, I think it’s *because* it was Silver-Haired and

Hamakaze who made the discoveries.

Hamakaze's really been killing it lately, what with discovering the Sunekosuri and not one, but *two* dungeons and all

Careful, Silver-Haired—you've got a pretty strong contender!

199: Fuka

Honestly, I doubt he even realizes what kinda reputation he has.

He'll probably just praise Hamakaze if he meets her and genuinely mean it.

200: Hiruma

Yeah, he'll probably smile at her and go, "Eeey, keep up the good work!"

201: Hamakaze

That's EXACTLY how he reacted! It was almost like I was beneath his notice or something!

Also, ME, his *rival*?

Ha ha. Very funny. If only you knew.

202: Heartman

Speak of the devil.

What happened anyway?

203: Hamakaze

I'm helping the Cats verify some Onmyoji-related stuff atm.

Can't go into too much detail, but boy, did I get a

reality check.

Just when I thought I'd finally caught up to him, I learned that he was already several steps ahead of me again.

204: Hiruma

Like the dungeon stuff?

205: Hamakaze

Not just that. There was other stuff too...

Ugh, the way my ego grew several sizes when he said he knew me... And to think I thought he regarded me as someone of some importance when he said, "I'll be rooting for you"...

Heh. Go on—feel free to laugh. I know I'm a clown.

206: Fuka

Oh wow, he really *did* say that to you.

207: Hendrickson

I can totally picture you smugly declaring Silver-Haired your rival while he calmly wishes you the best of luck dbndbnbdbn

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208: Heartman

But hey, you're still doing a great job, Hamakaze.

Silver-Haired's just, you know, built different.

209: Hiruma

Exactly.

Next to him, your discoveries are almost as impressive.

210: Voyage

It’s true that Silver-Haired’s in a league of his own, but you’re definitely a top player too in every other sense of the word

---

211: Hamakaze

Like that’s supposed to make me feel *better*?!

I swear, next time, I’ll make a discovery SO compelling, it’ll top anything of his to date! Just you wait!

“Eep! I’m scared!”

“You okay there, Amelia?”

“*No*... Hngh...”

Amelia and I were in the midst of our second underground cave expedition in the Northern Town. As it turned out, her party was pretty strong, the gnomes playing defense and the rabbits playing offense. Thanks to this clear division of roles, her team was incredibly stable and performed solidly. Her evolved rabbits were also capable of dealing attribute damage now, which increased the strength of their attacks. As a result, we were making steady progress, at least in terms of fighting. *Other areas...not so much.*

It soon became apparent that Amelia had a fear of heights. During the event in Alf, she had suffered the same fate as me at the hands of the Archdemon Glasya-Labolas, an experience that had terrorized her to no end. During our ascent of the daunting slope-slash-cliff, she clung tearfully to Sakura’s safety rope, her gnomes aiding her. By the time she reached the top, there were tears fully streaming down her cheeks.

“F-Finally... Why does it have to be so high up and dark and cramped and shaky and... Ugh!”

“There, there. The worst is over now. Things will get easier from here.” I assured her.

“You promise?”

“Cross my heart. Just hang in there, okay?”

“Okay...”

Although not as intense as her fear of heights, Amelia didn’t seem to like dark or cramped spaces either. Why had she decided to explore the cave then? *Oh, right. Olto.* I doubted she would have otherwise.

“You know, there’s no way I could’ve managed this place on my own.”

I looked at Amelia quizzically. “Huh? Really?”

“Really. I probably would’ve quit halfway because of that slope. That thing’s

way too scary to climb without a safety harness."

"Glad we're being somewhat useful."

I was relieved to hear that, mainly because I was a total leech during fights.

"Besides, you sold me this too," she said, gesturing at the bamboo moss holder attached to her waist that Sakura had made. It was almost the same as the one I'd bought, made even more colorful thanks to the paint accentuating it in places. We'd also been growing small amounts of luminous moss on our blackout farm, so there was no shortage of that either. I'd ended up selling the moss holder to Amelia for 2,000 G. Initially, I'd told her that she only need pay for the direct material cost, but she refused, insisting I accept her payment. Considering the ones at the store had been a little over 2,000 G, I felt like she deserved a friend discount at the very least. However, Amelia objected to this, arguing that it was an insult to Sakura's craftsmanship to sell her handmade goods for such a low price. She firmly advised me to enter the maximum price if I decided to sell them at my farm stand.

"Anyway, can we stop for a bit? I need to rest!"

"Okey doke."

"Ugh, I'm exhausted," Amelia groaned, plunking herself down on a rock. I didn't blame her; I'd been completely spent and unable to move as well when I first climbed this slope. "Time for some juice."

"What's that, Amelia?" I asked, eyeing the red drink she was holding.

"Oh, this? It's strawberry pumpkin juice!"

Strawberry pumpkin juice? Now, hold up. I can't possibly ignore that.

"You found strawberries?"

"Just wild strawberries."

"Ah, gotcha."

Apparently, Amelia had undertaken the florist quest chain too. Come to think of it, she did own several gnomes, so it wouldn't be strange for her to be growing wild strawberries or other plants. As a Tamer, she probably had Cooking skills as well, which would allow her to experiment with different

recipes.

“I made this by mixing wild strawberries and amber pumpkin.”

That was a combination I’d never tried, as I usually sweetened my drinks with honey. Naturally, I was intrigued. Perhaps due to wild strawberries being classified as weeds, the drink didn’t appear to have any buffs. That was fine, though—what mattered most was the taste.

“Hey. Got another one of those?”

“Sorry, this is all I have now.”

Too bad. I was hoping I would get to taste it.

“Curious?”

“Yeah. I’ve never tried that combo before.”

“Wanna trade then? Your juice for mine,” Amelia offered.

“You sure? You said you only have one of those.”

“I don’t mind. It’s not like I particularly love this juice. In fact, I’m kinda sick of it—this is all I’ve been drinking. It’s not even that good.”

Well then, don’t mind if I do. I gratefully traded a glass of honey peach juice for Amelia’s strawberry pumpkin juice. *The taste, you ask? Ahem.* As expected, the drink was earthy and only had a hint of sweetness to it. Despite the subpar experience, it was apparently still one of Amelia’s better creations. Thank goodness I had monsters with Arboriculture and Beekeeping skills.

“Mmm, this is good.” Amelia sighed in satisfaction. “You always make the best drinks.”

“Well, I do experiment a lot.”

If there was one thing I was fairly confident about, it was my Cooking skills.

“By the way, are you coming to the tea-tasting party?” Amelia asked.

“The what?”

“Wait, haven’t you heard about it?”

Tea-tasting party? Was that some kind of event? Yup, but not an official one,

Amelia explained to me. Apparently, a group of Farmers growing herbs and players making herbal tea had decided to host some sort of mini herbal-tea fair.

"I see. Sounds pretty cool."

"Wanna join, then? It's tomorrow."

"Huh? Is it okay for me to join on such short notice?"

"I don't see why not. There aren't official invites or anything. It's mostly just the host hitting up their friends to see if they're free."

Evidently, all I needed to do was show up at the venue in the Town of Beginnings. *Cool!* This was going to be a treat.

One hour later...

"You can do it, Bun Bun!"

"Pwee!"

So far, we had the upper hand in the boss battle. Although bosses became more powerful when you faced them as a team, Amelia's party was still stronger. Moreover, the only thing that increased significantly was the boss's stats, whereas its minions remained more or less the same. The extra poltergeists that the boss threw at us were just regular poltergeists, nothing more. One blow from Amelia's rabbits was all it took to kill them. As a result, we were able to get rid of the lesser beings as quickly as they spawned, and the Poltergeizst's HP dropped steadily by the minute.

While crawling your way through the dungeon was certainly much easier the fewer people you had, especially when climbing that super steep slope—with smaller numbers there was less chance of a secondary accident occurring if the person above you suddenly slipped—it was far more effective to fight the boss as a larger group, as it gave you more leeway to get rid of the poltergeists. Thank goodness I had Fau and Sakura to assist us up that slope. In the end, we succeeded in defeating the boss in less time than it took for my initial failure.

"Hey! The wall slid open!" Amelia pointed. Once we defeated the Poltergeizst, part of the wall opened up, revealing another upward slope. It appeared to be a

one-way street, like the other dungeons, post-boss fight. *Wonder what lies ahead?* I mused. I doubted there'd be any more monsters, but I remained on guard, just in case. We let Amelia's rabbits, who were able to detect the presence of traps, lead the way. I grinned like an idiot, staring at them dreamily as they hopped and wiggled their cute rumps and tails to and fro. I now understood why other players ogled at Rick. When we reached the top of the slope, another passage awaited us. I turned around and saw a gaping hole in the floor.

"Isn't that the hole we fell into right before the boss battle?" I said.

"Seems like it."

It appeared that we'd come out the other side of the hole.

"Wow. I feel like an idiot for trying so hard to get across it."

"Yeah, me too."

To tell the truth, we'd been curious to see what was on the other side of the pitfall that led to the boss room. Though we'd tried various tactics to get across it somehow, we eventually concluded that it was impossible unless we were all capable of flight. The distance was too great for us to jump across, and even if Fau somehow made it to the other side, there was no place for her to securely fasten a safety rope. The hole was also too wide for us to stretch our arms and legs across it.

"Well, mystery solved. Shall we keep going?"

"Yeah."

Shortly, we arrived at a three-way intersection. I wasn't sure which path to take; it was too dark to see what lay ahead.

"What should we do?" Amelia pondered.

"Hmm, no use trying to figure it out from here... Shall we go left?"

Cheep cheep cheep.

Just as I was about to turn to the left, I heard a noise that sounded like a bird chirping. It seemed to be coming from around my waist.

“What’s that, Silver-Haired?”

“I bought it at a general store. It’s a kind of alarm that goes off if there are any poisonous fumes nearby.”

The source of the noise had been my Canary in a Coal Mine, which I’d purchased along with my lighting devices. Cautiously, I removed it from my waist and moved it closer to the path on the left.

Cheep cheep cheep cheep cheep cheep!

This time, the canary chirped even louder, indicating there was poisonous gas ahead of us. I repeated the process with the remaining two paths and discovered the one in the middle was also off-limits.

“Guess that leaves us with the path on the right.”

“That’s so useful! Maybe I’ll buy one too.”

“Looks like it breaks after a few uses, but it’s not a bad investment,” I agreed. *Especially this time—who knows what would have happened without it?* We went down the safe path, encountering nothing but red panther caps on the way. After a while, we came to another three-way intersection. Evidently, it didn’t matter which path we took since they were all connected: the only difference was the presence or absence of poisonous gas. I was curious about the remaining two paths, though.

“Hey, which path do you wanna take next?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Just figured there might be some kinda item we’re missing, you know?”

Amelia had intended on choosing the same path we’d just taken. However, I couldn’t shake the feeling that there might be a loot box down one of the paths we ignored.

“Maybe, but...I don’t have a lot of antidotes.”

“I have a few. Besides, we don’t *all* have to go. We can ask Rick or Bun Bun—anyone that’s swift on their feet, really—to go scout out the place. What do you think?”

“Hmm, I dunno...”

Amelia seemed reluctant to send one of her precious companions into the path of unmistakable danger. Still, she eventually agreed to dispatch Bun Bun to the scene.

“I-I trust your intuition,” she gulped, visibly anxious.

“Uh, just so you know, I don’t have a sixth sense or anything.”

“I know, but you’re Silver-Haired, after all.”

“Okay...?”

I wasn’t sure what she meant by that, but I guessed it didn’t matter as long as she was okay with the arrangement. *Had* I done anything to warrant such a reputation, though? Sadly, it soon became obvious that my hunch had been wrong, big time.

“Huh? Bun Bun, where’s Rick?” Amelia asked. Rick was nowhere to be seen.

“Pwee...”

Bun Bun’s shoulders sagged in defeat. *Whoa, what happened to your HP?!* The poisonous fumes appeared to be far more toxic than I thought.

“Rick’s dead,” I muttered, realization dawning.

“What? No way.”

Even Bun Bun was in terrible shape; there was no way Rick could have survived that. I pulled up my status window, and sure enough, Rick was currently labeled Dead. I had foolishly thought his Guardian’s Scarf would protect him from the poison. If I’d known this would happen, I would have dispatched Olto or Sakura instead. *So much for my “amazing” intuition...* As I silently beat myself up over my mistake, Amelia yelped in surprise.

“Euywah?!”

“What happened?”

“L-Look!”

Amelia had been sorting through the items Bun Bun brought back. Among them was a white mushroom: a red panther cap mutation.

“Whoa, you managed to get one.”

Tentatively, I checked my inventory and discovered the words “Red Panther Cap (White)” among my recent items. Rick had apparently succeeded in obtaining one too, before he died.

“Think this is a guaranteed item?”

“If so, that’s a *huge* discovery! You can feed these to the obake, right? They’re supposed to be super high in demand now!” Amelia chattered excitedly. And understandably so; if everyone was guaranteed a rare panther cap mutation, you could basically arm yourself with antidotes and farm for them.

“Let’s check out the remaining passage!”

“Good idea. Can I count on you, Sakura?”

“...!”

Sakura’s HP was relatively high, not to mention she possessed Status Ailment Resistance. I was confident she would survive. Amelia had chosen to dispatch a different rabbit this time. Unfortunately, there appeared to be nothing of interest in this passage, as both members returned empty-handed. *Tsk, too bad.* I supposed you couldn’t get lucky twice in a row. Furthermore, both Sakura and Amelia’s rabbit had suffered a lot of damage. From what I could gather from Sakura’s miming, there appeared to be a trap that shot arrows in addition to the poisonous gas.

“That must’ve been rough. Thanks for taking on that risk for us, though.”

“...♪”

Now that we’d gotten a good idea of the three passages, it was time to move on. I didn’t want to keep Rick waiting too long.

“Hmm, what’s the most effective way to farm for mushrooms here...?”

“Psst, come on. We’ve still got a ways to go.”

“Pwee.”

“Mm.”

“Hey, no pulling! Eek!”

Amelia's tamed monsters dragged her along, ignoring her protests. They seemed pretty used to it, so I suspected it was a common occurrence.

"Mmm." Her Knocker bobbed its head apologetically on her behalf.

"Must be tough having to take care of your owner all the time," I said sympathetically, offering it a pat on the head.

When we reached the end of the passage, we found ourselves in a small room much like the one I discovered the obake in.

GROOAWRRNK!

"Tiep..."

Like the other dungeons, a starving NPC lay on the ground before us.

"Is that a butterfly?"

The NPC was a cabbage butterfly designed to look cartoonish and plushie-like. The creature was called a Tefu-Tefu, the old name for butterfly in Japanese.
Well, that was pretty straightforward.

"Tiep..."

GROOOAR-GULNK!

The Tefu-Tefu's stomach growled even louder. It stared at us with a pleading look in its eyes, just as the obake had, desperate to get our attention.

"Tiep..."

"Yeah, yeah, hold on a sec. Let me look for something you can eat."

It was probably better to feed it first before we got a better look at it. As with the obake, I had no idea what it liked, so I did the same thing and surrounded it with all the edible items I owned with the help of Amelia.

"What's wrong, Amelia? Why the weird face?"

"Nothing, just impressed as always. Seriously, how much cooking do you have to be doing to own these many food items? It's insane."

"I-Insane...?"

"Sorry, I don't mean it in a bad way. It's a compliment."

Was it really? *Oh well, never mind.* It *was* an irrefutable fact that I was more skilled at cooking and farming than her... Still, it kinda bugged me. *Damn it, I swear I'm gonna become a phenomenal fighter like Amelia someday! I'll snuff my enemies with a flick of the wrist, overwhelm the boss with my indomitable monsters, screaming, "You'll rue the day you meddled with us!" and share my moment of glory online for all to see!*

"Mm?"

"Hum?"

"...Nothing. Don't mind me, guys."

Yes, someday. While I was busy fantasizing about becoming stronger, the Tefu-Tefu lunged at one of the ingredients.

"Tiep-tiep!"

"Huh. Didn't think it would like *those* items."

"Me neither."

The Tefu-Tefu had shown interest in the following items: bitter grass, lantern pumpkins, and cure carrots. It ignored the tulips and royal jelly completely, zooming past them to wolf down the aforementioned foods instead. Normally, butterflies had long, straw-like tubes that curled or uncurled when they ate. The Tefu-Tefu, however, had a sideways *X* for a mouth. I wondered if that meant it'd be able to eat solid foods as well, but I hadn't expected it to make a beeline for the vegetables. The butterfly munched happily on its snacks, deftly holding them with its wings.

"Tiep♪"

I instantly realized what these three vegetables had in common: they were all crops born through Selective Breeding. *Yes, that had to be it,* I thought, explaining my theory to Amelia.

"Doesn't that make this challenge really difficult, then?"

"Really? How so?"

"Well, they might be ordinary crops to you, but they're not items regular players can obtain easily. You *can* buy them from some shops, but why would

anyone, unless they needed them for something? Most people would just buy them for a specific purpose and use them immediately."

Amelia had a point. It was highly unlikely that people would carry them around, especially in unprocessed form, unless they grew them on their own like me.

"Gosh, I really lucked out by teaming up with you."

"Likewise, Amelia. The last time I fought the boss, I basically got clobbered to death."

"Well, that makes two of us then. Oh, but let me pay half for the crops, okay?"

"Nah, don't worry about it. I can harvest them from my farm anytime. You can show me to the tea party instead."

"Of course! I gotchu. I'm sure everyone would be thrilled to have you too."

While Amelia and I chatted, our monsters were busy playing among themselves. Drimo and the humanoid elementals were huddled around in a circle playing tic-tac-toe. Until that point, it had been Amelia's monsters against mine, but now, it was Team Sakura and Reflet versus Team Gnome. *Oh, that was quick.* Now they moved on to Sakura versus everybody else. It seemed like Sakura was simply too powerful, so they'd opted to take her down together. Given that Drimo was apparently the commander of the allied forces, he seemed to be the only one who could fight on equal terms with her.

Meanwhile, Fau and the little ones were busy running around and chasing each other. I'd assumed Fau would have an advantage over the others, given that she could fly, but the rest of the group was just as light-footed. Moreover, Amelia's rabbits were incredibly agile due to being at an advanced level, jumping out of harm's way every time they were on the verge of being caught.

"Tiep-tiep!"

"Hey there. Satisfied?"

"Tiep!"

Once it had had its fill, the Tefu-Tefu gave me and Amelia our items before

vanishing into thin air, just like every other dungeon I'd visited. I was relieved to find we'd each received the same item, so there was no risk of squabbling.

"Hmm... It says 'Torn Menko Card.'"

"What'd you get from the obake again? A marble?"

To no one's surprise, the Tefu-Tefu had given us yet another nostalgia-filled Japanese toy.

"Still haven't a clue how to use these, though." I frowned.

"I'm sure we'll find out eventually. Who knows, maybe you'll trigger an event when you get all four."

"That's possible."

"Anyway, what do you wanna do next? Wanna visit the remaining two dungeons too?"

"You'll come with me?"

"Duh, of course! Honestly, I'd be super happy if you'd have me!"

Excellent. I still had a bit of time before I had to log out. With Amelia's help, I just might be able to clear either the east or south dungeon.

"Shall we then?"

"Yeah, let's!"

Acting on a whim was scary sometimes. Before I knew it, we'd agreed to do another dungeon crawl together. I quickly returned to my farm to swap out my monsters and cheer up a disconsolate Rick, and soon we were in the underground tomb in the Southern Town.

Both Amelia and I were high on the idea of making another discovery, our monsters included. No one was there to stop us either, and we charged excitedly into the tomb, our gnomes *mm-mming* along the way.

"Hmm!"

"Nice work, Himka! Get 'em, Drimo!"

"Squeak squeak!"

Himka and Drimo were an excellent match for the Coal Golems. They made the perfect team, Himka stopping the creature's blows and allowing Drimo an opening to attack. Furthermore, we had Amelia's Knocker to back us up now, and the Coal Golems were powerless against the gnome and Drimo's double pickax attack. It seemed that pickaxes had a decimating effect on them after all. Though the duo made it look easy, the golems were still a powerful opponent for me.

Halfway through, we reached the dungeon's primary obstacle: a deep, narrow crack in the ground, from which fire burst forth. At a glance, the crevasse wasn't very wide, and looked like we could just about jump across it. However, the fissures were multilayered, and fire erupted from between the cracks at random intervals. Touching the flames resulted in a huge amount of damage, even more so if you fell into the crevasse itself.

As it happened, Amelia's Gnome Farmer nearly died. It had gone ahead to observe the terrain and received a nasty damage combo as a result. Fortunately, Amelia was able to return it to safety at the last minute, but it was an extremely nerve-racking experience nonetheless. If Amelia's party had fared that badly, there was no way my weaker companions could survive. Surprisingly, though, that was the extent of the damage we received, and we managed to overcome the terrain hurdle in the end.

"I knew that we could! Good work, everyone!"

"*Mm-mm!*"

Olto and Amelia's two gnomes had created a bridge for us with their earth magic—a plan born out of Amelia's determination not to see another gnome catch fire. By doing so, we were all able to cross to the other side safely without fear of falling or being roasted alive.

The boss fight happened soon after we had gotten past that. By now, I was familiar with the lazy naming convention used for the boss monsters, so it came as no surprise that the boss was called a Coal Coal Golem. Unlike a regular Coal Golem, which only had coal arms, the boss was made entirely out of coal, and was roughly three times the size of the former. Its coal-like body glowed orange in places, smoke rising from it menacingly. Frankly, I was terrified—even a

casual swing of its arm created the illusion of an enormous rock hurtling towards us.

“Hunh-gronk!”

“Eek!”

The Coal Coal Golem stretched out one of its large hands, bypassing the front line and heading straight for the back of the group—*me*. I could see it right above my head, intent on smashing me into a pulp. *Crap, I’m done for! How the heck can it move so fast when it’s so enormous?!* I tried to dodge its attack, but it was too late. The golem’s fist filled my vision, and my mind flashed back to the time the Poltergeizst killed me. *Forgive me, Amelia! You’ll have to go on without us!*

“Mm-mm-mm!”

“O-Olto?”

A split second before the boss’s fist crushed me to death, a figure jumped into my path. It was Olto, armed with his hoe.

“Mmm!”

“G-Gronk?”

A low, thunderous sound echoed throughout the room upon impact, accompanied by the ground vibrating—exactly what I would expect from a heavyweight like the Coal Coal Golem. So much as a graze of its fist and I would no doubt have suffered critical damage. Amazingly, despite its tremendous force, Olto had stopped the boss’s attack with his hoe. Not only that, he’d even managed to deflect it completely, knocking the creature off-balance.

“I-I’m alive! You’re amazing, buddy!”

“Mmm!”

“Now’s our chance! Get ’im, everyone!”

“Pwee pwee!”

Without missing a beat, Amelia and her companions attacked the boss with gusto. I quickly pulled myself together—couldn’t let them do all the work, could

I?

“Go, Drimo!”

“Squeak squeak!”

The Coal Coal Golem’s weakness appeared to be water magic, which worked to our advantage. However, what was truly terrifying about the Coal Coal Golem wasn’t its strength, but the fact that it began summoning regular Coal Golems after a certain amount of time. It was the same pattern as our nemesis, the Poltergeizst: fail to keep up with their spawning speed, and you’d be surrounded by an army in no time. Thankfully, it didn’t come to that, as Himka and Drimo cleared out the minions with ease. While that meant less damage to the boss, it was far more important to prevent a mass Coal Golem spawn.

“Hmm!”

“Squeak squeak!”

“Keep it up, you guys!”

While the unstoppable duo was busy shielding us from the lesser golems, we concentrated all our efforts on the boss itself.

“Get ready, Bear Bear!”

“Growl growl!”

“Fau, hit us with one of your buffing songs! Reflet, keep healing the others!”

“Aye!”

“Hum!”

After that, it was essentially attack after attack until we ran out of energy and resources. Thanks to Amelia’s gnomes pulling aggro for us, we were able to focus on going on the offense. Although we were nowhere near as powerful as Amelia’s party, Bear Bear’s Charge Ramp-Up and my water magic served as a significant source of damage.

“Growl growl growl growl!”

“Whoa! Dang, Bear Bear!” I exclaimed as their attack destroyed the boss’s right leg. Evidently, you were able to destroy it piece by piece by accumulating

damage in a single area. Having lost stability, the golem fell onto its back with a resounding crash. Immediately, Drimo and Bun Bun jumped in.

“Squeak squeak!”

Drimo struck the boss with all his might, shattering its chest armor, and a brilliant red gem appeared from within. *Could that be its core?* Bun Bun seemed to think the same thing.

“Pweee!”

A blue light enveloped Bun Bun’s body as it hurtled towards the boss, headbutting the core. It appeared to be a water-based Charge attack. The devs had really gone all out with the effects on this one, as upon colliding, the entire room was instantly bathed in blue. It was probably a special move like Drimo’s Dragon Blood Awakening. The impact was just as great, zapping the last of the Coal Coal Golem’s HP, and the creature crumbled into dust at last.

“We did it! Yay!” Amelia made a peace sign and grinned.

“Pwee!” Bun Bun cried, striking a pose on top of her head. Unlike us, Amelia and her monsters still seemed to have a lot of energy. *Man, I dunno how she does it.* I shook my head in admiration, shoulders heaving from the effort. In the meantime, a passage had appeared before us, where I suspected the NPC of this dungeon resided.

“Phew... Time to move forward, I guess.”

Chapter Five: The Tea Party Live Stream

The day after Amelia and I went on our joint dungeon crawl, I logged in to the game and headed as usual to my farm, where my monsters greeted me cheerily.

“Morning, guys. I’m planning on taking it easy today, so no rush with the chores, okay?”

“Mmm!”

“...♪”

The preceding day had been one intense fight after another. Not only did we clear the underground cave in the north, but we also ended up clearing the underground tomb in the south shortly after. Amelia’s presence had motivated my monsters to do their best, especially Olto and Himka, who’d played a major role, between the former’s Guardian skill and the latter’s fire-damage resistance. I was proud of how dependable the pair was, Himka in particular; I had never seen him perform so spectacularly in battle as he had yesterday.

All of us leveled up as a result of our dungeon crawls, myself included. I was especially thrilled about my Monster Taming skill reaching level 25, as I unlocked an extra taming slot and learned a new skill called Monster Whiz. This skill temporarily boosted the Intelligence and Sanity stats of the monsters under your command, which, in theory, would also increase Reflet’s HP recovery amount and Sakura’s magic damage.

My monsters had also obtained new skills through leveling up. Olto was now at level 30, which earned him a skill called Mutation Rate Booster. As the name implied, this skill increased the probability of crops mutating spontaneously. Although this wasn’t something I could confirm the results of immediately, I had no doubt it would come in handy in the long run.

Meanwhile, Himka had reached level 20 and obtained a skill called Crockery Making, which I asked him to demonstrate right away. Until now, he had only

been able to make simple, low-quality items. With this new skill, however, he could create beautiful, decorative tableware out of metal, and eventually glass as well, once we had the necessary ingredients for it. Coupled with Sakura's Woodworking skills, we had a lot more options now for crafts. Once we were able to make glass and pottery, the possibilities would be endless. I couldn't wait until we had all the resources we needed.

Out of all the drops we'd obtained, the Poltergeizst's Red Jade and Coal Golem's Charcoal were the most noteworthy—I could always use an extra gem or two to make additional Tamed Monster's Orbs. Himka was ecstatic about the latter, as adding charcoal to the furnace during the crafting process improved the quality of his goods. The remaining items remained stashed away in my inventory. I wasn't in want of cash at the moment after all, and I figured they'd come in handy during alchemy experiments or when I wanted to make new equipment for myself. If I wanted to, I could always sell them some other time. *No rush.*

"All right. Let's make some herbal tea while we wait for Amelia to come pick us up."

"Aye!"

"Hum!"

After getting our farming and concocting tasks out of the way, my companions and I got to work on making herbal tea for the party. Out of the countless tea blends I'd made to date, there were a few favorites that I kept coming back to, so I decided to make extra portions of those to bring with me.

"Mind giving me a hand, guys?"

"Aye!"

"Hum-hum!"

"Poko!"

By now, Fau and Reflet were well versed in the art of herbal tea making. For some reason, Kettle had decided to join in the festivities as well—that is, strictly as emotional support. Being a Tea Kettle Tanuki, it probably found all things tea-related alluring.



“Hang on. Won’t we need snacks too?” I suddenly realized midway through our tea making. Amelia hadn’t mentioned anything about it, but surely, it wouldn’t be a tea party without snacks. Or were they not strictly necessary for a tea *fair*?

“Hmm, but we are kinda showing up unannounced. Better to be safe than sorry. Besides, it’d be rude not to bring anything.”

Reflet and Fau could handle the mass tea production while I pondered the question of snacks. Although I wasn’t sure how many people were attending, it would probably be for the best if everyone could have more or less the same thing. It wouldn’t be fair otherwise, and I didn’t want people arguing over snacks.

“Could try making different kinds of cookies, I guess.”

Unlike when I could only make honey cookies and similar variations, I now had far more options to choose from, such as fruit, yogurt, goat’s milk, and sweet vegetable. With these many ingredients to play around with, I was bound to come up with a few combinations that tasted good.

“Let’s start by combining goat’s milk and goat’s butter.”

While supplies were limited due to the maximum purchase quantity, I had been stocking up on the two each time I visited the Northern Town. After testing various combinations, I found two cookie recipes that I liked. One was made with goat’s milk, butter, and yogurt, crimson raisins, and honey, and the other was made with goat’s butter, honey, lantern pumpkin, and cure carrots. The former had a refreshingly tart aftertaste, and I could easily eat a whole tray of them. Perhaps due to this being a game, the cookies lacked the distinctive odor of goat’s milk and were easily palatable. While it didn’t have any notable effects, it was incredibly satiating, making it an excellent item for recovering your hunger status.

The latter, aptly named Vegetable Cookies, had a pleasant sweetness to them thanks to the lantern pumpkin and cure carrots. Paired with the creaminess of the butter, they made for a substantial snack. They also came with a buff that made you immune to Blaze for a limited time period—an effect I would’ve loved to have had *prior* to exploring the Fire Elementals’ trial. For some reason,

the cookies also turned out looking like miniature jack-o'-lanterns. Since I hadn't chosen that shape, it appeared to be the default setting, a likely consequence of adding lantern pumpkin to the mix. That was interesting to note.

"Cool. These should fit the bill." I nodded, satisfied with my creations. Now, what were some other tea party staples?

"Let's see... Scones? Nah, I dunno the first thing about scone-making. I'd probably need baking powder anyway. Maybe some jam, then?"

I wasn't sure whether Russian tea would taste good with *herbal* tea, but it couldn't hurt to bring some jam.

"Wild strawberries, honey, royal jelly, and wine seem like a good place to start. Let's give it a shot."

Wild strawberries, which were considered weeds in this game, were a bit on the tart side, so I'd most likely have to compensate for the lack of sweetness with honey. I envisioned wine adding a hint of fruitiness to the mixture. I chucked the ingredients above into a pot, simmering them until they reached a jam-like consistency.

"Well... Technically, it *is* jam."

The end product was a curious item called Wine Jam. In addition to having only the slightest HP recovery effect, eating too much of it would cause you to become intoxicated. True to its name, wine appeared to be the main component of this jam. That said, it was incredibly flavorful: it tasted like the strawberry jam I usually had in real life, albeit far less sweet, with a tannic aftertaste from the wine. Admittedly, it didn't sound that appetizing when you put it that way, but the complex flavors were perfect for people who weren't fond of cloyingly sweet jams. In fact, this was probably more suitable for stirring into tea.

"Not the strawberry jam I was hoping to make, but it all worked out in the end."

I still had quite a bit of time to kill. What else did we need?

"Cups? No, teaware?"

I was no tea connoisseur, though. What counted as teaware anyway? The two utensils that immediately came to mind were that whisk thingy and spoon to scoop tea leaves—no, those were for *Japanese* tea, not herbal tea. I knew European tea sets had stuff like tea cozies, but for this occasion, perhaps the bare essentials, e.g., teacups and teapots, would suffice. *What else, what else...? Come on, remember what you were served with at that fancy café you visited before.* There'd been way more stuff than a cup and a pot, that was certain.

"Lemme think... A cup, a saucer, a teaspoon, and a teapot—oh, and that...whatsit called? A sugar bowl, that's it. There was also a milk jug."

Cups, saucers, and teapots were all items commonly sold in-game, as I'd learned when I purchased them from an NPC stall before. I could use small spoons instead of teaspoons, so there was no need to make more. A sugar bowl seemed unnecessary too, considering we didn't have sugar in this game yet. *Should I substitute it with honey, then?*

"Maybe I can make a honey jar."

I'd seen something like that in a foreign film once, where one of the characters scooped honey from a jar using a funny-looking wooden wand with grooves in it. Was that technically a spoon too? At any rate, that was about all I could recall for now.

"All right! Time to get cracking!"

I had already obtained the clay necessary for Himka's Pottery skills when we visited Zone Three. To my surprise, I was able to buy some at a stall, without needing to explore any dungeons. Moreover, it had been ridiculously cheap due to there being little demand for it at the moment. The basic ingredients for pottery were clay, water, and ceramic glaze. However, Alyssa had mentioned the last item could be substituted with regular paint, which meant I already had everything I needed. I'd also purchased a pottery wheel kit. The cheapest kit didn't cost much, and I figured it'd be good practice for Himka. I could also use it myself someday if I felt like trying my hand at it. I mean, how cool would it be to claim pottery as a hobby?

The only thing I was missing now was a kiln; a rental craft studio would

probably suffice for the time being.

“Himka!” I called out to the salamander boy, who had been watching Sakura at work inside the barn.

“Hm?”

“We’re going to the rental craft studio to make teaware. Let’s go!”

“Hmm! *Hm-hm!*”

Immediately, Himka thrust his palms out in front of himself to stop me. *Not so fast,* he seemed to be saying. He then began laying out some brownish items on the table—crockery made from clay.

“Huh? Wait, you made some already?” I blinked.

“Hm!”

“No way, a teapot too?! And I thought this would take ages!”

To my utter surprise, Himka produced twelve teacups with matching saucers, as well as two teapots. He seemed to have made them in his spare time. Himka stood tall, chest out, a smug smile on his face. His head also seemed to be tilted towards me ever so slightly, as though he was demanding a pat.

“Good job, buddy! I’m proud of you!”

“Hm!”

I obliged, watching his eyes crinkle in delight. The praise was well deserved, though. All we had to do now was fire these up in a kiln, and we would have perfectly usable teaware in no ti— O-n second thought, that wasn’t a guarantee. It was his first time, after all, so there was always the possibility that he might fail. *Best to keep my fingers crossed that things turn out as planned.* Anyhow, even if things didn’t work out, we still had Sakura’s wooden cups as backup.

“That reminds me, I should ask her to make a honey dipper and some teaspoons too. Oh, and a honey jar.”

Wooden utensils had their own place at the table, so it wasn’t as if Himka’s pottery would go to waste in the event that he succeeded.

“Okay, Sakura. Himka and I are heading out for a bit. Can I trust you to make all this stuff while we’re gone?”

“...!” Sakura nodded cutely, fists clenched in front of her chest.

“Awesome. I know I can always rely on you.”

“...♪”

Himka and I set off for the rental craft studio. Bear Bear tagged along as well since they had finished their work and had nothing else to do. The studio was located in the central district of the Town of Beginnings. Though large, it hardly looked like it could meet the needs of hundreds of players. However, the building was far more spacious on the inside—infinitely so, in fact—and there was no waiting time at all. Once I’d selected the room with the facilities I wanted and paid the hourly rental fee at the reception desk, I simply had to enter the door next to it, where my personal crafting studio awaited me on the other side.

“Kiln, pottery wheel... Good, we’ve got everything we need.”

“Hm!”

For starters, I asked Himka to make a milk jug, as we still lacked one. After adding water to the clay and kneading it into a ball, he placed the lump on the wheel and began coning it up with a practiced hand. Although I lacked Pottery skills, it seemed like you could shape things neatly in Auto mode if you had them. Before long, the shapeless ball of clay had transformed into a neat little milk jug.

“Hmm...” Himka let out a deep breath, pretending to wipe the sweat from his forehead. No doubt the process required a fair amount of concentration.

“What about the glaze?”

“Hm!”

I followed Himka’s gaze, which was directed at a large jug containing a thick liquid. Though of the lowest quality, it seemed like we were given the option of using ceramic glaze if we wanted.

“Gotcha... Hey, which is better? This crappy ceramic glaze or this paint?”

“Hm!” Himka pointed at the paint without a moment’s hesitation—which meant the paint I had was still better than the premade glaze. Regardless, I wanted to see how the results would differ, so I decided to make five sets of each. Although using paint might improve the overall quality, the most important thing to me was whether the final product looked good or not.

“Shall we get baking?”

“Hm!”

Himka placed the teacups on a large paddle, much like the ones you used for baking pizza, and shoved it inside the kiln. He then began firing up the kiln with huge amounts of charcoal. I suspected the fire needed to be at a certain temperature in real life, but for in-game pottery, “the hotter, the better” was all that mattered. Once the kiln had reached blazing temperatures, Himka crossed his arms and stood stock-still in front of it, staring intently at the peephole in the kiln door. He looked undeniably professional, but...

“So...you just gonna stay like that?”

“Hm.” Himka nodded solemnly, his expression uncharacteristically grave. It seemed that he had truly entered serious potter mode. Usually, Himka was the restless type, but he remained rooted to the spot for over five minutes, not taking his eyes off the door. Every now and then, he adjusted the temperature of the kiln, presumably to account for fluctuations in the firing process. I doubted he would waste his time with unnecessary tasks, so I took it to be a requisite for pottery. His efforts paid off, for the finished teacups were perfectly baked and glazed. While they had no noteworthy effects, they were all in pristine condition, unbroken and fully intact.

“Great job, Himka. You did good.”

“Hmm!”

Himka was delighted by the results and my praise, and did a happy little skip.

“Silver-Haired! Yoo-hoo!”

We returned to our farm not a moment too soon, finding Amelia had just arrived when we got there. Thank goodness we weren’t late.

“I came to pick you up as promised. All set?”

“Yep. Got everything we need.”

“Good, good. All right, let’s go! Everyone’s gonna be so surprised to see you!”

Huh? Wait a minute, does that mean...?

“Ahem. You didn’t tell the others I was coming?” I eyed Amelia incredulously.

“Nope. Thought I’d surprise everyone!” she chirped.

“Are you *sure* I can join? What if they turn me away when we get there?”

“Don’t worry! Like I said, it’s a suuuper chill gathering, and there’s always at least one party crasher. It’s mostly just drinking the herbal tea we brought and chatting and stuff.”

Hmm, I supposed that was all right then.

“You say it’s ‘chill,’ though?”

Since Amelia had described it as a “tea fair,” I’d imagined it would be more competitive, somewhere where people would be ranking one another’s teas. Evidently, I’d had a very different idea of what it actually was.

“We’re all still beginners, so it wouldn’t be much fun to rate each other’s tea at this point, would it?” she shrugged.

“True... Guess not.”

So it really was an ordinary tea party and not some grand affair.

“Mm-hmm. They did mention they’d be doing something different this time, but I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t turn you away or anything.”

“Uh-huh. By the way, am I allowed to bring my monsters with me?”

“Of course. My bunnies and gnomes are right here.”

Amelia had brought three rabbits and two gnomes with her, Bun Bun included. There appeared to be other Tamers participating, and she wanted her companions to be their playmates.

“Does that mean I can bring everyone along too?”

“Absolutely!”

“Hi, guys! I’m here.”

“Hey, Amelia. Good to see you.”

“I brought a friend with me today. You don’t mind, do you?”

Thirty minutes later, Amelia and I arrived at the conference center in the central district of the Town of Beginnings. As the name suggested, players could rent rooms in this building for various types of meetings. We were in a homely room, furnished with only a long table, wooden chairs, and a naked light bulb fitted with a silver shade. It felt less like a room in a fantasy world and more like something from the fifties or sixties. Fortunately, the lamp provided us with plenty of light. Most players used the conference center to plan raid boss battle strategies or, in the case of clans that lacked sufficient space in their clan houses, to host emergency meetings. Personally, I didn’t think it made much difference whether you discussed things indoors or outdoors, but it seemed that a considerable number of people appreciated the privacy it offered to keep their secrets safe.

“’Course not. And your guest is...? Wait a minute. I recognize that fairy and tree fae...”

“Everyone, meet Silver-Haired,” Amelia introduced me to the group.

“For real?”

“No way!”

“Holy crap, an actual celebrity!”

All ten players in the room fixed their eyes on us. Were they gawking at Amelia? She did stand out a lot, what with three gnomes accompanying her. Besides, she’d told me that gnomes were really popular. I supposed Fau stood out too, being a fairy and all. Where were we going to sit, though? As far as I could see, there weren’t any empty seats.

“Um, is it okay if I join?” I asked tentatively. “Amelia invited me, but I understand if you don’t have any more spa—”

“N-No, not an issue at all!” a woman cut me off shrilly, quickly tapping the

computer display on the table. The next instant, the room grew one size bigger, and an extra table and chairs materialized. Apparently, you could change the size of the room depending on the number of participants you had. *How useful was that?* No wonder they could afford to accept surprise guests.

"Please, have a seat!" another woman ushered me to the center.

"Huh? Sure you want me to sit in the middle?"

Weren't middle seats usually reserved for the host? Everyone seemed to be encouraging me to sit there, though, so it felt rude not to comply. Perhaps this was their way of showing hospitality to newcomers.

"Um, did you bring any tea with you? Or are you just here for the tea tasting?"

"Oh, don't worry. I have some herbal tea right here."

From the sound of it, you didn't even need to contribute anything to join the party. Amelia was right about it being laid-back.

"I brought this and this," I said, producing my contributions.

"Really? This much? *And* you made two different types?"

"Yup. Glad I made enough."

They didn't call themselves a "tea-tasting party" for nothing, and most participants had brought their share of homemade herbal tea. Although newcomers were usually exempt from this duty, I'd gone to the trouble of making tea for the occasion, so I decided to chip in everything I'd made.

"Dear me, I almost forgot to introduce myself. I'm Asuka, one of the hosts."

"And I'm Usami!"

The women who'd offered their seats greeted me cordially. The posh blonde woman next to me was Asuka, and the demure, raven-haired elf who was now seated across the table from me was Usami. Both of them appeared to be fairly famous players within the chef circle.

"I'd always wanted to meet you, you know," Asuka said.

"Likewise! Imagine—here, of all places! You've no idea how chuffed I am!"

Usami gushed.

“Our tea-tasting party has been made all the more distinguished thanks to your presence, Silver-Haired.”

“Oh, deffo.”

Whoa, no need to flatter me so much. Hmm, but I guessed I *was* kind of a pioneer of herbal tea making, so maybe I was influential in some way. Before long, the remaining guests had arrived and been seated. Normally, the party would kick off after this, leaving people free to drink tea and chat, but it seemed like Usami had a special announcement today.

“Ahem. As I mentioned last time, we’ve decided to do a friends-only live stream so that people who can’t make it to our parties can also join in on the fun from afar.”

“Huh? A live stream?” I echoed.

“Yup. Wait, did Amelia not tell you?”

“Nope...”

All I’d heard was that we were having a “super chill gathering,” so naturally, I hadn’t expected anything of the sort. Sensing my confusion, Asuka explained that many players who were unable to attend the tea parties due to scheduling conflicts had asked if they couldn’t at least enjoy the feel of them. Following this request, the regular attendees had decided to use the live streaming feature in the conference room to broadcast the party to their friends. As long as you were logged in, you were able to watch the stream anywhere. Since many chefs and cooks had their own shops, a lot of them planned on catching snippets of the stream during their spare time. You could also watch it in safety zones in dungeons—a great way to kill time, as you couldn’t really up and leave in the middle of a dungeon crawl unless you were solo. Some players were too far ahead in the game and found teleportation too costly, therefore deeming it a waste of money to return to the Town of Beginnings simply for a tea party.

“We share our recipes too, of course, but some players want to see our impressions of each other’s tea in real time. We also have quite a few Tamer participants, so naturally, some people just want an excuse to see cute

monsters.”

“I see.”

Tamers had Cooking among their starting skills, so it wasn’t surprising that a lot of them were able to make herbal tea.

“Of course, if you’re not comfortable showing your face, you can still back out...” Asuka left her question hanging.

“Nah, it’s fine. You said this is a friends-only stream, right?”

“Yes.”

That was fine by me. I would no doubt have hesitated to be in a show broadcast to thousands of people, but if it was just for the friends of the participants here, it couldn’t be that bad. Moreover, since most of the guests were either cooks or Tamers, we practically all knew each other.

“Phew. I was really hoping you’d stay. This way, I get to see your fairy up close... Heh heh.”

So Asuka was a fan of Fau. By now, I was completely used to being treated like a fifth wheel. I had mostly brought humanoid monsters to this party—Olto, Sakura, Reflet, Himka, and Fau—with the exception of Bear Bear. The only reason I’d chosen Bear Bear was because of the British-gentleman-esque shirt and tie they had worn previously, which I automatically associated with tea. Since they were now wearing a cape, however, they looked more like a kindergartener who’d sneaked into a party.

“Okay, everyone.” Asuka cleared her throat. “Let the tea tasting begin!”

“Wahoo!”

“Hurry up, let’s see y’all’s tea. That’s right, lay it all out.”

“Wait till you see what I made this time! It’s a winner for sure!”

“So is mine!”

Once the party was underway, the participants began passing around their tea for appraisal. Asuka went first. Unfortunately, there wasn’t enough to go around, as she’d only prepared about five servings. Those that didn’t get their

share received the other host's, i.e., Usami's, herbal tea instead. It wasn't easy to prepare enough tea for everyone each time; strictly speaking we wouldn't be ranking them anyway, Asuka and Usami explained.

"You can also trade with other people if you're interested!"

"Got it, thanks."

Incidentally, my monsters were lined up behind me. Normally, other players were eager to play with them, but all people did today was exchange looks and glance at them from afar. This was a tea-tasting, after all; I supposed they were more interested in the tea. *So this is what happens when a bunch of dedicated cooks get together.* Usami also passed around some snacks she had made especially for the party. Not only was she the person who'd proposed the idea of a tea fair, but she was also a chef who specialized in baked goods and desserts. My stomach grumbled at the sight of her scones, their rich, buttery smell wafting my way and tantalizing my taste buds. In addition to two types of scones—plain and walnut—she'd also made dessert pizzas topped with fruit.

"Scones, eh? They look great."

"Tuck in! No need to be shy."

"Don't mind if I d— Holy hell, these taste incredible!" I cried, stunned by how good they were. *And this jam!* Slathering it on the scones took them to a whole nother level: I could easily eat a gazillion of these. *Dang, this was the kind of jam I'd wanted to make.* The scones were also crisp on the outside and tender and fluffy on the inside.

"Both scones and jam are amazing."

"Aw, bless!"

"How'd you make them?" I asked Usami.

"It's easy as long as you have baking powder. You can get it from Zone Seven."

"Zone *Seven*? Isn't it super valuable, then? You must've put a ton of effort into these," I said, impressed. That was still a long way off for me.

"What can I say? I'm from the UK—of course I'm not going to skimp when it

comes to scones! Although, it's said that they taste better if you use the shortcut method. You just have to mix some powdered edible grass, baking powder, and butter, and presto! That's all there is to it, really. Oh, and mind the fire."

Did she say she was from the *UK*? I was far more curious about that than her scone recipe now. Or was she some kind of British wannabe?

"Nae. I'm a hundred-percent, bona-fide Scottish lass currently in my tenth year in Japan!" Usami beamed.

"Wait, but I thought the first batch was only sold in Japan," I replied, still confused.

"Well, anyone can buy LJO as long as they're a *resident* of Japan. You'd be surprised how many foreign nationals play this game."

Duh. How stupid of me. Although the first batch was exclusive to Japan and only playable on the Japan server, nowhere did it say noncitizens couldn't play.

"As you can imagine, tons of people living in Japan love gaming. The basic in-game avatars mostly look European, though, so you can't really tell a person's background by their name or appearance alone. The built-in translation software's also pretty advanced, so you'd need to have a good wee blether with folks to figure out if they're a native speaker or otherwise—not that I need to use it."

Indeed, there was no way of knowing whether someone was a foreigner or not unless they told me themself, especially if they were as proficient in Japanese as Usami. Moreover, her avatar's long, black hair and dark-brown, almost black eyes made her look incredibly Japanese. The only remotely European aspect to her was her elvish features.

"By the way, I'm not the only foreigner here, ken."

"You're not?"

"Nope. Plenty of people get into cooking 'cause they wanna recreate dishes from their home countries, like those two over there. Come on, I'll introduce you to them," Usami said, motioning to me to follow her. She then walked up to the pair and introduced me to a male dwarf player and a white cat-woman

hybrid with blonde hair.

“The name’s General Frost.”

“Blanche. Nice to meet you.”

General Frost was from Russia, while Blanche was from South Korea. Both spoke Japanese fluently, and I had no problems communicating with them whatsoever. Although General Frost occasionally had an odd pitch accent, it was still heaps better than the thick, incomprehensible dialect the old innkeeper I’d met on a trip to Aomori had spoken in.

“You guys both chose Japanese usernames, huh?”

I was sure they could just as easily have written their usernames in Hangul or the Russian alphabet if they’d wanted, as translated subtitles were automatically displayed on-screen.

“Well, we *are* playing in Japan, so it’d be a shame not to, no?” General Frost answered. “As the saying goes— Blanche, remind me how it goes again?”

“When in Rome, do as the Romans do?”

“Da! That’s the one!”

“Also, some people don’t take too kindly to us when they find out we’re not Japanese,” Blanche added.

“Ugh, right...”

I should have guessed. Thankfully, there seemed to be far fewer incidents of that nature lately due to the devs’ refusal to tolerate bigoted knuckleheads. Most players who made discriminatory remarks were shut down immediately, forcing them to mend their ways.

“Besides, we’ve made a lot of Japanese friends too.”

“I’m happy to have more otaku friends I can geek out with.”

Ultimately, it didn’t matter whether you were Japanese or not: what mattered was that you treated and respected everyone as individuals.

“Do drop me a line if you find any chilies,” Blanche said.

“Let me know if you come across any свекла too! Ah, what’s it called in

Japanese...? Yes, beetroot! I believe in you, Silver-Haired!”

Chilies seemed more likely to exist in-game, but beetroot? *The vegetable you use in borscht?* That I wasn’t too sure about. The thought of authentic Korean and Russian food greatly intrigued me, though, and I hoped I would get to try their food someday.

“You’ll be the first to know if I find them,” I promised the pair.

“Wonderful.”

“Many thanks!”

The three of us carried on chatting while I helped myself to a slice of Usami’s dessert pizza, which she seemed to be particularly proud of.

“Mm, that *is* good.”

Although I’d made dessert pizza before, this was far tastier than any I’d ever made. At first, I thought it was due to the difference in skill level, but Usami kindly taught me the key to making good pizza.

“Using high-quality ingredients is one, but I also added herbs to the mix,” she explained. Apparently, they served as some sort of key ingredient. It’d never occurred to me to use herbs in that way. Whenever I used herbs, they were usually in things where they were the star of the show, such as herbal tea. I’d never tried using them as a secret ingredient before, except when I was recreating a dish from real life.

“It doesna change the flavor a whole lot, but it does make it noticeably better.”

“Hence ‘secret ingredient.’”

“Yep. Been experimenting a lot, ye ken.”

I should experiment more too from now on, I vowed. This tip alone had already made the trip here worth it. *Now, what about the snacks I made?* Was it better to offer them now?

“Hey, Usami?”

“Yes?”

“I brought some snacks too. Should I pass them around?”

“Huh? Snacks? You don’t say.”

Instantly, General Frost, Blanche, and the other players nearby stood up and fixed their gazes on me.

“F-For real?”

“Can I try?!”

“D-Do you have enough to go around?” Usami whispered fiercely, casting a nervous glance around.

“S-Sure. Made extra, just in case.”

“Phew. Th-Thank goodness. Dinnae have to worry about a riot now...”

“Come again?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Don’t mind me.”

I definitely felt things get tense for a hot second, but why...? Never mind, it had to be my imagination. This was just a regular tea party, not the apocalypse.

“So, how should I do this?” I turned to Usami.

“Well, we usually offer them at the same time as the herbal tea we made. You can do the same.”

At that, the other players perked up their ears and began protesting.

“Not so fast! You really expect us to wait that long for *the* Silver-Haired’s snacks?!”

“Hear, hear! I already know they’re gonna taste amazing!”

“I wanna try ’em too!”

Aw, shucks. Thanks for stroking my ego, guys. The pressure was definitely on, though, especially after Usami’s insanely good dessert pizza... No, but hers was scones and pizza, and mine was cookies. Since they *were* two separate things, I could probably get away with it.

“Let’s switch up the order a bit, then. You’re up next, Silver-Haired.”

“Good idea. Everyone’s dying to try those snacks.”

After a brief discussion, Asuka and Usami decided it was best for me to go next. As if on cue, Fau started playing a slow and classy tune on her lute to match the vibe of the party. As much as I loved her music, I was slightly worried about how other people would react. Would they appreciate it too? What if they found it too grating?

“Ahh, a live performance by a fairy... What a treat...”

“How lovely is that?”

“Gosh, wish I had a fairy too.”

Thankfully, Fau’s performance was met with positive reviews, so it seemed like I needn’t have worried too much. Since it was customary for the person who made the herbal tea to do the pouring, I set to work preparing my cups and saucers. Incidentally, I had exactly twelve teacups, one for each participant. The teacups only had a three-star rating each, but the quality was acceptable, and the coloring wasn’t too bad either. One of the paints was made with iron ores, giving the cups a glossy black sheen, as I’d intended. The only issue was that because we’d painted the entire thing, both the inside of the cup and the saucer were black as well. Personally, that didn’t bother me too much, but it probably wasn’t ideal for drinking something like herbal tea, which was a brownish color. Perhaps it would look more appetizing with milk or coffee in it.

Meanwhile, the cups painted with the premade ceramic glaze provided at the rental craft studio had a yellowy-beige hue to them. While not terrible, they weren’t exactly pretty, and the paint job was uneven and amateurish. Still, they seemed good enough for everyday use. In the future, I hoped to experiment with more colors, and draw designs on my cups too.

Once I’d finished pouring the tea, my companions took the cups to bring to the table. Obviously, I figured everyone would be much happier to be served tea by cute monsters instead of me, but...

“Olto, honey! Over here!”

“My sweet undine! Would you be so kind as to serve me some tea?!”

“Bear Bearrrr! Come to mama!”

“Himka Himka Himka Himk—”

“Sakura! Oh, how I long to slurp you up!”

Whoa. I certainly hadn’t expected *this* level of enthusiasm. It seemed like everyone wanted to be served by their favorite monster, Usami and Blanche included. The only person not partaking in the madness was General Frost. I supposed the saying “kawaii transcends borders” was true. The way they were all acting, you’d think this was a maid café instead of a tea-tasting party—or would it be a monster café in this case? *Hmm, that might actually be a viable business idea...* Whoops, now wasn’t the time for daydreaming.

“Aww... Even the fact that the tea looks like it’s about to spill is super endearing...”

“Am I in heaven...?”

“Ugh, I’m gonna die from cuteness overload.”

What should I do? Was it better to take everyone’s requests and have the monster each player wanted serve them personally? I would hate for this to turn into some kind of popularity contest, though, and it wouldn’t be fair to my companions.

“Guys, get back here for a sec.”

“Mm?”

“Hum?”

My monsters returned to my side obediently.

“This is getting out of hand. Here, lemme just take these...”

“...”

“...”

Just as I was about to take the cups from my companions, a hush fell over the room, everyone ceasing to talk at once with timing so precise it almost felt orchestrated. Amidst the deathly silence, eleven pairs of eyes swiveled towards me. It was painfully obvious that they all wanted *my monsters* to serve them, not some rando like me, even if it meant they wouldn’t get to choose their favorite.

“...Never mind. You guys can do the honors.”

“Hm!”

“...♪”

“Growl growl!”

That put an end to the fuss, and there were no further complaints as my companions solemnly served each participant their tea.

“Oh, Himka made these cups, by the way. Could you guys let me know what you think about them?”

“He what?! Your *salamander* made these?!” Asuka yelped. Once again, I felt the group stir. *H-Huh?* Why was everyone staring at their teacups so intently?

“Made by Silver-Haired and co...”

“Himka’s handmade teacups...”

Oh, did Himka have fans too? Quite a few people had tamed a salamander around the same time I tamed Himka, though, so I didn’t think they weren’t *that* rare. While not many people had been spotted with one yet, Himka was far from the only salamander around; he was nowhere as rare as Sakura or Olto pre-Earth Elemental Gate. Perhaps it was because of the fact he was a unique specimen that people found him intriguing. Now that I thought about it, I’d heard unique specimens were hard to come across. It would make sense why the others seemed so curious about his teacups.

“This is his first attempt at them, though, so they’re more like prototypes. I’d appreciate any feedback,” I added for clarification.

“O-Okay.”

“His first... *gulp*...”

I then placed my snacks in front of the players, who were studying their teacups in earnest.

“And here’s the stuff I made.”

“Woo-hoo! Finally!”

“You made cookies? They look great!”

“S-So these are Silver-Haired’s homemade snacks... The people who missed the party are gonna be *so* jealous!”

“Yay!”

“These are delicious,” each person said as they munched on my snacks. I was happy to hear they were a hit with the crowd.

“Never knew lantern pumpkins could be used this way.”

“Think they’d work the same in other dishes?”

“Gotta secure a steady supply source...”

The cooks seemed especially surprised by my jack-o’-lantern-shaped cookies and their effects. This was the first time they’d encountered an ingredient that automatically altered the final product’s shape, and they seemed keen on experimenting with it. While the chefs marveled over the lantern pumpkin cookies, the Tamers guzzled the rest of the snacks with gusto. A few were even showing off their cookies to the live stream camera.

“You seeing this, Rikyu?”

“Silver-Haired’s cookies are the *bomb*!”

So Rikyu was watching the stream too, eh? Come to think of it, why *wouldn’t* she participate in a tea party? Oh, but she did mention she got anxious around strangers...

“Bet Rikyu’s fuming right now. For all her eccentric tea talk, she loves cute things too.”

“She said she’d considered joining, but canceled last minute because she didn’t wanna be on stream.”

Ah, no wonder. Maybe I’ll bring her some snacks and tea later, I decided.

“Hang on, I made this too,” I said, remembering the wine jam I made. “Wanna try it?”

“Hm? Jam, you said?” Usami, the aspiring pastry chef, perked up at the mention of it. While it was nowhere near as good as the jam she made, I figured it wouldn’t hurt to let the others try it.

“It’s wine jam. What do you think?”

“*Wine* jam? You don’t say. Mind if I have a look?”

“Be my guest,” I replied, handing the jar to Usami to assess.

“Well, I’ll be! Says you become absolutely sloshed if you eat too much—I suppose that means there’s still alcohol in it? How’d you make it?” She looked at me, amazement in her voice.

“Er, by simmering all the ingredients together? Nothing special, really,” I said, explaining each step to Usami—not that there was much else to it.

“So it’s wine, wild strawbs, honey, and royal jelly... That’s all?”

“Yep. Nothing else.”

I hadn’t known this until Usami told me, but apparently wine jam was an actual thing in real life. Who knew such a fancy breakfast food existed? Although she’d attempted to make some to go with her scones, she said that no matter how hard she tried, she always ended up with either regular jam or mulled wine. How difficult could it be, though, when all it took was tossing ingredients into a pot and boiling them down? Nonetheless, Usami seemed to have an idea of where she’d gone wrong.

“Never even considered using something as dear as royal jelly in jam...”

So *that* was the key ingredient. In my case, I already had a few servings of royal jelly thanks to Bear Bear’s Beekeeping skills, and we were on track to making more now that we had additional beehives. Rare as it was, I still had the means of obtaining more in the future. For Usami and others, however, royal jelly appeared to be extremely hard to come across; at the very least, it wasn’t something they could chance using in the recipe-tasting stage. Evidently, going the extra mile for the tea-tasting party had worked in my favor, miraculously resulting in this wine jam.

“Is it really that big of a deal, though? Doesn’t seem that useful if eating too much of it makes you drunk.”

“Are you kidding?! Pure barry is what it is for players who can use Drunken Boxing! They’ll be positively delighted!” Usami gushed.

“I bet, but not many players have that skill, do they?”

“*Yet.* Lots of people have been growing cherry blossoms, though, so it won’t be long before we get more Drunken Boxers! Besides, wine jam is rare enough as it is. That alone already makes it buzzworthy.”

“This is INcredible!” General Frost exclaimed upon licking the jam. He then stirred some into his tea, his expression changing into one of pure bliss as he took a sip. Was this the so-called “true Russian way” of drinking tea? But hang on—weren’t you supposed to lick the jam first, *then* drink your tea while the taste of jam still lingered on your tongue? I vaguely recalled some phony gourmet wannabe saying that adding jam directly to your tea wasn’t how authentic Russian tea was drunk. I posed my question to General Frost, whose reply was surprisingly simple.

“Either way is fine, no?” he shrugged.

“Huh? Really?”

“Think of it this way. Do you observe every single custom or tradition in Japan? Do *all* Japanese people sit seiza-style and turn their tea bowls when drinking tea? I think not, eh? It’s the same thing—you should do whatever *you* feel is best. Personally, I prefer adding jam straight to my tea since it’s easier that way. A lot less sweet too.”

General Frost also seemed to like the wine jam precisely because it had alcohol in it. Evidently, he used to add an inordinate amount of vodka to his tea when he was still living in Russia, accompanied by only the tiniest spoonful of jam for sweetness. *Could you even call it tea at that point...?* He was right, though. It was silly of me to assume all Russians were good at gopak dancing or liked to yell *horosho!* while taking huge swigs of vodka; that was like saying all Japanese participated in geisha dinners and regularly climbed Mount Fuji. Now that I thought about it, I’d once heard that vodka consumption was on the decline among the younger generation in Russia—not that General Frost was one of them. In any case, I was glad he had taken such a liking to my wine jam. Beside us, the rest of the group was fussing over my cookie recipe.

“I’m telling you, people who plan on tackling the Fire Elementals’ trial will *kill* for these lantern pumpkin cookies.”

“Think adding lantern pumpkin to other dishes will give them the same Blaze immunity?”

“If we can get some farmers to mass-produce them...”

“This means my monsters will stop catching on fire! I need more cookies!”

“Must grow lots of lantern pumpkins...”

It wasn’t just chefs who were obsessing over the lantern pumpkin cookies; Tamers were equally impressed by them. I’d also had a rough time in the Fire Elementals’ trial, so I could definitely see why. If it was possible to grant the lantern pumpkin’s Blaze immunity effect to other dishes as well, it would be easier for players to protect their monsters from harm. While I was sure other people would be experimenting with the squash, I decided I would give it a shot too; I could probably come up with a decent juice recipe. Just then, a player who had been chatting with Amelia came up to me. The man was a bear-human hybrid with a butterfly monster on his right shoulder, a squirrel on his left, and a Japanese rhinoceros beetle on his head; in other words, a Tamer, like me.

“I’m KingOysterMushroom. Nice meeting you again,” he greeted me.

“Yuto. Likewise.”

Coupled with his glasses and unsmiling expression, he looked like he was incredibly book smart, which only made the contrast between his cute monsters and the brown bear ears poking out from his similarly brown hair even starker. Surprisingly, we seemed to already be friends. *Of course*—I should’ve known he’d been at the flower-viewing picnic too.

“This black teacup’s pretty cool. Makes me want to drink coffee from it.”

“You think so too, huh?”

“Yeah. Café au lait might work too.”

Despite his stoic demeanor, the way he spoke was pleasant enough. He was probably just less expressive than the average person.

“Also, these cookies are excellent. My monsters are mostly bug types, so I really struggled in the Fire Elementals’ trial.”

Apparently, he had been alternating between curing his monsters with

recovery items while they healed from the damage inflicted by Blaze, and retreating from the dungeon.

“Dang. So bugs really are weak against fire.”

“They sure are. At the same time, they’re pretty resistant to air and earth types. The learning curve might be a bit steep, but once you get the hang of it, they’re great to have on your team.”

“I bet. Monsters that can fly are pretty valuable, after all. I’m reminded of it every time I use Fau.”

“Must be awesome having a fairy,” KingOysterMushroom muttered. While his expression suggested otherwise, I could tell he wasn’t being sarcastic judging by the way his eyes were glued to Fau. Not only was she cute, but she had insect wings too. I was sure he was dying to get his hands on a fairy himself. While we were chatting, I suddenly received a push notification. And not just one either: several of my close in-game friends, such as Marca and Ashihana, had messaged me.

“Why’re they texting me all at once?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Just got a bunch of texts from my friends, and all at the same time too...” I scratched my head. KingOysterMushroom seemed to immediately understand the source of my confusion.

“Didn’t you pause your text notifications?”

“Huh? Why would I do that? Was I supposed to turn them off for the party?”

“No, no, it’s not an official rule or anything. Everyone else turned them off once they learned you were coming, though.”

“Because of *me*...? What? Why?”

What was *that* supposed to mean?

“Oh, don’t worry about it. It’s nothing. Just that we’re streaming this time, so your friends are bound to bombard you with messages if something happens. I think it’s best if you turn off notifications for the time being.”

“Uh-huh. Okay.”

If something happens? Had something weird or noteworthy taken place? All we’d done was drink tea and eat cookies and jam... Oh, but Usami and Asuka did mention this was the first time they were doing a live stream. Maybe there’d been a bunch of unexpected twists that I wasn’t aware of. After turning off my push notifications with KingOysterMushroom’s help, I took a look at the messages I’d already received. I hadn’t noticed earlier, but it seemed like a few others had messaged me a while ago too.

“That’s Ashihana, Marca, Fuka, Tagosack, and Ursula.”

The senders were all women, and their texts all said more or less the same thing. Each player started off their message with praise for their favorite monsters, followed by a scolding for not telling them about the live stream in advance, before asking if it was too late to join the party now. Not only were the texts ridiculously long, but they also radiated an intense passion. *Weird.* I didn’t remember them liking herbal tea *that* much. Or had Usami’s desserts enticed them?

“Hmm, *can* they join?”

If they normally accepted last-minute guests, I didn’t see why they wouldn’t accept a few gate-crashers as well. No sooner had I pondered the question than I received a friend call from Tagosack.

“Hello? Tagosack?”

“’Sup, Yuto? Ya good? I’m watchin’ the live stream, by the way.”

“Wasn’t expecting you to call me. You caught me off guard.”

“Didn’t seem like you’d read my message, so figured I’d call instead. Y’know, I *really* wanna join the tea party too. Can I?”

It seemed like she’d been too impatient to wait for my reply. Tagosack was an avid herb grower, so I could understand why she would want to join.

“Well? How ’bout it?” she pressed.

“Hmm... Gimme a sec,” I replied, turning to Asuka for confirmation. “Hey, one of my friends is asking if they can join. What do you think?”

“Oh. You too, huh?”

“Wait, you mean you got a call from your friend too?”

“Yes. And way more than just one... I had to turn off both text and call notifications,” Asuka sighed, showing me her screen.

“Yikes.” I gulped at the sight. Asuka’s call history had filled up within minutes of the start of the tea party, and the log seemed to scroll forever. It was a bit of a nightmare; if I didn’t know any better, I would’ve assumed someone was harassing her.

“As you can see, we can’t really afford to accept any latecomers this time. If we say yes to one person, we’ll have to say yes to everyone else, and who knows how many more people want to join.”

“No, you’re totally right. No way we can fit all these people here.”

Besides, it wouldn’t do for a first-time participant like me to get preferential treatment.

“Sorry, Tagosack. It’s a no.”

“Aw, seriously? Dang.”

“Looks like there are loads more people who wanna join too. If we let everyone in, it’ll be a bit of a mess.”

“Right, gotcha... Fair enough. Maybe next time, eh?” Tagosack sounded deflated.

“Sorry.”

“Naw, don’t be. I shoulda known better. Can I ask ya some questions about lantern pumpkins later instead?”

“I don’t mind, but don’t you grow them too?”

“True, but I only managed to start harvestin’ them the other day. They take time to grow, and the yield’s not that great either, so there ain’t much info on ’em yet.”

I was a bit surprised that even a top farmer like Tagosack was struggling to grow lantern pumpkins. Thanks to Olto, the process was a lot easier for me. It

was times like this I felt extremely grateful for my monsters.

“Dude, ya coulda told me this was gonna be live streamed, though.”

“My bad. I didn’t know until I arrived.”

“Betcha anything your friends are all raisin’ hell about now. Ashihana even hung up on me and went runnin’. Who knows, she might even be right outside the conference room this very moment.”

I could imagine that—Ashihana did love Bear Bear, after all.

“Anyway, sorry for interruptin’! Talk to ya tomorrow!”

“S-See ya.”

Thank goodness it was Tagosack who called me and not one of my more easily excitable friends. I shuddered to think what kind of chewing out I might have gotten, especially from those who were megafans of my monsters. *Bet they would’ve been ecstatic just to spend time with them.* Although I was terrified of what awaited me after the tea party, I decided to ignore my problems for now and enjoy everyone’s herbal tea. After I turned off my call notifications as well, KingOysterMushroom and Blanche approached me again. Weren’t they chatting with Amelia, though? What could they want from me?

“Hey, Silver-Haired?”

“We kinda have a request...”

“A request?”

“Yeah. Any chance you could share some food for the Fluffaball with us?”

“Amelia said you might have something that fits the bill.”

Oh, so that was what they’d been talking about. They appeared to have been exchanging various tips and info about the underground tomb in the south with Amelia.

“I actually made it to the core of the tomb, but I couldn’t satisfy the Fluffaball’s hunger,” KingOysterMushroom explained.

“Me neither,” Blanche added.

“Right... Don’t blame you guys, though.”

The NPC at the end of the underground tomb was a creature called a Fluffaball. As the name suggested, it was similar in appearance to a Hairballer, only cuter. The Fluffaball had turned out to be a sucker for fruit, which wouldn't have been too difficult if it weren't for the fact that it only accepted fruits that were eight stars or higher. Thankfully, I'd happened to have an eight-star green peach on me at the time. Since it hadn't so much as looked at my other green peaches, the quality of the fruit was most likely a crucial factor.

"Unfortunately, I don't have any more at the moment."

"You don't?"

"Nope. Only the one, and that was a result of a quality mutation."

"That's too bad."

"Sorry about that."

"No, we totally understand. It's not an easy requirement."

As much as I wanted to do right by my friends, this was one case where I was unable to help them out. Meanwhile, my monsters were being pampered to no end. Amelia was feeding Olto honey, while Asuka fed Fau some veggie sticks. Reflet, Himka, and Bear Bear each had their fair share of fans too, who'd gone to the trouble of providing them with their favorite foods. Due to tree nymphs and pixies still being relatively rare, Sakura and Fau received the most attention, especially from Tamers—although in Sakura's case, it looked like people were simply hitting on her, since she didn't eat or drink anything.

"Thanks, guys. I'm super grateful."

"For what?" Amelia asked.

"Well, the fact that everyone gives my monsters lots of attention, of course."

"What're you talking about?! *We're* the ones who should be thanking you!"

"Exactly. You could even charge people if you wanted to." KingOysterMushroom nodded.

"In fact, name your price! I'll pay!" Blanche chimed in. For some reason my offhand comment immediately prompted an outcry. *Charge people,* though? Surely, that was taking it a step too far. I'd never heard of a Tamer charging

people money to play with their monsters.

“Sure, Fau and Sakura are rare and all, but why would anyone *pay* to play with them?”

“Here we go again...”

“Another Silver MVP moment...”

For some reason, Amelia and KingOysterMushroom seemed taken aback. Was I missing something? Perhaps Tamers who were especially enthusiastic about playing with monsters were more than willing to fork out for the opportunity. The tea-tasting party continued without a hitch, and shortly, my companions returned to my side to have tea with me.

“Mm-mm!”

“Here are your honey dumplings, buddy.”

“Growl growl!”

“I know, I know, be patient. Here’s your food, Bear Bear.”

“Hmm!”

“Hum!”

“Ha ha. Quit shaking me, you two.”

“La di da di da♪”

“...♪”

Fau was perched atop Sakura’s shoulder, playing a lively tune for the crowd. While the music was slow at first, it had gradually become more upbeat the longer the party went on. Nobody seemed to mind, though, so I decided to let her sing to her heart’s content. Thankfully, it looked like the party would end without any major hiccups. The only thing that bothered me slightly was the wine jam. I’d heard that when minors drank alcohol, the taste became more juicelike, and the Intoxicated status ailment didn’t apply to them. According to the underage participants, the results were the same with my wine jam. When I ate it, the jam tasted mildly sweet and had a faint whiff of alcohol, but when minors ate it, they found the jam much sweeter and fruitier. As someone who

could drink but wasn't that fond of alcohol, I was much more curious about the latter. Apparently, it tasted similar to Usami's grape jam, so I decided to try recreating her recipe later on. As the tea party neared the end, I asked the other players what they thought of Himka's teacups.

"Did you find them easy to drink from? Difficult? Or just average?"

Average wasn't necessarily a bad thing; at the very least, it meant there weren't any obvious defects. People began stating their impressions at once, half of them saying they weren't bad while the other half said they were slightly difficult to use. They didn't need to look so apologetic, though; it had been Himka's first time making them, so a mixed result was only to be expected. The most common critique was the thickness of the cup being uneven, making it difficult to drink from, depending on where you placed your lips. The second most common critique was the color of the teacups: as expected, people weren't a big fan of their being black on the inside too. That had more to do with personal taste and could easily be solved by changing the paint.

"The thickness is up to you, though, Himka."

"Hm-hmm!" Himka piped, pretending to roll up his sleeves as if to say, *I got this!*

"That's the spirit! Let's make the rim thinner next time and aim for the perfect teacup!"

"Hm!"

"I'll look for more types of paint too."

"Hm."

Now, what should I do with these teacups? They were the very first cups Himka made, so I'd planned on using them for ourselves, but...

"Hm..."

Himka glared at his teacups disapprovingly. Was he unhappy about them now that people had pointed out their flaws? He flicked his fingers at the cups, studying them from various angles before crossing his arms and furrowing his brow deeply. It was plain as day that he wasn't pleased with them at all.

“Hmm...”

Uh-oh. Saving them for everyday use was *definitely* a bad idea. I didn’t want Himka to feel upset every time he saw them. I’d noticed while observing his process that he appeared to take extreme pride in his craftsmanship. *Who knows—he might even start breaking his creations if he doesn’t like them...*

“...Himka. Don’t go breaking the stuff you make, even if it doesn’t meet your standards, okay?”

“...Hm.” Himka nodded reluctantly. Oh, so he *did* want to break them.

“...You wanna break them?” I asked, pointing at his teacups.

“Hm?”

Himka tilted his head to one side, asking me for confirmation. I guessed if he *himself* didn’t want them, there was no harm in destroying them. Besides, he was bound to make much better ones in the future. The cups didn’t meet the requirements for our farm stand, nor was there any point in selling them at shops since the materials were so cheap to begin with. If breaking them would make Himka feel better, then by all means, he was free to do so.

“Wait until we get back, though, okay?”

It would be a disaster if he started breaking cups right here.

“Hm.” He nodded happily, pleased with our agreement. However, the others weren’t about to let that slide. Instantly, screams erupted from all corners of the room.

“Not so fast!”

“B-Break them?!”

“That’s such a waste!”

“Break...?! I won’t stand for it!”

“Let *me* have them then!”

“Nuh-uh, *I’m* buying them!”

Whoa. All of a sudden, the players were upon me like vultures swooping down on their prey.

“Huh? You want *these*...? But they’re not even that good. You said it yourselves.” I shook my head in bewilderment. People could buy far nicer and more user-friendly tea sets at NPC shops. Although I’d brought them with me since Himka had put a lot of effort into making them, that didn’t change the fact that his teacups were still defective. Regardless, the crowd remained adamant in their decision. It seemed like they truly wanted Himka’s cups.

“Um, okay. Who wants a cup?”

“*Me!*” the group yelled in unison. Welp, that was all of them. *What now?*

“B-But why?”

“Are you kidding me? Your *salamander* made them!”

“It’s a super rare item, that’s why!”

“Besides, it’s nice to have a keepsake of this tea-tasting party.”

“Be honest. You just wanna flaunt it to your friends.”

“That’s not the *only* reason!”

For goodness’ sake, don’t talk all at once! I could hardly understand a thing anyone was saying. From what I managed to discern, however, people seemed to be split into two camps: fans of Himka, and those who wanted a memento of the party.

“What do you think, Himka?”

“Hm? Hm-hm.”

To my surprise, Himka motioned to his cups as though urging people to take them. *Wait, didn’t you say you wanted to* break *them earlier?* Evidently, he didn’t mind either way if people wanted them, as long as they were out of his sight.

“Hmm... Is one each okay then?”

Despite asking for no more than the raw cost of materials, I ended up receiving 3,000 G per person after much arguing back and forth. So insistent were they that I couldn’t help but say yes; we would have been arguing all day otherwise.

“I feel like you could buy a much nicer tea set with 3,000 G, though...”

“Hmm.”

From Ashihana’s Point of View

“What the?! No *freaking* way!” I stared aghast at the message I had received roughly thirty minutes ago. Interestingly enough, the sender was Silver-Haired; this was probably the first time he’d messaged me, now that I thought about it. Because I received so many orders in my DMs, I usually set aside a dedicated chunk of time to go through my messages instead of reading each one the moment I got it, and I always had my ringer off. Unfortunately, this meant that I opened Silver-Haired’s message too late. The DM had apparently been sent via the conference room’s notification feature. Nothing could have prepared me for the absolute shock I experienced upon clicking the link in his message.

“A t-tea party with Bear Bear...? Omigosh, they’re spoon-feeding Bear Bear some honey!”

Silver-Haired’s other monsters were all being pampered in a similar fashion. What was this, paradise on earth?!

“N-No way!” I gasped. “They get to do *that*?!”

Eek! No fair, no fair! I *wanna do that too!*

“Sorry to keep ya waitin’. Here ya go. Fresh from my f— Ashihana? What’s up with that face? You kinda look like a creep.”

“Tagosack? Sorry, gotta go! I have urgent business to attend to!”

“Huh? What business? Hey, hol’ up!” Tagosack hollered after me. *Sorry, Tagosack, but you can’t expect me to stay put after seeing that live stream!*

“*This* is what’s up!” I said, flashing Silver-Haired’s message at her.

“Er, what’s that? A message from Yuto?”

“I wanna have tea with Bear Bear too!”

“Dontcha play with his monsters almost every night, though?”

“Yes, but this is different! It’s a *tea* party, Tagosack! *A tea party!*”

“Uh-huh. If ya say so.”

“I very much say so!”

Bear Bear, my love! Wait for me!

“Hey! Don’t bother Yuto too much... Eh. Maybe I should check my messages too.”

From Alyssa and Lewin’s Point of View

“Hrmm...”

“What’s the matter?”

“Lewin. Check this out!”

“Oho. That a live stream?”

“Yep. It’s the tea-tasting event that the chefs host regularly, though in reality, it’s like any other ordinary tea party.”

“Yeah? What about it?”

“Get this—Yuto’s participating in it this time!”

“Ah. Well, we all know how *that’s* gonna turn out.”

“Yes, exactly! Gah, I *sooo* would’ve joined too, if only I’d known he was coming! I mean, just look at him, dropping bombshells left and right...!”

“He’s completely oblivious to the fact too. Scary, ain’t it?”

“Oh my god! Do you see that? They’re *ceramic cups*! They might look pretty average, but this *is* Yuto we’re talking about... Who knows what amazing secrets they might hold?!”

“...Why dontcha crash the party if you’re so curious? Someone else can look after the shop for ye. Besides, the clan master’s back from the front lines, ain’t he?”

“Please, as if... Pretty sure the hosts are being bombarded with similar requests even as we speak... If they give one person a special pass, they’ll have to do the same for everyone else, and no one wants to go down that road.”

“Right... Good point.”

“Ugh! If only that jackass hadn’t stalled me for God knows how long! I could’ve checked my messages much sooner then! How *dare* he haggle with me for hours over that crap piece of info?! The audacity!”

“Hey, relax. Ye can always ask him about the party later, cantcha?”

“...I suppose so.”

From Sawyer’s Point of View

“Ughhh! Why, *why* didn’t I go?!”

“Wh-What’s wrong, Fuka?”

“Sawyer! Here, take a look at this!” Fuka cried, motioning at her status window frantically. The source of her distress appeared to be a message from Silver-Haired. Apparently, he was at a tea-tasting party. I hadn’t bothered to attend since I wasn’t that into tea—I was more of a casual drinker—but to Fuka, who was a chef, it seemed to be a huge deal. I might have reacted in a similar manner if it had been something like an alchemy fair, though.

“Wh-What should we do...?” she said, shooting me a wide-eyed look.

“Do...? We’re inside a dungeon. It’s not like we can just leave.”

Our party was currently taking a break in one of the dungeon’s safety zones. Technically, we *could* escape if we really wanted to by using an item, but we were only moments away from facing the boss. She wouldn’t *dream* of turning back now...would she? *No way.* She *had* to be joking, right? Surely, a tea-tasting party couldn’t be more important than clearing a dungeon.

“Isn’t there anything we can do?”

“No. I’m sorry.”

“Hnnggh...”

Fuka looked like she wanted to turn back, but we couldn’t afford to lose our healer now. Besides, I doubted she would make it back in time for the party...

“You can always ask Yuto about the herbal tea later, can’t you?”

“But there are lantern pumpkins too!”

“Like I said, later.”

“What about having tea with his monsters?”

“But you visit his farm all the time, Fuka.”

“Yes, but this is a *tea party* we’re talking about! And just look at this! His monsters are serving all the guests tea... Can you believe it?”

Hmm... I did find Silver-Haired’s monsters cute, and I occasionally paid them a visit at his farm too. Still, I wasn’t a superfan or anything, so I had a hard time relating to Fuka’s overwhelming enthusiasm.

“Grrr...”

“You can grumble all you want, but the answer’s still no.”

“Waaah!”

“Crying won’t work either. Right, Ursula?”

“...Why am I still here? Just to suffer?”

“Oh... You too, huh.”

Did this message go out to every single one *of his friends?* I wondered. If so, I could definitely think of a few people who might go on a mini rampage...

“Oh boy... I hope Yuto will be okay.”

From Kokuten’s Point of View

“...Oh my *GOD*!”

“Wuh?! What’s up, Kokuten? Did you, like, remember a mistake you made at work or something?”

“Please don’t remind me of work, not on my first day of paid leave.”

“Ha ha, my bad. You startled me, though. What’s going on?”

“Sorry, didn’t mean to freak you out. But you *have* to see this.”

“Hm? What’s this? A live stream?”

“It’s a tea-tasting party.”

“Kinda impressed you can watch something so boring.”

“Normally, I wouldn’t be interested in it either, but it seems like Silver-Haired’s participating this time.”

“Ohhh. That *does* make it more watch-worthy. So, what happened?”

“He brought this thing. Apparently, it’s wine jam.”

“Like, jam made from wine? Doesn’t sound that tasty to me.”

“It’s pretty good in real life. One of my colleagues bought me some before as a gift.”

“Dang, you’re such a fancy-pants, Kokuten.”

“Ha ha, it’s not stuff I would ever buy for myself. But never mind what I do offline. What matters is the wine jam in-game.”

“What’s so special about it? Does it have a buff or something?”

“It has a slight HP recovery buff *and* an intoxicating effect.”

“What? Seriously? That’s freaking amazing!”

“Exactly! It’s *the* perfect item for us Drunken Boxers! I have to acquire it at all costs.”

“Where’s the party at?”

“The Town of Beginnings, from the looks of it.”

“Zone Nine is right around the corner, though... What do you wanna do?”

“...Indeed. What *shall* we do?”

“...I do want that item, though.”

“...Time to head back, I suppose.”

From Rikyu’s Point of View

“...Eurrgghh... *sob*”

Chapter Six: The Mayoiga and the Zashiki-Warashi

Gradually, the tea-tasting party drew to an end—or so I thought. I soon realized that the event was far from over.

“Whoa, why’re they all staring at us?”

“Mm-mm?”

The second I stepped outside the conference room, I was greeted by a crowd of nearly a hundred people. They appeared to have gathered after watching the live stream. Frankly, I was intimidated.

“Check it out! It’s Silver-Haired in the flesh!”

“This is the first time I’ve seen him.”

“His monsters are such cuties!”

My monsters seemed to be the center of attention, most of the onlookers eyeing them curiously. That was nothing new, though, and I could hardly blame them for staring. Just then, I spotted one of the players making their way through the crowd.

“Yuto!” Alyssa hollered.

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

“What am *I* doing here? You really think we Cats could ignore an event like this? I saw the live stream and all, but thought I’d come over and get info from the participants in person too.”

“Right, I see.”

“Also, figured it was about time I introduced you to daddy longlegs over here.”

“Hiya,” the man next to Alyssa greeted me breezily.

“Uh, hi.”

“Ha ha. I’m Highwood. Nice to meet ya.”

What a chummy guy. I was willing to bet his real name was Takagi, which was commonly written with the kanji characters for “tall” and “tree.” Not that *I* was any better than him, considering my username (Yuto) and my real name (Yuta) only had a one-vowel difference. Highwood was a handsome blond-haired elf, and a pretty tall one at that. Unlike halflings, elves didn’t get any height adjustments during their avatar-creation process, so he had to be well over 180 centimeters tall in real life too. *Damn, give me some of your height, dude!* His handsomeness was somewhat diminished by his frivolous attitude and lax expression, however. If anything, he kind of reminded me of Sukegawa—a so-called “hottie” with wasted potential.

“I may not look like it, but I’m actually the clan master of the Quick-Eared Cats,” Highwood added.

“Wait, seriously? The *clan master*?”

“That’s me. I’m usually busy fighting my way through dungeons on the front lines, though, so Alyssa’s pretty much the de facto leader.”

I darted a glance at Alyssa, who nodded in confirmation. *Wow.* I hadn’t expected to become acquaintances with the clan master of such a famous group.

“We don’t just buy info from people—we actively seek out new information ourselves too. We also need members to work on the verification side of things, which is mainly the clan master’s job,” Alyssa explained.

“I just kinda do my own thing while other people take care of the annoying businessy stuff, to be honest,” said Highwood.

“He might not look like one, but he’s also something of a celebrity himself. He was pretty active during the village event, not to mention he kicks ass on the front lines.”

Contrary to my initial impression, Highwood turned out to be a hard-hitting top fighter. *Sorry for judging you so harshly, dude.*

“Anyway, I figured it was my duty as clan master to greet one of our most distinguished patrons personally.”

“Distinguished patron? Who, me?”

“Who else? You’re one of our top information sellers, after all.”

So that was why he’d come to greet me personally. That was awfully sincere of him. Like me, I had a feeling he was also a working adult—my guess was he worked in sales. Not that I intended to ask him about his job or life offline, though.

“Thank you for always using our services, and I hope you’ll continue to do business with us.”

“D-Don’t mention it. The feeling is mutual.”

Phew, that was close. I almost broke character and regressed to polite businessperson talk. Whenever I met someone like Kokuten or Highwood, who gave off the impression that they were a working adult in real life, I found myself feeling the need to respond similarly. While I wasn’t strictly role-playing, I’d made a silly rule for myself to drop the polite speech in-game regardless of whom I was talking to, and I was determined to keep things that way. Alyssa was an exception, though. Why was that? Was it because she reminded me of my senior coworkers at work? I supposed it was mainly because I’d started off talking to her that way, and it’d sort of stuck.

“By the way, I’ve got something newsworthy for you,” Alyssa piped up.

“What is it?” I replied.

“Here, lend me your ear,” she said, bringing her face close to mine. Crap, I could feel my heart starting to beat faster. I wouldn’t get logged out of the game due to a sudden change in physical condition, would I? What could it be, though? If Alyssa said it was newsworthy, it had to be something major.

“Remember those Otherworldly Cherry Blossom Petals you gave me, Yuto? We managed to make salted cherry blossoms with them.”

“You did? Really?”

“Yes, really. You told me it didn’t work when you tried pickling regular cherry blossoms the other day, didn’t you? Figured you’d wanna know about this.”

“Thanks so much. That really is a key piece of info. How much do I owe you?”

“Heh heh, don’t worry about it. Couldn’t have done it without your help, after

all.”

“Huh? But...”

“Shh, I said don’t worry about it.”

Hmm, I supposed it’d be rude to keep pressing. Never knew you had to use Otherworldly Cherry Blossom Petals *specifically* for making salted cherry blossoms, though—I hadn’t thought to experiment with them since they were so valuable. I made a mental note to ask Reflet to make some with them when I got back. If all went well, we’d be able to increase our repertoire of herbal teas even further.

Shortly, our conversation was interrupted by a player running towards us with tremendous speed.

“Bear Beaaarrr!”

“Marca?”

The player was Marca, the Wind Mage I became acquainted with during the Village Archdemon event a while back. Ever since the flower-viewing picnic, she and Ashihana were forever butting heads over who got to play with Bear Bear.

“Hewwo, Bear Bear,” Marca cooed.

“Growl.”

“Oh, and you too, Silver-Haired. Hi,” Marca added after exchanging polite bows with Bear Bear.

“Uh-huh. Thanks for noticing.” I rolled my eyes. *Same old Marca*—what else was new?

“Please, *please* can I have a tea party with Bear Bear too?!”

Ah, I knew she would say that. That was out of the question, though.

“Sorry, Marca. I’m heading to the underground passage in the east with a few others in a bit.”

Unfortunately for Marca, I’d already made plans to visit the Mini Kappa with KingOysterMushroom, Blanche, and General Frost.

“N-Nyooo...”

“Come visit my farm again some other time, okay? Bear Bear says so too.”

“Growl.”

“Hrngh... Bear Bearrrr!” Marca wailed.

“Growl.”

As I attempted to console Marca, I heard another voice behind me.

“Yuto!”

“Hey, Ashihana. Haven’t seen you since you last made me that extra beehive.”

“A-Are you free after this? I wanna have tea with Bear Bear too!” Ashihana blurted, getting straight to the point. *Ah, you too. No surprise there.*

“Hmph! Sorry to burst your bubble, but I already suggested that and got shot down!” Marca retorted before I could reply.

“Maybe *you* got rejected, but you wouldn’t say no to *me*, would you, Yuto?!” Ashihana looked at me hopefully.

“Not sure how you came to that conclusion, but I’m off to a dungeon once I’m done here,” I replied, repeating what I’d told Marca. Ashihana wasn’t about to give up that easily, though.

“Okay, I’ll tag along then! I might be able to feed Bear Bear some treats that way!”

“Uh...”

What now? Ashihana was clinging tightly to Bear Bear, showing no signs of letting them go anytime soon. To make things worse, I could see a light bulb go off inside Marca’s head—I already knew what was coming next.

“I’m coming too!” she exclaimed.

“No, you’re not.”

Wait, that wasn’t me. I turned around to see who had spoken up.

“Have you forgotten *we’re* going dungeon crawling too?” One of Marca’s party members shook his head, exasperated. He and the others then began dragging her away.

“B-But!”

“No buts. Some of us have to go back to work tomorrow, so we gotta clear the dungeon today.”

From the sound of it, her party seemed to have begrudgingly agreed to come here.

“Heh, thank goodness *I’m* a solo player!”

“Grr! No fair, Ashihana!”

“Say goodbye to everyone now.”

“Ack, wait! Bear Bear, my love!”

Impressive how she can scream that loudly in front of all these people. I shook my head as well. It was almost remarkable how little shame she had.

“Heh heh♪”

After Marca’s teammates dragged her out of the room against her will, Ashihana glanced at me, a hopeful look in her eyes.

“...Fine,” I breathed a deep sigh. “Hey, guys? Mind if Ashihana tags along? You can get rid of one of my monster slots.”

“Oh, we don’t mind at all. It’s not every day we get to spend time with such famous players,” replied KingOysterMushroom.

“Agreed,” General Frost added.

“Likewise,” Blanche chimed in.

“Wahoo! Thanks so much, guys!”

“Beeearrr Bear.”

“Grooowl?”

“Bear Beeeearrr!”

“Growl growl.”

An hour later, while Ashihana smothered Bear Bear with gleeful affection, the rest of us busied ourselves with checking the details of the dungeon as we

waited our turn to enter. I was glad Marca wasn't here, or she would've been crying tears of blood. Thanks to Hamakaze, most of the information on the underground passage was already out in the open. Moreover, KingOysterMushroom appeared to have a reputation for being a pretty strong fighter among Tamers, so clearing this dungeon would likely be a piece of cake. Regardless, I'd been invited along because I owned a red cucumber, which had become increasingly difficult to obtain due to the recent price hike.

Our party members were Himka, Drimo, Bear Bear, Rick, Fau, Ashihana, and me. Bear Bear had been Ashihana's request, and Fau KingOysterMushroom's. KingOysterMushroom had been especially hard to say no to: his impassive face made him all the more intimidating, and before I knew it, I'd found myself nodding in reply. Fau was a great team player, though, so it was no big deal. I'd brought Rick along since he'd missed out on the tea-tasting party, and Himka for leveling up and searching for pottery materials.

"So we should be able to clear this place in roughly two hours?" I asked.

"Yeah. The boss isn't that strong, and we have a pretty solid team. Shouldn't take much longer than that if we move quickly," KingOysterMushroom replied. Even with a near-complete dungeon walk-through on hand, was it really possible to clear it in such a short amount of time? I was more of a deadweight than a help, if I might be so bold. *Don't underestimate how useless I am, guys.* KingOysterMushroom was right, though. Since he and Blanche usually fought on the front lines, their current level far exceeded the difficulty of this dungeon.

"I might be a frontliner *now*, but I'm bound to fall behind sooner rather than later. As a matter of fact, the top players are already several levels above me."

"Really? You seem pretty strong yourself, though."

Not only was KingOysterMushroom a Tamer, but he was also a powerful mage as well. However, he immediately shook his head.

"Trust me—the cream of the crop are in an entirely separate league. They have an almost unhealthy obsession with winning."

"That so?"

"Mhm. Can't really compete with players who pour their entire heart and soul

into leveling and fighting, you know.”

Still, that didn’t change the fact that he and Blanche were in the top percentile. All of the enemy monsters we encountered were KO’d instantly, and they had no trouble deactivating the traps. Frankly, I had nothing to contribute. Other than Bear Bear almost dying from a critical hit, defeating the boss was a cinch too, although that made Ashihana throw one of Rikyu’s bombs at it in fury, causing her to accidentally kill herself. I called her soon after, but she insisted we go ahead without her. That said, the only thing left to do was feed the Mini Kappa a cucumber, not to mention Ashihana had already cleared this dungeon once and received her gift item. When I asked her why she’d bothered coming, she simply replied, “If Bear Bear’s there, you can count on me being present too!”

“Whatever you say, girl...”

“What did Ashihana say?” KingOysterMushroom asked.

“She said we can go on without her.”

I had to say, though, I truly hadn’t contributed *anything* to this dungeon crawl. Although feeding the Mini Kappa a cucumber at the end hardly seemed enough to make it up to everyone, the others didn’t seem to think much of it.

“Never mind that—it’s the Mini Kappa that matters. We’re counting on you.”

“O-Okay.”

“Besides, I got to see your fairy up close. That alone made this trip highly worthwhile.”

“Blanche and I were unable to obtain cucumbers, so we’re just grateful you’re willing to provide one for us,” General Frost chimed in.

“Exactly.” Blanche agreed.

Hmm, I supposed I could think about what else to do for them later on. Perhaps I could give them some of my item drops to make things slightly fairer.

“Okay. Shall we move on, then?”

According to the guide, the Mini Kappa would be waiting for us right down our current path. As we made our merry way to the final room, a server-wide

announcement suddenly brought our conversation to a halt.

Ding-dong.

"*The underground dungeons in each of the four towns have been cleared for the very first time. Consequently, the first player to clear all four dungeons will be awarded the title, 'Mascot Helper.'*"

"*The number of teleportable locations has increased.*"

Evidently, someone had just cleared all four dungeons.

"Aw, someone beat me to it," I groaned. If I'd come just a bit earlier, I might have been the one to receive the title. "Too bad."

"Hm..."

"Oh well, it happens."

Although I was pretty disappointed about it, there wasn't much you could do about titles that were awarded on a first-come-first-served basis. Suddenly, the rest of the group jerked their heads up and cried out in dismay.

"S-Someone beat you to it?!"

"We're so sorry, Silver-Haired!"

"If only we hadn't been so slow...!"

The three of them apologized profusely, almost prostrating themselves. Wait, what were they sorry for? Sensing my confusion, they bowed deeply and explained that they felt responsible for my not being the first player to get the title. *Whoa, now wait a sec.* I would've taken *way* more time if I'd attempted the dungeon alone; either way, there was no way I could've beaten the other person. *Gah, quit apologizing already!* Once I'd finally managed to reassure everyone and calm them down, we continued on our journey.

As it turned out, it had actually been *my* fault someone else had gotten the title first. I received a call from Alyssa shortly after asking whether I was the one who had received the title. According to what she told me, quite a few people had already bought the information on the southern dungeon I'd sold her the previous day, and so the Quick-Eared Cats had already posted the details on their page. Because of that, people already knew what to feed the Fluffaball,

not to mention there was a possibility you could obtain an eight-star-rarity fruit in Zone Ten. One of the frontliners had thus managed to get their hands on one and beat me to the punch. All of this could have been prevented if Amelia and I hadn't sold our findings so carelessly. In my excitement, I'd simply gone straight to Alyssa without thinking about the consequences.

"Anyway, I'm curious to find out what the new teleportable locations are," I said, changing the subject. "Let's hurry up and clear this dungeon, okay?"

"I suppose..."

"That's the spirit. C'mon, let's go. My monsters agree too. Don't you, guys?"

"Hmm!"

"Aye!"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Squeak!"

"Growl growl!"

My monsters all raised their hands and paws in unison. Thankfully, that seemed to put a smile on everyone's faces. *Nothing like cute monsters to lift your spirits!* Finally, we reached our destination, where we found the starving Mini Kappa sprawled facedown on the ground.

"That must be it," I said.

"Just like the guide said." KingOysterMushroom nodded.

GROOAWRRNK! its stomach gurgled.

"We should hurry up and feed it."

"Thanks for doing this for us."

"Gotta say, it just looks like a blue plushie."

The kappa was bright blue all over, as though it'd been dipped in paint, and its soft, cloth-like torso was shaped like a haniwa figure—smooth and cylindrical, without a visible neck. Its roundish hands and feet likewise lacked any digits. The only parts of its body that weren't blue were the top of its head and the center of its face—its "dish" and beak—which were yellow. The dish on its head

was shaped like a cartoon sunflower, and its beak resembled a bird's beak more than a kappa's. The kappa gazed at us, its black eyes round and glassy like marbles. To be honest, it was pretty cute for what was supposed to be a terrifying water creature.

"Kapa-pa..." the kappa moaned faintly.

GROOOAR-GULNK!

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Give me a sec."

"Kapa."

"Here's your cucumber, little guy."

"Kapa-pa-pa!"

"Whoa!"

Man, that was close! It might have gobbled up my arm too if I hadn't let go of the cucumber when I did.

"Kapa!" The Mini Kappa munched happily on its cucumber. It was strange watching it eat, though; I could see the cucumber disappearing gradually despite it not moving its beak. It kind of reminded me of how I used to continuously feed pencils into electric sharpeners when I was a kid.

"Kapa-pa!"

The Mini Kappa patted its stomach, seemingly satisfied.

"Kapa."

"A gift? For me?"

"Kapa." The kappa nodded, handing me a black lump of iron slightly larger than a five-hundred-yen coin.

"A Flattened Beigoma, huh?"

Like with the previous NPCs, I had received yet another nostalgic Japanese toy. First the Obake's cracked marble, then the Tefu-Tefu's torn menko card, then the Fluffaball's ohajiki, and now this. I hadn't a clue how to use this item either. As I was studying the beigoma in my hand after the kappa disappeared, I heard another announcement, this time a personal one.

“*As a reward for clearing all four underground areas, you will receive the item ‘Ripped Beanbag Ball.’*”

“Another mystery item?” I frowned. That was a weird reward. I seemed to be the only one who got it too, as the other members of the group had yet to clear all four dungeons.

“Interesting. But you don’t know what it’s for?” KingOysterMushroom asked after hearing my explanation.

“Nope, no idea. Anyway, why don’t we go to the teleportation circle in the square? That might give us some sort of clue.”

“Good idea.”

“We’d be happy to accompany you!” Blanche said.

“Ditto!” General Frost agreed.

Using an escape orb, we hurried out of the dungeon and made our way to the square.

“Dang, that’s a *lot* of people...”

“Hm-hm...”

It’d been a while since the server-wide announcement, and many players had already congregated in the square by the time we arrived. Fortunately, the teleportation circle was accessible as long as we were within bounds, so we found a spot in the corner of the square and each pulled up our status menu.

“Let’s see... ‘The Abandoned House of Tono’? What’s that?” I squinted at the unfamiliar location. “Hey, I got something called The Abandoned House of Tono on my list. How about you guys?”

“Yeah, us too,” KingOysterMushroom replied. Evidently, the same option was available to all of us. An abandoned house was pretty self-explanatory, but *Tono*?

“Wonder what ‘Tono’ is,” I wondered aloud.

“No idea.”

“Me neither.”

Blanche and General Frost appeared to be just as lost as I was. I vaguely recalled there being a city called Tono in Iwate Prefecture—did that have anything to do with it? KingOysterMushroom seemed to have an idea, though.

“Tono is where that famous book, *Legends of Tono*, is set. It’s pretty much known as the yokai capital,” he explained. Now that he mentioned it, the book did sound somewhat familiar. Who was the author again? *Oh yeah, Kunio Yanagita.* The name flashed in my mind as I recalled a documentary about kappa folklore I’d watched on television some time ago.

“Think this is a yokai-related event then?” I asked KingOysterMushroom.

“Well... That would be my guess, yeah.”

“Hmm, what about our party? We might have to fight again...”

I tried calling Ashihana, but unfortunately the line seemed busy.

“That’s a shame. I suppose we’ll just have to go without her.” KingOysterMushroom shrugged.

“Yeah, too bad. What do you say we take a quick look at the place?”

“Good idea,” Blanche agreed.

“Yes, let’s,” General Frost seconded. This particular location didn’t seem to cost any money to teleport to either. Within seconds, we had all arrived at our destination.

“Well, they weren’t kidding about it being *abandoned*...”

We had been transported to the grounds of a decrepit Japanese-style house. The front gate behind us was shut tight, and a long, tall fence enclosed the entire property. I got the sense that we were trapped.

“Think you can fly over that wall, Fau?”

“Aye!” Fau nodded, zooming off with her arm outstretched like superman. However, she soon came to a halt.

“Aye?” she cried in puzzlement as an invisible wall repelled her. Despite her attacking it from various angles, the barrier remained impenetrable, and she was eventually forced to give up.

“Hey, it’s okay. Don’t worry about it.”

“Aye...” she mumbled despondently.

“Guess we can’t leave the premises, huh?”

“Aye.”

I did my best to console Fau, casting an eye over our surroundings. There seemed to be some sort of festival going on, with dozens of NPCs dressed in plain Japanese-style clothing milling about in the enormous yard. I also spotted a few players here and there lined up in front of stalls.

“Hm, thought there’d be more people, to be honest.” I scratched my head. There had been at least a thousand in the Eastern Town square we’d come from.

“Maybe they split us into different servers, like how they did during the village event and auction,” KingOysterMushroom suggested.

“Ah, that would make sense.”

There appeared to be a cap on how many players could fit in each “house,” i.e., server. Once a server had reached its limit, you would get sent to a different abandoned house that was a carbon copy of the first one, and on it went until all players were assigned to their respective servers. We decided to check out the one-story wooden building, which was surprisingly small compared to the vastness of the property. The Abandoned House of Tono had a pretty timeworn appearance to it—by my guess, it was less than a century old, but still most likely built during the early Showa period—and was in a completely uninhabitable state. Peering through the shattered glass windowpanes, I could see a thick layer of dust and rubble covering the floor. There didn’t seem to be any yokai inside, though, at least not according to my Yokai Searcher skill.

“Hmm, what’s it like insid— Huh?”

“What’s wrong, Silver-Haired? Why’d you stop?” KingOysterMushroom asked, confused.

“I had to. That’s as far as I can go.”

“Huh?”

“By Jove, you’re right!” General Frost exclaimed.

“There seems to be some kind of wall in place,” Blanche commented. True enough, an invisible wall of some sort prevented us from getting any closer to the house. Hmm, so there was no way out *or* in...

Although this place stuck out like a sore thumb, it appeared you needed to obtain a specific item or trigger an event to gain entry. The festival was probably the key to all this; that had to be why the other players were all lined up in front of the stalls.

“Why don’t we walk around the yard before we visit the stalls? We might find something on the way,” KingOysterMushroom suggested.

“Aw, why not check out the festival first? The house can wait.”

“I’m with General Frost on this one.”

Blanche and General Frost seemed more curious about the festival. I supposed they hadn’t had very many opportunities to experience a traditional Japanese festival yet.

“What do you think, Silver-Haired?”

“Huh? Why’re you asking me?”

“Well, you *are* our leader.”

“Whoa, wait a sec! Aren’t *you* supposed to be the leader?”

“Meh, I’m not really leadership material. Even my friends agree that my true talent lies in assisting rather than leading.” KingOysterMushroom shrugged. *Meanwhile,* I’ve *never been told that I have a talent for anything... What does that make* me*?*

“I’m a foreigner, so, you know.”

“Ditto.”

Hey, no fair! You don’t get to play the foreigner card only when it suits you!

“How about we take a vote then? All those in favor of making Silver-Haired the leader, say ‘aye.’”

“Aye!”

“Aye!”

“Hm!”

“Chirp!”

“Aye!”

“Growl!”

“Squeak!”

I nearly cried out in protest when Himka’s hand shot up, but my remaining companions soon followed suit. They even seemed to be enjoying themselves.

“I think the answer’s pretty clear, don’t you think?”

“Grr... Fine, I’ll do it!”

“Oooh.”

“Give it up for the man, the myth, the legend!”

“Hmm!”

With everyone whooping and clapping, there really was no backing out now.

“Mwa ha ha. Mark my words, I’ll make you all regret this!” I cackled evilly.

“So, what next?”

“Urk! Could’ve at least played along, KingOysterMushroom... Fine, let’s explore the grounds for a bit then.”

“Sure thing.”

“Okey dokey.”

Having already forced the bothersome leadership responsibilities on me, Blanche and General Frost didn’t argue with my decision. After searching the perimeter of the house, we made several discoveries. Apparently, the stall owners all appeared different to each player. While the other booths were manned by regular human beings, the NPCs selling their wares on straw mats seemed subject to change.

“Looks like their appearances change depending on which toys you got,” KingOysterMushroom mused. While I could clearly see a Mini Kappa, Obake, Tefu-Tefu, and Fluffaball, some of the stall owners appeared as regular human NPCs to the others. “None of us own a chipped ohajiki since we haven’t cleared the underground tomb in the south yet. Nor can we see the Fluffaball, which means the toy must be a key item.”

“Guess you need to have collected the corresponding items from each NPC to see them, huh?”

“What now, then?” General Frost asked.

“Shall we try playing some of these traditional games?” Blanche suggested.

“Yeah, good idea.”

The stalls run by the dungeon NPCs were a bit unusual; instead of shooting galleries or food, these stalls offered four types of traditional Japanese games you could play, namely menko, beigoma battling, ohajiki, and marble drop. All four games utilized the items gifted by the NPCs of the underground dungeons in each town. *Still no mention of beanbag balls, though...* The way things usually went according to game logic, you were bound to trigger some sort of event by winning against the NPCs.

“All right, let’s give it a shot, then.”

I decided to queue in front of the Tefu-Tefu’s stall, which was the closest. Immediately, my screen prompted me to pay 100 G.

“Can’t tell if that’s supposed to be cheap or not, but okay.”

Once I’d completed the transaction, the Tefu-Tefu gave me several menko cards. Each card had a Tefu-Tefu on it, striking a different pose.

“Let’s see... Uh-huh, uh-huh. Got it.”

The rules were surprisingly simple, somewhat similar to playing milk caps. Each player received five menko cards, with ten more laid out on the ground at the start of the game. The goal was to try and flip the menko on the ground by hitting them with your own. If you were successful, you won the number of points written on the card. Each player was limited to one turn at a time,

regardless of whether they succeeded or failed. If you failed, you had to leave your menko on the ground, which then became a target worth one point. After five throws, the winner was determined by adding up the number of points each person had won. This set of rules was most likely exclusive to LJO, though, and different from how the game was played traditionally.

"Menko, eh... You guys ever played before?" I asked the group.

"No, never."

"Me neither."

"Likewise."

Figured as much. I would honestly have been surprised if they had, considering this was more of a game my *grandparents* used to play.

"Well, might as well give it a shot. Pretty sure I'll get used to it the more I play it." I cracked my knuckles, getting ready to battle it out with the Tefu-Tefu. The menko cards, which were laid out in random order, came in three different sizes: the largest was worth five points, the second largest three points, and the smallest only one point. Essentially, I just had to throw my cards down next to them *really hard* and try to flip them over by force.

"Who knows? I might even awaken my inner menko whiz while playing."

"Oho! That's reassuring!" General Frost whooped.

"We're rooting for you, Silver-Haired!" Blanche beamed.

"All *right*! Behold the power of my menko! Highhh-yah!"

Flop.

"Oh, wow..." KingOysterMushroom mumbled.

"...C-C'mon, that was my first try. What did you expect?"

"Hm..."

"Aye..."

Gah, quit looking at me like that! Not you guys too, Himka and Fau! You can't expect me to be good from the get-go. I've never played this before!

“A-Anyway, it’s the Tefu-Tefu’s turn. Like they say, gotta watch and learn!”

“S-Sure, of course.”

“Chirp chirp!”

“Squeak!”

“Growl!”

Each of us held our breath as the Tefu-Tefu slowly lifted its menko. It almost looked as though the card was stuck to its wings, but I couldn’t really tell how it was carrying it. Perhaps it had suction cups like Doraemon’s fishing rod. As we watched on in silence, the Tefu-Tefu slammed its card on the ground, causing one of the one-point menko cards to flip over.

“Tiep!”

“Ooh, nice. Think I get it now.” I nodded. It seemed that it wasn’t so much about using force as it was about hitting the card at the right angle. “Second time’s the charm!”

Despite my determination, however, I only managed to flip one menko out of five throws, whereas the Tefu-Tefu succeeded on all five rounds.

“So much for that...”

There seemed to be some kind of consolation prize, though, for a window popped up in front of me.

“Huh. So you still get something regardless of the outcome of the game... Looks like you get honey if you win only one point.”

That said, the quality was pretty terrible. The prizes became more useful the more points you won, ranging from assorted potions to sweets with buffs.

“Wow, impressive. This thing would cost at least 100,000 G if you bought it from a store,” KingOysterMushroom commented, looking at one of the top prizes.

“Feel like it would be quite difficult to win, though. You’d have to flip pretty much all of the cards to get twenty points, and you saw how it went just now,” Blanche mused.

“Hmm, true.”

“Hey, mind if I go next?” General Frost piped up. Never mind prizes—what mattered right now was the outcome. At the very least, I wanted to win a game!

“Tiep,” the Tefu-Tefu squeaked, beckoning us over. Pretty neat how it was able to use its wings like hands.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Tiep.”

“A menko practice set? For 1,000 G?”

“Tiep!”

Damn, this butterfly knows how to do business! It might have looked like a cute plushie on the outside, but it was a shrewd shooting-gallery owner all along. The Tefu-Tefu urged us to take the pack, insisting we practice throwing cards with it.

“Think we’ll do a few rounds first and see how we fare.”

After several more attempts, not a single one of us had won a game. Once, I managed to win five points, but the Tefu-Tefu still beat me by a slim margin, earning six points. My monsters could only cheer from the sidelines, unable to participate in the game themselves.

“This is really hard. You say kids in Japan used to play with these? I’m impressed,” Blanche said.

“Amazing!” General Frost exclaimed. “Japan is truly something else.”

“Seriously, you guys sound like crazy tourists who came to Japan without doing their research...” I sighed in exasperation. “You don’t see me or KingOysterMushroom doing any better, do you?”

It seemed like the Tefu-Tefu had been right about buying the practice set.

“Fine, I’ll take one of those.”

“Tiep-tiep!”

“Heh heh heh. *Now* I can become a menko pro!”

“Hmm.”

“Oh, you can hold this too, eh, Himka?”

“Hm!”

“Feel free to play with the cards we’re not using.”

“Hm-hmm!”

While the others continued to duel with the Tefu-Tefu, I practiced improving my throws with the practice cards. I felt like I was starting to get the hang of it, now able to flip more cards.

“Hmm!”

“Damn it! You’re good at this, buddy.”

“Hm-hm!”

“I see. That angle, eh?”

I did a few practice rounds with my monsters too. Himka turned out to have a real knack for menko due to his humanoid form and high Dexterity stats. If only my monsters could participate—I would have left things to Himka for sure. Since that wasn’t possible, however, my second best option was to practice with him and get better at throwing cards myself. Bear Bear, on the other hand, wasn’t very good at it. Surprisingly, Drimo, whom I’d guessed would be even worse at menko than Bear Bear, turned out to be the most skilled at it after Himka. Evidently, his levelheadedness and observation skills made up for what he lacked in dexterity. Rick was, well, *Rick*, and so wasn’t even part of the equation. I was equally surprised by Fau, who carried her menko in both arms and swooped straight down as she threw it—similar to what the Tefu-Tefu did—which resulted in a pretty explosive flip. She was also skilled at adjusting the angle of her throw, making her much better than Bear Bear, who merely relied on sheer power.

“Growl growl growl!”

“Squeak...”

“G-Growl?”

“Squeak squeak.”

“Grooowl...”

Bear Bear’s shoulders drooped, having just lost to Drimo by a landslide. I had incidentally bought another set of practice cards for my monsters to play with, since they seemed to enjoy them so much.

After thirty minutes or so, I noticed KingOysterMushroom checking out a different stall.

“Find something interesting?” I asked him.

“Take a look at this,” he replied.

“Hm? Wait, what? *More* menko cards?”

“Yeah. Looks like this stall sells menko that are more powerful than the regular ones.”

A suspicious-looking man dressed in loose-fitting capri pants, a belly warmer, and sunglasses was selling menko cards at a premium at a nearby stall, ranging from 1,000 G to 10,000 G. *Dang, this guy looks just like the* tekiya *of old—the guys that came before the modern yakuza.* That said, the cards *were* noticeably larger and thicker than the ones we’d been using. What if you had to use these particular menko to win the game...?

“Aha, I’ve got it now!”

“Well, what are we waiting for? I’m not going to lose another round if I can help it!”

“Think I’ll buy them too.”

The others seemed intent on buying the more expensive menko. *Hmm, what to do...?* Wait, did that mean the practice packs had been a complete waste of money? But the cards the Tefu-Tefu was using were just regular menko. I wanted to challenge it on the same terms, and I’d nearly beat it just now. I could probably win the next round if I just practiced a bit longer... Meanwhile, KingOysterMushroom had gone off to challenge the Tefu-Tefu to a rematch with the expensive set of cards he’d acquired. The game was over before I knew

it, with KingOysterMushroom emerging victorious.

“You did it!” General Frost whooped.

“My turn!” Blanche announced, determined. For some reason, the Tefu-Tefu’s loss reminded me of my childhood. Back when I was a kid, there’d been something of a Mini 4WD craze. Sadly, I only received a small allowance then, so the most I could afford was one of the most unpopular car models on sale. I’d made minor modifications to it by chiseling off part of the body and boring holes into the chassis with a gimlet in the hopes that it would run faster, though in retrospect that’d probably done jack squat. Meanwhile, some of my well-off classmates had had their parents buy them additional parts and even help them make modifications. Naturally, their vehicles were far superior to mine—there was no way a basic model could compete with one with an expensive motor installed. *You really happy to win races with a machine your* parents *modified for you?! That’s cheating!* Still, like it or not, their toy cars were the fastest on the racetrack, and that was what mattered in the end; saying stuff like that only made me a sore loser. Seeing the Tefu-Tefu in tears had inadvertently evoked those bittersweet memories.

“You aren’t buying the expensive cards, Silver-Haired?” Blanche asked.

“Hmm, not yet. Think I’ll keep at it just a bit longer.”

If I lost, say, *twenty* times in a row, then I could reconsider. Eventually, my efforts bore fruit, and I managed to win on my ninth attempt, albeit by one point. Regardless, a win was a win. So what if my prize was a low-grade potion?

“Heck yeah! Finally!”

“Tiep-tiep.”

“Huh? You wanna shake hands?”

“Tiep!”

For some reason, the Tefu-Tefu asked to shake my hand. What was the saying again? *Yesterday’s enemy is today’s friend?* It had been a good fight, that was for certain.

“Tiep!”

“Hm? For me?”

“Tiep.”

The Tefu-Tefu had given me a small object: a toy eraser modeled after it. The item was labeled “Household Object: Home Accessory.”

“What’s that?”

“Is it a doll?”

The others peered at the object curiously. Come to think of it, I was the only one who had received it. Why was that?

“Maybe it has to do with the number of games you played?” KingOysterMushroom said thoughtfully.

“Oh yeah, good point. Silver-Haired did play more than double the number of rounds as us.”

“Or, it *could* be because he bought the practice set.”

“Hmm, can’t really tell at this point...”

We eventually solved the mystery after several experiments, when Blanche won a round without using the expensive menko cards and received the same doll as me.

“Ooph, so you can’t cheat if you want the doll, huh?” Blanche muttered.

“Win without extra help?! Impossible!” General Frost moaned in despair. Admittedly, he was the worst at menko out of the four of us. KingOysterMushroom had a slight shot at winning, but General Frost was a lost cause.

“How about it, General Frost? Wanna keep going?” I asked.

“Grr... No, I’m good. I shall make another attempt tomorrow.”

“Likewise. I’d like to check out the other stalls, so I’ll call it quits for today,” KingOysterMushroom seconded.

“Okay, if you guys say so.”

“On to the next stall!” General Frost declared.

“Hell yeah!”

“Boo.”

Five minutes later, we had moved on from the Tefu-Tefu’s menko stall to the next traditional game: marble drop with the obake. For this game, players had to drop marbles from a height of approximately one meter onto a dartboard-like target drawn on the ground. Whoever scored higher won, although you could also force your opponent’s marble out of the ring with yours, which made the outcome unpredictable until the very end. Unlike menko, my monsters could also participate in this game, and they were currently playing with the practice marbles I’d purchased. Rick, who had sat out the previous game, was able to participate this time, though he needed Bear Bear to hold him up.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Growl?”

“Chirp!”

“Growl growl.”

Rick gave Bear Bear precise instructions, having them adjust his position down to the nearest millimeter before dropping his marble. Not only did he have a knack for it, but he was also able to knock the obake’s marble out of the ring with surprising force. It seemed that he was using his tiny paws to put a backspin on the marble before dropping it, a move made possible by his tiny figure.

That said, this game still had a pretty strong element of chance to it. After just four rounds I was able to beat the obake. As with the Tefu-Tefu, I received another toy eraser, this time in the shape of an obake. Incidentally, KingOysterMushroom was the only other person to win the game without the help of cheat items. Blanche and General Frost had to rely on expensive modified marbles to defeat the obake, deciding to give up on the toy eraser for the time being.

“Since we’re only here to scout out the place today, should I switch to using the cheat items as well?” I turned to the group for advice.

“No, I think it’d be better if you tried winning by yourself,”

KingOysterMushroom replied. “It’s best if we have at least one person win without cheat items, for verification purposes.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. It would take way too long for the rest of us to win unaided, plus you’re the only one who can actually see all of the NPCs. That makes you the best person for this role.”

“Okay. I’ll keep at it and try to win at all four stalls then.”

“Thanks, we appreciate it.”

That said, tomorrow was the day the Air Elemental Gate became accessible. I meant to arrive there by midnight, which meant I could only spend about three more hours at The Abandoned House of Tono.

“Hope I can make it in time...”

After the obake’s stall, it was time for stall number three.

“Looks like we got ohajiki next.”

“Fluff.”

The Fluffaball’s stall offered ohajiki, a game similar to curling, the classic Winter Olympic sport. Each player had to flick their ohajiki towards the target from their designated spots to win points. If your ohajiki failed to reach the target, it would be removed from the game. Knocking your opponent’s ohajiki out of bounds seemed to be the key to winning. This turned out to be more difficult than I thought. Flicking the ohajiki was a delicate business, and if I wasn’t careful, it would go flying in a completely unexpected direction. Fortunately, I was able to win in the eighth round due to the Fluffaball making a huge blunder.

“Fluff-fluff!”

“Yeah, good game,” I said, shaking the Fluffaball’s hand. “Oh, another toy eraser? Thanks.”

“Fluff!” The Fluffaball beamed. As expected, the NPCs seemed far more cheerful when we won fair and square.

“That just leaves us with the beigoma stall.”

Since the other three couldn’t participate in the Fluffaball’s game, they had gone ahead to the Mini Kappa’s stall first. I could see them battling with the Kappa furiously as I approached them.

“How’s it going?”

“This is the most difficult game so far,” General Frost huffed.

“We can’t win if we don’t spin it properly, even with the help of a modified beigoma,” Blanche sighed.

For the beigoma match, the prizes appeared to change depending on how far you were able to knock your opponent’s spinning top out of the ring. Unfortunately, no one had been able to get the hang of the first step so far.

“We got this guide on how to wrap the string around the top, but can’t say it’s been much help,” KingOysterMushroom said, showing me a coarse sheet of paper made of straw with instructions written on it. *Wow, they’re really into the whole retro thing.*

“‘Otokomaki’ and ‘onnamaki,’ eh?” I read aloud the wrapping techniques listed on the sheet, two different styles of winding the cord with oddly gendered connotations.

“To tell the truth, I was pretty confident about this one, but I guess I was wrong,” Blanche said sheepishly.

“Really? Have you played with beigoma before, Blanche?”

“Not exactly, but I read about it in one of my favorite manga.”

Apparently, she was referring to the manga about a rascally cop that was serialized in a famous shonen manga magazine for forty years, spanning over a hundred volumes in total. Blanche had first learned about it when she came to Japan and fallen in love, immediately devouring the whole series.

“I remember Ryotsu calling this one a di—”

“Whoooa, okay, stop *right* there! Don’t finish that word, please! Just call it otokomaki!”

“He also called the other one a pu—”

“Shh, that’s *also* a taboo word! You can’t go around saying stuff like that out loud! Please, *please* just call it onnamaki!”

“Oh. Okay.”

Phew. That was close.

“Hmm, if only I had a shooter...” KingOysterMushroom muttered as he struggled with the giant beigoma. From the sound of it, he might have been a Beyblader when he was a kid. This time, General Frost was the first to emerge victorious, owing to his dwarven high Dexterity stats. Evidently, your character’s innate abilities made up for what you lacked in skill. I hadn’t realized that until now, although it hardly made a difference in my case since my stats were pretty low across the board.

After ten tries and fifteen minutes of intense practice...

“All *right*!”

“Kapa!”

I had evidently been blessed with beginner’s luck, for despite not succeeding even once with the practice beigoma, I miraculously managed to spin my top on the first try. No, it wasn’t sheer luck; practicing with my monsters had paid off. My beigoma hit the Mini Kappa’s and knocked it clean out of the ring, resulting in a sweet victory.

“Phew. Four out of four, baby!”

My prize was nothing special since I hadn’t spent any money, but I couldn’t care less about that. Besides, I’d gotten all four toy erasers.

“Well, that’s all four stalls down...”

“Any changes?” KingOysterMushroom inquired.

“Hmm...”

I hadn’t heard any announcements, nor did I see any visible changes. Perhaps winning at the stalls had nothing to do with the house. However, my

companions seemed to have noticed something, as they suddenly became desperate to get my attention.

“Squeak squeak!”

“Growl!”

“Hm-hmm!”

At first, I thought their game had merely grown heated—they’d been playing with the practice toys I’d got for them just moments ago—but that wasn’t the case. All of them were facing the same direction, pointing at something in the distance.

“Chirp chirp!”

“Ayeee!”

“Whoa! Okay okay, just stop pulling!” I yowled at Fau and Rick, who were tugging at my ears incessantly. If this were in the real world, my ears would probably have popped right off by now, and I’d be screaming, “Stop it, sis, it hurts!” like that little boy Mina Tominaga voiced. “Seriously, what’s over there?”

I turned towards the direction my companions had been pointing and finally realized what they were trying to show me. A young girl with a chin-length bob and bangs dressed in a red kimono stood in front of the abandoned house. She appeared to be around six to eight years old, and was roughly the same height as Olto. Strangely enough I felt no fear, and her smile suggested benevolence more than anything.



“Hmm. That a Zashiki-Warashi?”

She *had* to be one—the girl was the spitting image of what I expected a Zashiki-Warashi to look like.

“Right, I get it now. It *is* Tono, after all.” KingOysterMushroom nodded. Tono appeared to be a city rich in Zashiki-Warashi lore. Considering this place was called The Abandoned House of Tono, an event related to it was pretty much an inevitability.

“So that’s a Zashiki-Warashi,” Blanche wondered aloud.

“‘Zashiki-Warashi?’ What’s that?” General Frost echoed.

“Hey!” I yelled after the girl, who had entered the garden surrounding the house before I could get any closer. After taking a few steps, she turned around, beckoning towards us.

“You want us to follow you?”

“Hurry, before she disappears!” Blanche urged. The Zashiki-Warashi picked up the pace and continued walking away. *Crap, we might lose sight of her if we don’t hurry!* We ran after her, determined not to get left behind.

“Hey, we’re in!” KingOysterMushroom commented.

“Indeed we are!” General Frost exclaimed. Meeting the Zashiki-Warashi appeared to be the requirement for entering the house, although I wasn’t sure what exactly had triggered her appearance. We slid the doorframe open, the panels having rotted away a long time ago, and stepped inside the entryway. Instantly, the others vanished, and I was left alone with my monsters.

“Huh? Where’d everyone go?”

“Hm!”

“No, I know *you’re* still here...”

Apparently we had been separated, rather than being allowed entry as a party.

“What now...? Should we turn back?”

That said, we had little to worry about as long as fighting wasn’t involved; it

would be far worse if the event ended as a result of us turning back.

“Okay, guess we’ll keep going for now,” I decided, eying the girl, who was waiting for us in front of the door a few steps away. “Um, should we take off our shoes?”

“Hm?”

“Growl?”

Hey, you can’t just enter someone’s house witho— I almost blurted out before remembering that monsters *had* no shoes to take off. As a matter of fact, the Zashiki-Warashi was still wearing her wooden sandals. The girl continued to stare at us, smiling all the while.

“Er, hi, I guess?”

“Ya,” the girl replied sweetly, giving a little bow. As if on cue, an announcement echoed overhead.

“*The Zashiki-Warashi would like a toy.*”

The girl stretched out her palms, gazing at me hopefully. *Huh? A toy? Where am I supposed to find...? Wait a second.* I *did* have toys.

“So those items were all for you? They’re all broken, though. You okay with that?”

I opened my inventory, only to find that my items had transformed.

“Hey, they’ve changed.”

My cracked marble had turned into a Pretty Marble, my flattened beigoma into a Sturdy Beigoma, my torn menko card into a Cool Menko Card, and my chipped ohajiki into a Cute Ohajiki. My ripped beanbag ball had also turned into an item called a Beautiful Beanbag Ball.

“Huh, didn’t even notice that was happening. Guess I’ll just give her one of these then.”

The beanbag ball felt like the most special item out of all of them, and they were sort of considered a classic toy for girls. I removed the item from my inventory and handed it to her; the Zashiki-Warashi accepted it with a smile.

However, once she had tucked it inside her kimono, she stretched her palms out again as if asking for more toys.

“You want more?”

“Ya.” The girl nodded in reply.

“...Okay, you can have this one too.”

I repeated the exchange four more times and ended up giving her all of the toys I had.

“Ya!”

“You’re giving this to me?”

“Ya!” the Zashiki-Warashi nodded, handing me an old key. After assessing it, I learned that the item was called the Mayoiga Key. I recalled what KingOysterMushroom had told me earlier. Mayoiga were abandoned houses that bestowed riches upon those who were selfless, and punished the wicked and greedy, similar to the fables of The Tongue-Cut Sparrow or Hanasaka Jiisan, aka The Old Man Who Made the Dead Trees Blossom.

“This key... It’s gotta be for this door, right? So...you want me to open it?”

“Ya!”

I inserted the Mayoiga Key into the lock of the wooden double door, and the door opened to reveal a long corridor. Both sides of the hall were lined with traditional sliding doors, lending it an eerie and mysterious air.

“It’s a vibe, all right.”

I was pretty sure I’d seen a similar dungeon in a Japanese-style RPG once.

“Ya-a-ah!”

“Hey, wait up!”

While I was busy taking in the surreal atmosphere, the Zashiki-Warashi took off without warning, disappearing around a corner. As she popped her head back out, I was hit with yet another announcement.

“*The Zashiki-Warashi would like to play with you.*”

“Ya!”

Ah. It seemed like toys alone weren’t enough to satisfy her.

“Well, you heard her, guys. Let’s go! But remember, we’re bailing the instant things start looking dangerous, okay?”

“Aye!”

“Chirp chirp!”

Given that Mayoiga rewarded the selfless and punished the wicked, it was entirely possible something bad would happen. I wasn’t sure what counted as greedy in a Mayoiga’s view, but I hardly considered myself an unselfish person. The minute we stepped foot in the corridor, the Zashiki-Warashi ran off again. Hearing her giggle in such a carefree manner made me all warm and fuzzy inside; surely there couldn’t be any traps or monsters where she was headed...? That was probably what the devs wanted us to think, though. I had to be careful, no matter how safe it seemed.

A strange sight awaited us once we reached the corner the Zashiki-Warashi had turned around. While it still pretty much resembled a Japanese-style house, the level of intricacy was beyond comprehension. *What is this, one of Escher’s works? An adventure playground?* I gaped in wonder. Slowly, I realized the structure was, in fact, a colossal, three-dimensional maze filled with multiple ascending and descending staircases and countless ladders. I could also see a path stretched across the wellhole.

“Hello? You there, Zashiki-Warashi?” I called out, only to be greeted with silence. There was no way around it—we would have to enter the maze if we wanted to find her.

“Aight, time to search for the Zashiki-Warashi! You guys ready?”

“Squeak!”

“Growl!”

Now then, I steeled myself, making my way through the intricate maze. The longer I searched, the clearer it became to me what was happening.

“The game’s already started—this *is* the game.”

It was either tag or hide-and-seek: the latter seemed more likely. After fifteen minutes or so, it suddenly dawned on me that the Mayoiga's corridor had been split into two paths. If rounding the corner led to this giant maze, where did the straight path lead to? If this was a game of hide-and-seek, the Zashiki-Warashi would probably stay put wherever she was, but if it was a game of tag, she had to be on the run still. That didn't necessarily mean she was *inside* this maze, though. While the chances seemed slim, I figured it wouldn't hurt to check the other passage as well.

"Drimo, Bear Bear! Follow me!"

I returned the way we had come from with Drimo and Bear Bear in tow, as the pair proved less useful than the others in the search. The corridor lined with sliding doors felt as peculiar as ever.

"Wonder if these will open... Guess not. How about that side, Drimo?"

"Squeak."

"Are they just acting as walls, then? Let's check them all, though, just in case."

"Squeak!"

I'd expected there'd be one secret door that would open, but my assumption was wildly incorrect, as none of them so much as budged. Before long, we had arrived at the door at the end of the hall.

"Wonder what's on the other side? I'm counting on you, Bear Bear, Drimo."

"Growl!"

"Squeak squeak!"

I slid the door open cautiously, my heart pounding at the thought of all the possible dangers that might lie within. However, there was nothing on the other side.

"Hmm. Looks like an ordinary room."

The door revealed a windowless tatami room the size of a small bedroom, the only source of light being four paper lamps, one in each corner. A single desk stood in the center of the room with some items upon it.

“What are these?”

Upon reaching the desk, a window popped up before me.

“*Would you like to take one of the items in this room?*”

Oh yeah, right. Mayoiga were supposed to bestow riches upon you. I started by assessing the items on the desk from right to left. The first item on the far right was a green strip of cloth called a Kappa’s Belt of Might.

“Pretty good stats.”

The accessory granted +10 to your Strength and enhanced your magic. While it didn’t do much in terms of defense, it provided a significant boost to your overall firepower.

“And this one’s a Demonic Ghost Bandage.”

This was another accessory that granted +10 to your Intelligence and enhanced your stealth skills. The item next to it was a Satori Fur Charm, an unremarkable item resembling a fur key chain that nevertheless granted +10 to your Sanity and sped up your incantation speed. The final item on the far left was a Phosphorescent Cocoon, a silk cocoon ball trinket that granted +10 to your Endurance and increased your HP recovery rate.

“Hmm, this is tough.”

Personally, I didn’t find the Kappa’s Belt of Might appealing, but everything else was a yes in my book.

“But if my strength increases, I’ll be able to wear heavier equipment. Maybe it’s not such a bad idea after all. Not to mention it enhances your magic...”

While I mulled over my choices, my companions roamed around freely, studying the various objects in the room.

“Wait, what’d that message say again...? Right, it said I could take one of the items in this *room*.”

Did that mean the scrolls hanging on the wall were up for grabs too? Given that I wasn’t exactly strapped for cash, my top choice was one of these accessories. What were the other items like, though? Could they be removed from the room? I assessed the Japanese-style paintings on the wall and

discovered that they, too, were free for the taking. Each scroll depicted a monstrous creature, such as a kappa or ghost.

“Are they not regular paintings then?”

The painting of the kappa was named “The Forbidden Kappa Hanging Scroll.” One sentence, in particular, stood out to me:

Name: The Forbidden Kappa Hanging Scroll

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 10★

Effect: Can’t be sold or given away. If you take this painting to a certain location...

“Take it to a certain location...then what?”

The rest was a mystery, but it was now obvious that these weren’t ordinary scrolls. Judging by its name, I suspected you could encounter a kappa by bringing it to its designated location. I doubted it would work unless you were an Onmyoji, though. There were four hanging scrolls altogether, each depicting a kappa, a demonic ghost, a satori, and a cocoon, respectively.

“Pretty creepy stuff...especially this one of the demonic ghost. I’d be terrified of incurring its wrath if I saw it in real life.”

Just then, a thought occurred to me.

“Hmm... Can I *really* take these, though?”

I mean, this was a Mayoiga, a house said to punish the avaricious. There had to be a catch. All of a sudden, I was riddled with doubts.

“Never mind, I’ll ignore them for the time being.” I made up my mind. Now that I thought about it, forfeiting the Zashiki-Warashi’s game to hunt for treasure was clearly a selfish thing to do. “Come on, let’s keep looking.”

Besides, I hadn’t even decided which item I wanted yet. *Might as well think about it while I look for the girl.*

“Well, she’s definitely not in this room. Time to head back!”

“Growl!”

“Squeak!”

The three of us left the room and returned to the maze.

“She must be in here somewhere,” I muttered. *Still no sign of the Zashiki-Warashi...* Where could she be?

“Chirp?”

“Aye?”

Fau and Rick, aka the pocket-sized duo, were focusing their efforts on searching narrow spaces. The two of them squeezed their heads into gaps far too small for the Zashiki-Warashi to hide in, getting dust all over their faces when they emerged.

“Hm?”

Meanwhile, Himka was trying to see whether there were any hidden passages, rapping his knuckles on various surfaces and pressing his ear against them to check for unexpected hollow sounds. So far, he hadn’t had any luck.

“Growl growl?”

“Squeak squeak?”

Bear Bear and Drimo were taking a very rudimentary approach, checking behind objects that seemed suspect as they went. Somehow, I doubted they would find the Zashiki-Warashi that way.

“Question is, what should *I* do?”

While my companions continued their search, I decided to try my hand at playing detective. The fact that we hadn’t found her yet meant that she was not only well hidden, but also tucked away somewhere you wouldn’t think to search under normal circumstances.

“Somewhere you wouldn’t normally think of... Well, they do say things are best hidden in plain sight.”

There weren’t any places to hide underneath, though... *No, hang on. Of course.*

“If not below, it must be to the side!”

The door next to me had been left ajar, most likely by the Zashiki-Warashi herself. Why hadn’t we thought to search behind it?

“Gotcha!” I exclaimed, flinging the door open.

“Ya?”

No way! She was here all this time?! I stared in disbelief as my eyes met with the girl sitting seiza-style in the small space behind the door.

“Aha! Found ya!”

“Ya-ya-ah!”

The Zashiki-Warashi beamed as she leaped to her feet. Man, I hadn’t actually expected to find her there. *Talk about hiding right under our noses.*

“Chirp chirp!”

“Aye!”

Rick and Fau jumped onto my shoulders, applauding me from both sides, while the others looked disappointed that I’d beaten them to it. Once again, an announcement echoed throughout the room.

“*You have received permission to remove an item from this house. You may leave the Mayoiga with one item and one item only.*”

Wait a minute—that meant we’d only *now* received permission to take the items. *Phew.* Thank goodness I hadn’t tried to take anything from the room earlier; it *had* been a trap after all. I hated to think what might’ve happened if I’d left the house without finding the girl. *Guess that’s it for the event, then...*

“Ya!”

“Huh? What’s up?”

“*The Zashiki-Warashi would like to play with you a little longer. What would you like to do?*”

“What?”

To my utter surprise, the event wasn’t over yet. A window popped up before

my eyes, presenting me with the following three options: "*Take an item and leave the house,*" "*Leave the house without taking an item,*" and "*Continue playing with the Zashiki-Warashi.*" It seemed like leaving was a valid option, but...

"Ya...?" The Zashiki-Warashi gave me a pleading look. How could I possibly say no to those wide, innocent puppy-dog eyes? You'd need to have nerves of steel to turn down a request from such a cute, human-looking girl.

"Eh, I guess I can spare a few minutes," I said, selecting option number three.

"*You may now resume your game of hide-and-seek.*"

Instantly, our party was transported to the entrance of the giant maze. The door the Zashiki-Warashi had hidden behind earlier was now closed, and a digital display on it had begun counting down from ten. The moment the number "0" flashed across the screen, I heard a "Ya-ya-yah!" from the other side. That seemed to be our cue. When I opened the door, the girl was nowhere to be seen. We seemed to have gotten the hang of things after our first game, though; within ten minutes, Rick had found the Zashiki-Warashi hiding behind a chest of drawers.

"Chirp chirp!"

"Ya-ya."

Both Rick and the girl were squealing together in delight. *Glad you guys enjoyed themselves. Now we can get g—*

"*The Zashiki-Warashi would like to play with you a little longer. What would you like to do?*"

"What? Seriously...?" I stared in disbelief at the screen in front of me. Once again, the Zashiki-Warashi gazed into my eyes like a lost puppy. *Damn you, devs! What're you tryna do—hold me hostage forever?! I refuse to fall for any more of your tricks! I won't do it, I—*

"*You may now resume your game of hide-and-seek.*"

"Ya!"

Predictably, we were transported back to the maze, and the countdown

began again. *Who am I kidding?* As if I could say no to her.

Approximately forty minutes later, we had completed three rounds of hide-and-seek and were about to begin our fourth game when a new announcement stopped me in my tracks.

"*The Greedy Old Man and the Insatiable Old Woman have awakened from their slumber. Please defeat them before they capture the Zashiki-Warashi, or find the Zashiki-Warashi before they do.*"

"The what now?"

The greedy old man and the insatiable old woman? Who were they? I paused, surveying my surroundings. Just then, I spotted an old man emerge from the shadows a few meters away from us. The man wore a headscarf and was dressed in a jinbei and a padded sleeveless kimono jacket, much like the old men depicted in Japanese fairy tales. However, that was where the semblance ended, for his face looked nothing like a kindly grandfather's. To begin with, he had no eyes—only two empty sockets that were dark as tree hollows—and his cheeks were sunken, giving his face a haggard look. From his half-open mouth, I caught a glimpse of sharp, beastly fangs, and his darkened skin was utterly withered, like a well that had dried up many years ago. "Mummy" was the first word that popped into my head when I saw him. I couldn't think of a better way to describe this monstrous creature, which currently had its eyes fixated on us.

"Is that the Greedy Old Man...?"

What was his backstory? I wondered. Had sheer greed twisted his mind and body to the point it had reduced him to a monster? One thing was certain, though: there was no way I could let that thing anywhere near the Zashiki-Warashi.

"Either we kill that thing or find out where the Zashiki-Warashi's hiding... Can't strategize unless we know how strong that thing is, though. Places, everyone! Get ready for a preemptive attack!"

Since the old man's gaze was locked on us, it wasn't as if we could make a break for it either. Given the above, striking first seemed like the best course of action.

“Whoops, almost forgot. Gotta choose someone for my extra party slot.”

Hmm, who to summon, though?

“Ah, of course. Come forth, Sakura!”

“...!”

Today was Tree Day, and I had planned on visiting the Lakeside Sequoia Dryad’s Altar once we were done here. I had intended to add Sakura to my party then, but it was just as well that I did it now.

“Himka, you’re our tank! Drimo, Bear Bear, go all out and give it to him good! Rick and Fau, you two distract him as much as possible! Sakura, support everyone with magic from the rear!”

“RRAAAUUUGGHHH!”

“Eek! Yikes!”

I could see the Greedy Old Man approaching us fast, having sensed we were gearing up to launch an attack on him. The man glared at us with his empty eye sockets, screeching in a voice that made my skin crawl.

“I thought this was supposed to be a chill game of hide-and-seek! Since when did this turn into a horror game?! Curse you, devs!”

“Rraaaieeeuugh!”

“Hm!”

Whoa! Unlike me, Himka seemed unfazed as he leaped right to the forefront. *Attaboy!* Bear Bear and Drimo had also gotten into a fighting stance, ready to strike at a moment’s notice. *Hold the bastard down, Himka, so the other two can give it to him good!* Unfortunately, my excitement was short-lived, for the old man turned out to be far more powerful than I’d thought.

“Raurrr!”

“Hmm?!”

“Himka!”

To my great dismay, Himka was sent flying with a single blow. Like Olto, Himka wasn’t much good at fighting, but he was a relatively adept defender,

using his Malletworking skills to stop and deflect his opponents' attacks. I never expected him to be bested so easily.

"Squeak squeak!"

"Growl growl!"

Thanks to Himka taking one for the team, however, Drimo and Bear Bear now had an opportunity to attack. Without missing a beat, the pair launched an assault on the old man. Unfortunately...

"What the hell?! How is this dude so *tough*?!"

Despite Drimo and Bear Bear's concentrated efforts, less than half of our damage went through. How were we supposed to win this fight? Was I just way out of my depth? If that were the case, though, Himka ought to have sustained far more damage. Despite the force with which he'd been flung across the room, he was no more hurt than if he'd been attacked by a low-level enemy monster. Perhaps the Greedy Old Man merely had high health to prevent players from defeating it too easily. It also specialized in obstructionist tactics, as demonstrated on Himka. Frankly, it seemed impossible to defeat. That said, we had managed to send it flying, which seemed like the key to getting the better of it. My guess was that we were meant to attack the creature and slow it down while simultaneously searching for the Zashiki-Warashi.

"Himka, Drimo, Bear Bear! Hold this guy back and make sure he doesn't get away!"

"Hm!"

"Squeak!"

"Growl!"

The three saluted in reply, eyes flashing with determination.

"The rest of you follow me! Rick, Fau, I'm gonna need your help especially in looking for the Zashiki-Warashi!"

"Chirp!"

"Aye!"

The little ones saluted as well before taking off in opposite directions. Considering their mobility, it was best to let them do as they pleased.

“Let’s go, Sakura.”

“...!”

Together, Sakura and I searched as many places as we could possibly think of. However, we soon came to a halt.

“Eee hee hee hee!”

“Yikes. This one’s just as creepy as the other one.”

Another mummyesque monster—this one was dressed like a woman and sported white hair—had emerged from the other side of the passage. There was no mistaking it: that had to be the Insatiable Old Woman.

“Sakura!”

“...!”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Sakura stepped in front of me and raised her buckler while I prepared to hurl magic at the beast from behind. The Greedy Old Man was a pro at deflecting attacks—how would the old woman fare?

“Raieee!”

“...!”

I knew it! The old woman was just as powerful as the old man! Sakura staggered backwards from the force of the blow, losing her balance.

“Aqua Ball!”

“Graurgh!”

Although my water magic did little to reduce the old woman’s HP, it managed to send her hurtling back, and she landed on her butt a few feet away. Both she and the old man were essentially the same in terms of build and weaknesses.

“Sakura! Detain her so we can buy the others some time!”

“...!”

As much as I felt guilty for depending on her, it was far too risky for me to

step forward. Given the circumstances, it was best to leave this one to Sakura.

Roughly five minutes had passed since we first engaged the Insatiable Old Woman. Though our MP was rapidly depleting, we had done a fairly good job at detaining the monster so far, with Sakura serving as tank and me acting as attacker and healer. I prayed Fau and Rick would find the Zashiki-Warashi quickly while the old man and woman were still distracted. Just then, the old woman abruptly came to a standstill.

“Rrr...”

“Wh-What’s happeni—”

“Screeee!”

“Eek!”

What the hell, granny?! I flinched at the sudden earsplitting shriek. The old woman didn’t seem to be looking at us, though. Instead, her gaze was fixed on something—or some*one*—behind us.

“Ya?”

“Graieeehh!”

“Guh!”

“...!”

“Ya-ya!”

Had we spent too much time on our search? To my utter dismay, the Zashiki-Warashi had poked her head out from around the corner and was eyeing us curiously. The old woman immediately shoved Sakura and me out of the way and darted after the Zashiki-Warashi, whose smile remained as cheerful as ever. Was she not scared?

“A-After them, Sakura! We gotta stop the old woman and get to the Zashiki-Warashi first!”

“...!”

We set off in hot pursuit of the pair, hurling magic attacks after the old

woman every now and then. Our attempts at slowing her down failed miserably, for she got to her feet within seconds and resumed the chase. Worse still, the Zashiki-Warashi kept stopping, waiting patiently for her to get back up each time.

"Ya?"

Judging from her complete lack of fear, perhaps this was all just a fun game to her. In the midst of our heated chase, I spotted something approaching us from ahead which made me groan involuntarily.

"God damn it!"

The Greedy Old Man was headed straight towards us, followed closely by Drimo and the rest of the team. Evidently, they had failed to detain the old man too. The elderly duo had blocked off both sides of the narrow passage, boxing the Zashiki-Warashi in completely. Although there was an open-air space above us, the path was too narrow, and there didn't appear to be any stairs that allowed you to escape to the upper levels. As agile as she was, I didn't see how the Zashiki-Warashi could wriggle out of this situation.

"Ya?"

"Raurrr."

"Graurgh."

The Zashiki-Warashi smiled as she looked from left to right, realizing she was cornered. *Crap! If we don't do something, she's doomed!* I quickly began chanting a spell, but the old man and woman were quicker to act. *I won't make it! This is it!*

"Aye aye!"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Ya?"

Just when I'd all but given up saving the Zashiki-Warashi, Fau and Rick came plummeting towards us. They appeared to have been on the upper floors and fallen through the atrium. The two clutched the Zashiki-Warashi tightly before hitting the ground, and the girl was suddenly bathed in a blinding light.

“Ya!”

“*Graieee...*”

“*Screee...*”

The Insatiable Old Woman and the Greedy Old Man, who had been caught in the blast of light, crumbled to the floor. Within seconds, both monsters had vanished without a trace.

Ding-dong.

“*The Zashiki-Warashi appears to be satisfied.*”

“Ya-ya.”

The little girl beamed, throwing her hands up into the air to demonstrate her joy.

“Cool... Glad to hear that...”

Although the last few moments had been an emotional roller coaster, it had all worked out in the end. *Phew.*

“Rick, Fau. Good job back there. Thanks for saving us.”

“Chirp!”

“Aye!”

“Ya!”

Er, why do you *look so smug?* I shook my head at the Zashiki-Warashi. A split second later, she vanished as well, waving cheerfully until the very end. The event had to be over for good this time—I was *so* ready for this to be over!

“*Please take an item and exit the house.*”

“Thank goodness it’s over for real. I can finally grab an item now.”

I still hadn’t decided what I wanted, though; it had been impossible to think properly with all that chasing and fighting. I returned to the room with the items, pondering my options along the way. The minute I entered, I noticed a change in the room.

“Pretty sure that wasn’t there before.”

A new painting had joined the others on the wall—one of a Zashiki-Warashi. I surveyed my surroundings to see whether there were any other changes, but that seemed to be the only addition.

“The other four paintings have corresponding accessories, but I don’t see one for the Zashiki-Warashi.”

The paintings of the demonic ghost and kappa were kind of disturbing, and I didn’t really want them that badly. If anything, they creeped me out. The Zashiki-Warashi scroll, on the other hand, was extremely sweet and charming, and my eyes were naturally drawn to it. Moreover, it hadn’t been there earlier, which meant it had to be a rare item only available to those who had completed the event. I figured it was a reward for playing so many rounds of hide-and-seek with her.

Name: The Zashiki-Warashi’s Token of Thanks

Rarity: 1 / Quality: 10★

Effect: Can’t be sold or given away. Those in possession of this painting will be blessed with good fortune.

I noticed that the flavor text was different from the kappa’s scroll. Had Olto’s Luck skill played a part in it?

“Hmm... Okay, I’ll take it!”

As curious as I was about the stat-boosting accessories, fighting wasn’t a huge part of my routine, although I definitely would have gone for an item that improved my Dexterity stats and productivity. Having made up my mind, I removed the scroll from the wall and stored it in my inventory.

“All right. Is that it for the event?” I paused, waiting for an announcement or notification to let me know the event was over, but there were none.

“...Huh?”

To my surprise, I could pick up the other accessories too. Did that mean I could take them with me?

“They did say *one* item, though... Nah, I’m good.”

Best not to tempt fate, I decided, retracing my steps to the entrance. As the lore went, the greedy and wicked were punished for their deeds. The second I stepped outside the house, a window popped up, telling me I had received my item from the Mayoiga. It looked like I had made the right choice.

“Hey, you’re back!” KingOysterMushroom waved at me. Apparently, I was the last to leave the house. After exchanging info with the rest of the group, I learned that each player had encountered a different item. While the accessories had been available to everyone, the hanging scrolls differed depending on which toy they had given the Zashiki-Warashi. In addition, the toys for the Zashiki-Warashi only transformed if you had won their corresponding toy erasers at the retro game stalls. Only General Frost, who had won against the Mini Kappa by his own means, had his beigoma repaired, which he had then given to the Zashiki-Warashi.

However, it seemed like he hadn’t been asked to go another round at hide-and-seek; the only options he’d been given were to either leave the house with an item or without one. We scratched our heads, unable to figure out why that was the case. Was the beanbag ball the key? Did you need to collect all four toy erasers? Or was it something else entirely?

“Sorry. You guys must’ve been waiting ages then,” I apologized.

“No, don’t be,” KingOysterMushroom dismissed my apology. “Besides, we were able to visit the other stalls in the meantime and run a few experiments.”

“So, what did you get?” Blanche asked.

“Ooh, I’d like to know that too!” General Frost agreed.

“Here. I got this.”

Unlike me, the others had opted for the accessories. Seeing them suddenly made me envious. No, the Zashiki-Warashi painting *had* to be a hard-to-obtain item—I’d definitely made the right choice, I tried to convince myself. It wouldn’t do to start dwelling on things.

“Whoa, a painting?”

“B-Bold choice. I admire you for that.”

“Ah, I get it now. Being able to go straight for an item like this—that’s what makes you so special.”

The others nodded in agreement, seemingly impressed. I *had* spent a fair amount of time agonizing over my choice, though. Besides, I was sure anyone in my shoes would have chosen the scroll too, given that it was a rare item.

“Well, guess I’ll hang on to it until I figure out how to use it...”

For now, I had to get a move on, as I was quickly running out of time. Moreover, I had to return to the Town of Beginnings first before I could head to the Air Elemental Gate.

“Hmm, what should I do?”

We were back at the farm after returning from The Abandoned House of Tono. Initially, I had planned on going to the Air Elemental Gate with KingOysterMushroom and company, but they apologized, saying they’d already made plans to go with other people. I decided to hit up a few of my friends later, as it seemed a shame to use an air crystal on myself alone. Unfortunately, I was unable to hang the Zashiki-Warashi painting in my barn. Apparently, decorative items were where simple homes drew the line; if I wanted to hang things on the walls, I would need an upgrade.

“...?”

“Whoops, sorry. We’ll get going now,” I apologized to Sakura, who was tugging on my robe. She seemed impatient to visit the Dryad’s altar, and we had to hurry before the date changed. Once it was past midnight, we wouldn’t be able to see her again for a whole week.

“Aight. Ready to pay her a visit?”

“...♪” Sakura nodded happily.

Was it that special an occasion? I wondered, smiling at the rare photo I’d just taken of Sakura skipping. The iron door under the bridge was as unimposing as ever, although there was a noticeable increase in the number of players visiting

the altar, with quite a few people passing us on the way. Still, it wasn't bad enough that we had to queue under the bridge; even I probably wouldn't bother coming here every single week if it weren't for Sakura.

"Welcome, my child. How good of you to come and visit me." The Lakeside Sequoia Dryad smiled beatifically.

"Hi again."

"...♪"

"I'm glad to see you have been well. Please keep up the good work and ensure she continues to bloom and grow."

As always, there was no sign of a special event happening, and we simply had our usual exchange where the Lakeside Sequoia Dryad petted Sakura on the head. Sakura seemed happy, though, and that was all that really mattered. After showering her with affection for several minutes, the Dryad vanished once more.

"Happy, Sakura?"

"...♪" She nodded, smiling shyly. That smile alone made the trip to the altar worthwhile.

On the way back up, I received a call from Amelia and Ursula. To my surprise, they were the first to arrive at the Air Elemental Gate and wanted to know if I felt like joining their party. At first, I assumed they were inviting me in exchange for my air crystal, but evidently they had already secured one and didn't mind me tagging along for free.

"But that's not fair to you guys," I protested.

"Actually, we were hoping you'd do us a favor," Ursula said.

"Oh? What kind of favor?"

"Please give me and Amelia permission to enter your farm!"

Permission? We were friends, so they already had free access to my farm. Besides, I didn't remember changing my settings anytime lately. Sensing my confusion, Ursula explained that during the next major update, the rules concerning physical contact would become much stricter, regardless of whether

you were friends or not.

“Ohhh. That sorta rings a bell.”

The details of the update had been posted on LJO’s official website a while ago, but I’d merely skimmed through them, thinking it wouldn’t affect me that much. I didn’t have many opportunities to pet other Tamers’ monsters anyway, although I did think fleetingly of Amelia and Ashihana. I’d figured there’d just be a time limit on how long you could touch another player’s monsters for, but the reality turned out to be more restrictive.

Amelia began rattling off the changes, which went something like this: not only would you need permission every time you wanted to touch a friend’s tamed monster, but you couldn’t enter their farm or home either unless you had permission. Moreover, you could only pet their monsters for a limited time; if you went overboard, your favorability score with that monster would go down. If your favorability score with someone else’s monster plummeted, you would never be able to touch them again. There were also many other new rules, including restrictions on how you could touch humanoid monsters. Apparently, this was all due to a number of Tamers who were found to be having excessive physical contact with monsters of the opposite gender. *Wait a minute...* They weren’t referring to *me*, were they? As it turned out, there were far worse people out there.

“You know, like Eulen,” Amelia scoffed.

“Oh, right...”

That made sense. Recently, he’d become known as the undine Tamer—that alone told you everything you needed to know about his party. I felt a teeny bit bad for him, though; Amelia was just as obsessed with gnomes as he was with undines, but Eulen was the only one who got treated like a scumbag. I recalled the time one of my coworkers came to me bemoaning the fact that he’d been called a pedo by a female colleague. According to her, a thirty-something-year-old that liked high school girls was considered a pedophile, but an office lady in her late twenties that liked cute teenage boys was not, her reasoning being that true shotacons preferred boys who were much younger. Obviously, I didn’t bother arguing that lolicons and shotacons were basically the same thing lest I

risk her wrath, so the most I could do was listen to my coworker vent over a few drinks. Perhaps I would try cheering Eulen up sometime.

“Seems pretty inconvenient...” I muttered. Having to give permission to friends who wanted to pet my monsters each time sounded like an awful lot of work. Thankfully, there appeared to be a prior approval system which allowed players to touch their friends’ monsters any time, although contact was limited to pats only.

“We might not be able to glomp your monsters like before, but we should still be able to pet them or watch them play on your farm!” Ursula said in earnest.

“Uh-huh. You really consider that a fair trade, though?”

The two had mentioned they were at the very front of the queue right now. If I joined their party, I’d be one of the first to open the Air Elemental Gate. If I did, there was a strong possibility I would get a title for being the first to unlock all four elemental gates. Moreover, they weren’t even asking for money in return for their air crystal. That hardly seemed fair to them.

“Yeah, we’re totally fine with this!”

“You sure?”

“Besides, the Defenders all agree we shouldn’t inconvenience you too much...”

“Hm? Sorry, didn’t quite catch that.”

‘Defend her’? Defend who?

“Nothing, don’t mind me. So, what do you say?”

“I mean, *I’m* happy with that arrangement, but... You’re really sure you’re okay with this?”

“Yes! Absolutely!”

In that case, I had no qualms either. *Might as well take them up on their offer then!*

Epilogue

“Gosh, I’m beat.”

“You okay, Chief?”

“Well, you know we’ve basically been living at the office twenty-four seven because of all the emergency updates. When I called my wife to tell her I wouldn’t be coming home tonight either, she went absolutely ballistic.”

“Ah. My condolences.”

“She snapped at me and said, ‘Which is more important, me or your work?!’ I never expected to hear those words from my own wife... How much more cliché could she get?”

“You also stood her up on your wedding anniversary the other day, didn’t you? I’d be mad too.”

“You think I like being here, night after night? What if I just decided to leave now, huh? Would you let me?”

“Absolutely not. We’d never get the update done in time without you here. If you’re thick-skinned enough to continue collecting a paycheck after causing irreparable damage to our company, however, then by all means, go ahead and go. Just so you know, though, you’ll be shouldering all the blame if you choose to do so.”

“...Ugh, how did it come to this? All I wanted to do was make a fun game...”

“That’s what you get when your game blows up. It’s a sign that people find it highly enjoyable.”

“The woes of creating a game that’s too entertaining for its own good...”

“Yeah yeah, I’m happy for you, Chief. Oh, and here. Got you the latest report on Silver-Haired.”

“Well, why didn’t you say so from the start? What sort of zany, unconventional stuff has he been up to today, I wonder?”

“Good to hear *someone’s* enjoying himself.”

“Of course! Reading his play data while knocking back a beer has been *the* highlight of my day for the past few days!”

“How many times do I have to tell you not to drink in the C-suite office?”

“Where else am I supposed to drink if I can’t go home?! Not to mention I keep getting summoned at least once per hour because of an emergency.”

“Can’t you at least go drink in the nap room?”

“Nuh-uh. That place is a tomb of all the fallen programmers.”

“Oh, right.”

“You don’t wanna rouse the dead, do you?”

“True, disturbing their sleep and causing their productivity to drop would have disastrous consequences for the game.”

“See, what’d I tell ya? That’s why I have no choice but to drink here.”

“Whatever you say, Chief.”

“Oho. Will you look at that?”

“Once again, he’s the only one who got the item.”

“Honestly, that no longer surprises me.”

“Me neither. I feel like it’s almost a given at this point.”

“Not surprising, considering he was completely off the wall from the start. The biggest shock for me was still the Lakeside Tree tree nymph, though. That was supposed to be a really tough one.”

“Indeed it was. Tree nymphs born from Lakeside Trees are slightly different from their regular counterparts.”

“They’re not the type of monster you can obtain right from the get-go. He even cured the plant’s disease and left open the possibility of the Elder route.”

“He’s the only one who could’ve pulled it off without any hints whatsoever.”

“And now he’s unlocking all the yokai and clearing the dungeons.”

“Why does everything go so smoothly for him?”

“Man, he really is an oddball! My beer has never tasted better.”

“Hey! Stop grilling squid in here! You’re stinking up the whole room!”

“Fine, I’ll switch to this then.”

“What part of ‘no grilling seafood’ do you *not* understand?”

“Okay, okay, you’re the boss. Hey, he’s even started making teaware!”

“He did obtain a unique salamander, after all. Usually, they’re impossibly hard to come by.”

“Well, he does have quite a few titles and stuff. But to think he managed to acquire so many unusual monsters...”

“A unique elemental and Gray Squirrel, a tree nymph born from a Lakeside Tree, a fairy, and a Drimole. He also got a Honey Bear pretty early on. Doesn’t seem like he’s collecting them on purpose, though.”

“Well, they do say like attracts like. Frankly, from a developer’s point of view, I endorse this kind of game play.”

“Moreover, *he* doesn’t find anything strange about what he’s doing.”

“Don’t you see? His being oblivious to the fact only goes to show that he *is* a true weirdo!”

“Perhaps you have a point. *You* don’t think you’re weird either, do you, Chief?”

“Huh? Wha...? What’s that supposed to m—”

“Setting aside the question of whether you’re a pervert...”

“A *pervert*? I’m not even a weirdo in your view?”

“Lately, there’ve been several players who have focused their efforts on noncombat skills in hopes of imitating Silver-Haired. It’d be nice if he could continue serving as a positive influence in the game.”

“No use trying to change the subject. You and I are going to have a nice long chat where you tell me exactly what you think of me.”

“That won’t be necessary. I’d be happy to answer that anytime.”

“Go ahead and list ten things about me, then!”

“That’s a lot. Very well. For one, you’re a hardcore gamer. You’re also selfish and immature, and have shockingly bad taste in clothes. Even your glasses are geeky. You put on weight recently. Your desk is a mess, your armpits reek, and lately, your hairline has been reced—”

“Enough! Please, no more!”

“You’re the one who wanted the truth. Don’t ask for it if you can’t handle it.”

“I didn’t think you’d be such a meanie, though!”

“Please, you’re well past the age of calling someone a meanie. Cringe. Anyway, take a look at this.”

“‘Cringe’...?! F-Forget it. I don’t want to hear any more.”

“A pity. I saved the best for last too.”

“Guh...! ...A-And? What’s that supposed to be?”

“It’s the details on the large-scale update we’re implementing before the second wave of players arrives.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh... Think the residential area will be introduced as planned?”

“Positive. We’ve already got the standard housing ready, and we’ll be introducing Japanese-style houses at this stage too. I didn’t think we’d have any players who fulfilled the requirements right from the start, but oh well.”

“Well, it *is* Silver-Haired... Can’t say I wasn’t expecting it.”

“Ditto.”

“That said, we don’t know if he’ll go for a Japanese-style house, or if he’ll even buy a house to begin with.”

“...You think he won’t?”

“...Think he’ll buy it then?”

“Most likely.”

“Eh, it’ll be fine. It’s not like it’ll have any effect on your progress in the

game.”

“That’s true.”

“It’s pretty expensive too, so we don’t know if he can even afford it in the first place.”

“*If* he can afford it...? You really think he’s strapped for cash?”

“...I doubt it.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Anyway, forget housing for the time being. Oh, we should throw this in too.”

“Yes. We’ll definitely need to change the requirements for Thou Shalt Not Kill and notify people about it. If we’re not careful, the majority of the second wave could very well just stay holed up for the first four days.”

“Seriously, why did he have to discover that title so soon? I was hoping some weirdo in the second or third wave would discover it instead...”

“...Well, what can you do? It’s Silver-Haired. We also have some changes concerning the amount of physical contact friends can have.”

“This was initially based on his data, was it not?”

“Correct. Even some of the devs have expressed concerns about the appropriateness of excessive physical contact between players, regardless of whether they’re friends or not.”

“I say they’re just jealous of the people who get to play with cute monsters.”

“Still, that *is* a valid concern. Given how laid-back Silver-Haired is, I doubt these changes will affect him, but players who have an unhealthy obsession with their monsters might end up getting reported.”

“True. So, players will now have to obtain permission to touch other people’s tamed monsters, even if they’re friends. We’re also restricting entry to players’ farms and homes, as well as warning people who’ve been petting a monster for too long.”

“Yes. Interesting how both of these major updates concern him, isn’t it?”

“That’s my boy. Knew he was special from the start.”

“You’re not the only one monitoring him, Chief. Almost everyone in-game seems to know his nickname at this point.”

“Wonder why everyone calls him ‘Silver-Haired’ and not by his username, though...? I honestly hadn’t thought about it myself—it just sort of stuck.”

“Maybe it’s a sign of respect?”

“Ha ha ha! Imagine a joke title becoming a sign of respect! It’s perfect for him!”

“That said, it’s a pretty sticky situation from a privacy-protection standpoint. The GMs were even involved in a case where he was being harassed by other players. It’s hard to ignore how many of these trolls exist in the forums too.”

“They’re not naming him explicitly, though, and it’s not as if he’s complained to us personally, has he?”

“No.”

“Hmm. In that case, I think we ought to wait a bit longer. Keep an eye out for threads bashing him, although I expect the GMs are onto it already.”

“Understood.”

“Wonder what sort of crazy stunt he’ll pull next? Can’t wait to see what he does.”


A Late-Start Tamer's Laid-Back Life
A LATE-START
TAMER'S
LAID-BACK LIFE
6







Bonus Short Story

Children's Games with Yuto and the Gang

It was just another day at the farm—or it would've been if not for the highly charged atmosphere, that was. I held my breath as I observed Olto and Bear Bear, their expressions taut and serious as they stood facing each other. So tense was the situation that I'd mistakenly thought they were fighting at first. I'd immediately rushed over with the intent of breaking up the fight, only to realize they were, in fact, playing a game. I watched as Olto raised a rectangular, card-like object high above his head before slamming it down on the ground.

"Mmm... Mm-mm!"

"Grooowl?"

Olto and Bear Bear were currently playing menko, an old-fashioned Japanese game played with cards made from thick paper or cardboard. Simply put, the goal was to flip the menko cards on the ground by striking them with your own, or with a gust of wind created by the thrown card. Players would either score a point if successful at all, or gain the number of points written on the cards. Olto and Bear Bear appeared to be playing by the latter rules. Each player had five menko to begin with, with ten more laid out on the ground. The cards were worth either one point (six cards), three points (three cards), or five points (one card), while the menko you threw became one-point cards once they were on the ground. At the moment, both Bear Bear and Olto were at zero points after throwing a card each, meaning there were now two additional one-point cards on the playing field.

"Mm-mm."

"Growl growl."

The pair held their cards fanned out, staring each other down from atop them. I could almost see lightning crackling in the background as they yelled,

“C’mon, let’s duel!” although the setting couldn’t have been less fitting for an intense showdown, given it was a bright and cloudless day. Plus, we were on a farm.

“Growl!”

“Mm?!”

Bear Bear raised their menko and slammed it down hard like a wild bear swiping at a salmon with its paw. Contrary to the dramatic move, Bear Bear’s menko landed on the ground with a comical *thlup!* instead.

“Growl.”

“Mm!”

Regardless, Bear Bear appeared to have succeeded in flipping a card. They picked up the one-point menko they had just flipped, holding it up proudly with a smug look. Olto looked peeved at Bear Bear’s win, gritting his teeth and stomping his feet in frustration.

“Mm-mm-mmm!”

Once he had regained his composure, Olto threw his menko down in a similarly dramatic fashion.

Flump.

“Mmm!”

Olto had scored a point too. Rather than go for the larger cards worth three points or five points, he had opted to play it safe. Honestly, it was pretty impressive that they had even scored a single point each, considering they were both still beginners.

“This might end up being a really, *really* low-level match...” I muttered. Predictably, neither of them scored any points during the next two rounds. The way things were going, I was doubtful either of them could even score a second point. However, all of that changed in the fourth round.

“Growl growl!”

“Mmm?!”

To everyone's amazement, Bear Bear succeeded in flipping a three-point menko. The score was now 4-1, with Bear Bear in the lead. Olto made a face, realizing he was now at a significant disadvantage, while Bear Bear puffed out their chest and gloated.

"Growl growl."

"Mm-mm...!"

With a look of determination, Olto raised his menko high into the air. His body was way too tense, though. If he didn't loosen his shoulders a bit...

"Mm-mm!"

Yep, definitely saw that coming. Despite his resolve, Olto was only able to score one point.

"Mmm!" Olto moaned in despair, burying his head in his hands.

"Growl!"

Meanwhile, Bear Bear raised both paws and struck a victory pose. The way they were acting, you'd think this was a life-or-death situation and not a silly card game... I was glad they were both enjoying the menko set I'd bought, though.

"Growl growl."

"Mm."

Ignoring Olto's death stare, Bear Bear hummed a cheerful tune as they readied themself for the final round. Currently, the score was 4-2. If Bear Bear managed to earn even one point, that would bump the score up to 5-2. That would pretty much guarantee their victory, given that it was almost impossible for either of them to flip the five-point menko. Even if Olto somehow scored three points, the two would still be tied.

"Growl grooowl... Growl!" Bear Bear threw their card down with vigor.

"Mm, mm-mm?!"

Olto's eyes widened in dismay, for Bear Bear had succeeded in flipping not just one, but *two* one-point cards. It seemed like they were starting to get the

hang of things.

“Growl!”

Bear Bear jumped up and down delightedly. Olto looked like he had lost all hope. The score was now 6-2, meaning his chances of winning were slim to none. However, he soon raised his head and slapped both cheeks as if to rouse his spirits and reset his mind. When he was done, his expression was deathly serious, like a world-class athlete readying himself before the start of a game.

“Mm...” he exhaled deeply, raising his menko slowly above his head.

“Mmm... Mm-mm-mm!”

An instant later, Olto’s eyes flew open as he slammed his card onto the ground. Even I could see that he had aimed it pretty well.

Thlup!

“G-G-Growl?!”

This time, it was Bear Bear’s turn to be stunned.

“Mmm!”

Olto jumped while punching the air like a shonen anime protagonist, thoroughly delighted. And with good reason, for his final do-or-die throw had succeeded in flipping *three* cards altogether: one three-point card and two one-point cards. It was nothing short of a miracle.

“Growl growl grooowl!” Bear Bear wailed, cradling their head in defeat. If I were to translate what they were saying, it would most likely be, “God damn it!” or something along those lines. You would think they’d lost the gamble of a lifetime from the way they crumbled to their knees.

“Mm-mm-mm-mm-mmm!”

Olto was almost as ecstatic as Bear Bear was upset, running around them in circles while jumping up and down. *You could at least try to be a more gracious winner, buddy...* What now, though? Olto was far too drunk with victory, and it would likely take a while before Bear Bear recovered from their defeat. Thankfully, we had nothing else to do today, but I wasn’t sure whether things would return to normal by tomorrow.

Just then, Olto came to an abrupt halt. Wait, why'd he go quiet all of a sudden? He was soon followed by Bear Bear, who dusted their knees off as they got to their feet. *Really? They were over it, just like that?* As I stood there, still confused, Bear Bear produced something with a flourish.

"Are those beigoma?"

The item Bear Bear held was a beigoma set, another traditional Japanese game I had purchased alongside the menko cards. Did they intend to duel with those next?

"Growl!"

"Mm!"

Once again, the two locked gazes as sparks flew between them. They each grabbed a beigoma and stood face-to-face, their expressions saying, "Game on!" this time. They seemed to have forgotten all about their previous menko contest.

"Oh well. Just don't get *too* carried away, okay?" I reminded them.

"Mm!"

"Growl!"

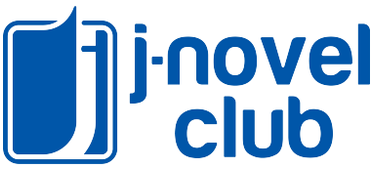
While these two battle it out, I might as well play ohajiki with the others, I decided, before heading for the barn.











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A Late-Start Tamer’s Laid-Back Life: Volume 6

by Yuu Tanaka

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Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by MICRO MAGAZINE, INC.

This English edition is published by arrangement with MICRO MAGAZINE, INC.

English translation © 2023 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: May 2023

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