A Late-Start Tamer's Laid-Back Life 13



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Chapter One: The Kappa Pool

"Well, this is exciting," said Siegfried.

"I'm grateful that you're coming with me, but are you sure it isn't too much trouble? We won't be getting any item drops or anything," I replied.

"I don't mind. I'm just interested in seeing the yokai."

I had gone to see Alyssa to sell her some assorted information, getting a spectacular "WAAAH!" out of her. It was a satisfying interaction.

But things hadn't ended there. I also bought some information, on Alyssa's recommendation. And that information pertained to yokai—information about their whereabouts and how to interact with them successfully, if you can believe it.

Once I had this information, naturally I wanted to go seek a yokai out. And Siegfried decided to come along with me too. I wanted more fighting power, and Siegfried was curious about the yokai; our interests had aligned perfectly. Siegfried also wanted to try out the new weapon he'd just obtained.

Incidentally, the information we'd sold had been worth quite the hefty sum. It was a bit more than Alyssa could pay us right away, so she'd begged us if she could compensate us partially with items instead. There were several pieces of equipment that Siegfried wanted, so he was happy to oblige. Kokuten and Murakage were also fine with that—and so was I. A top clan like the Quick-Eared Cats had a substantial catalogue of items with plenty of interesting curios to offer.

Among the pieces of information that we had been sold, the one that had been worth the most was that pertaining to the Foam Emblem. I was surprised to find out that the Quick-Eared Cats had already learned that emblems could be used for evolution, just like how Siegfried had used one to evolve Silver.

According to Alyssa, a Foam Emblem could be used to evolve a Muddy Frog into a Chemical Frog. *Foam and frogs...* I wondered if that meant that the emblem had to be compatible with the monster in some way. There might also be some connection with the monsters that inhabited the area the emblem was obtained.

The "juicy info" that Alyssa had first reached out to me about had been regarding this information about evolving those monsters with the Foam Emblem. The reason she'd given such an intense reaction to the information Siegfried sold her regarding his using the Galloping Emblem to evolve his horse had been because she'd been trying to sell me that very same information.

It wasn't the *exact* same information, but the essential part was the ability to evolve monsters with emblems. Knowing that the Foam Emblem could be used to evolve a Muddy Frog was certainly very useful information as well, but since I already knew that emblems could be used for evolution, that had definitely weakened the impact of her announcement.

Plus, that Chemical Frog's appearance was a bit, well... I would have liked it if it looked like a cute tree frog, but instead it looked like a realistic toad. And it was huge, about the size of a dog. True to its name, it had a psychedelic coloring; its base color was green and it had blue and yellow marbling on top. Just looking at it made my eyes water. And the hues made the warts covering its body look really gross.

Alyssa showed me a video of the toad producing foam from its entire body, but even that just kind of creeped me out. I couldn't see myself ever being brave enough to walk around with a toad like that. Maybe if it didn't have those warts...

Following that conversation, I bought information about monsters and materials found in various areas, which was what led me to buying information about the yokai.

I hadn't discovered a new yokai for a while, but a player had apparently encountered one in Zone Ten. The one who had investigated and consolidated all the information on it had been none other than Hamakaze. As an Onmyoji, she was the true yokai expert.

"The place was near Blue City, right?"

"Yeah. It shouldn't be more than an hour away from there."

Our destination was a river not far from Blue City. The Great Rainforest located to the south of Blue City was an area where, as its name might suggest, it rained for half the day. That rainfall produced countless streams which fed into the rivers, large and small, that ran freely through the tropical biome.

The annoying part was that depending on how much rain fell, the rivers could change size, or even dry up completely. Because of that, the map of the area would change every few days. Areas that had once been traversable would be submerged, the rivers would dry up and different monsters would spawn, causing a lot of headache for the players exploring the rainforest. Not only that, but the rain obscured visibility, so out of all four cardinal directional areas outside of Blue City, it was the one I hated the most.

However, this rainforest still had a few fixed rivers that never changed. People called it a small mercy on the devs' part, but the truth of the matter was that in order to make sure events would trigger, they couldn't make the rainforest change *too* drastically.

Our goal was reaching one of those unchanging rivers. To be more precise, we were headed to its headwaters.

"It's a good thing it's only drizzling today."

"It should stop soon," Siegfried said nonchalantly.

"Huh?" I said in surprise. *How'd he know that?*

"There's a weather forecaster in Blue City."

"Th-There is?" I stammered.

This fantasy game really had everything.

"Neigh neigh!"

"Aye-aye!"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Fau, Rick. Don't bother Carro while they're running."

The tiny pair, Fau and Rick, were sitting on top of Carro's head and playing with the pony's ears. The ears' flicking must have attracted their interest.

"Tra-la?"

"Kee-hee!"

“Hey, not you guys too! You can touch them later! But for now, stop!”

Before we’d set out, I had returned to my farm and assembled a party that I figured would be good for traveling. Our party was composed of Carro, who was a fast runner; Fau, Eine, and Lilith, who could fly; and Rick, who could travel by riding on me. I wasn’t sure who to pick for the final slot, but I’d eventually settled on Olea.

They were the lightest, so I figured they could ride on Carro behind me. That would slow Carro down a bit, and Olea wouldn’t be able to fight from back there, but it was still possible to travel that way.

The only problem was that Olea kept wobbling from the vibrations that came with riding a horse. The fact that they didn’t possess the Riding skill meant those vibrations weren’t reduced at all.

“T-T-T-Trii.”

“You okay, Olea? Should we take a break?”

“T-T-Triii!”

They were acting tough, but were they really okay? They were shaking like crazy.

Siegfried must have felt sorry seeing Olea in that state. At some point, he suggested that Olea ride on Silver instead. I felt a little bad, but Silver was undeniably larger and stronger than Carro. I decided to gratefully accept Siegfried’s kindness for now.

“How’s that, Olea?”

“Triii-triii!”

It worked like a charm. Since Silver was so big and more powerful than Carro, he had no problem carrying two riders at once. Olea looked happy to be riding in front of Siegfried.

Once Olea had switched horses, I felt like Carro was now matching Silver’s speed. The two horses started running side by side at a faster pace, the sound of their hooves loud against the forest floor. Several times, we passed by players who turned around to look at us. Well, I couldn’t blame them. I was sure a large and small horse running together looked like quite the odd couple.



We ignored almost all potential battles during our journey. We rushed past monsters as they chased after us. It was nearing the time I had to log out, so we had to speedrun this. I felt bad for Siegfried, but I didn't have time to fight a bunch of monsters. Though I did wish we could have tried fighting the shadowlike monster that we spotted along the way.

"Is that black shadow one of those low-level Shadow Men?"

"Yeah, it is. They say they're related to that cutscene that was released."

After the recent reveal of that cutscene featuring the demon and his subordinate having a confidential talk in a basement, people started reporting quests involving shadowlike enemies popping up all over the place. The enemy I fought in the Squire's Forest, the Shadow Man, was also probably part of that.

These Shadow Men were also appearing outside of quests, as regular mob monsters on the playing field. People speculated that defeating a certain number of these Shadow Men might progress some sort of event, so there were increasing reports of their spawn locations.

However, even though they were small fry, that didn't mean they could be killed instantly. They were just weaker than the boss types. They were apparently still more difficult than the ordinary monsters on the playing field.

"Oh well," I sighed. "I guess we'll just let it be for now."

"There's nothing we can do about it, given our time limit."

"Yeah, true. Considering we also have that yokai battle to do, we really are short on time."

That all being said, I could tell Carro was getting tired, so we decided to take a break at a safety zone that was on the way.

"Come on, I'll help you down."

"Triii!"

Siegfried lifted Olea and lowered them to the ground. I'd already given him permission to touch my monsters directly.

Olea seemed to trust Siegfried completely already, based on how friendly they were acting towards him. They grinned when he picked them up.

“Aaah. Even though we’re in a game, it feels great to be in nature.”

“Trii-triii!”

“Here, Silver. Have a carrot.”

“Neigh!”

Siegfried was feeding his beloved horse a carrot. Silver looked like he was on cloud nine as he munched on it. Even though Silver had been carrying two riders, he didn’t look tired at all. Maybe his stamina had increased after evolving.

As I watched him, I thought of something. Couldn’t I evolve Carro by using the Galloping Emblem on them? The pony was a horse-type monster like Silver, and Moon Ponies inhabited the very Squire’s Forest where Galloping Emblems were obtained. It wouldn’t be so strange to think that Moon Ponies and Galloping Emblems have good synergy.

Then there was the Foam Emblem. If Galloping Emblems evolved horses, what could Foam Emblems evolve? I knew that they could evolve frogs, but there was a good chance they’d be effective on other monsters too. Maybe it could evolve Perca or Reflet, given their connection to water. Yeah, it was worth a shot. But first, I would try using a Galloping Emblem on Carro!

“Is something on your mind, Yuto?”

“Yeah, this!”

I took the emblem out of my inventory and held it up dramatically.

“Oh wow, are you going to use it like I did?”

“Yeah! I’m gonna make Carro evolve! We’re almost at our destination, but the path is going to get more rugged from here on. If I can give Carro a power up, we’ll be able to run away from enemies more easily.”

“I wonder what Carro will evolve into? Maybe the same type of horse as Silver?”

Siegfried looked at Carro hopefully. There certainly wasn’t a nonzero chance they Carro would evolve into a Noble Horse. They were both horses, after all.

As I tried to get my wildly beating heart to settle down, I used

the Galloping Emblem.

"All right, Carro! It's time for you to get a power up!"

"Neeeigh!"

The black pony absorbed the Galloping Emblem into its body and then emitted a bright light. I checked their stats right away and saw that they got a boost to their abilities as well as learning the skill Galloping. *Nice, so far everything is exactly like what happened to Silver!*

"Now, as for your evolution— Huh?"

"What is it?" Siegfried asked.

No way, this can't be. I checked Carro's stats over and over, but...

"...There's no option for them to evolve."

"R-Really?"

"Yeah..."

Oh, come on! We both looked silently at each other. Carro had obtained the Galloping skill, and they got a stats boost. But they didn't do the thing I was looking forward to the most, and that was evolve!

"I-It must be because Moon Ponies are so strong to start with!" Siegfried suggested. "Th-They probably don't need to evolve!"

"Y-Yeah, you're right."

Despite Siegfried's attempt to console me, his words were like an arrow to the heart.

"Neigh..."

"Ah, Carro! You didn't do anything wrong!"

Carro looked sad, seeing my disappointment, apparently thinking that my dejection was their fault.

"Neigh?"

After I hurriedly explained otherwise, Carro looked up at me with a face that said, "Really?"

"L-Look, I'm not upset at all! I was just expecting a different outcome! In fact, I'm happy you got stronger!"

"Neigh-neigh!"

"Yeah! You'll still let me ride you, right?"

I felt bad placing my own expectations on Carro and then feeling let down when they didn't come true. I had to pull myself together.

“Hmm.”

But now I was unsure of what to do with the Foam Emblem. I was planning on using it on Reflet or Perca, but now that I knew there was a chance they wouldn’t evolve... But if I refused to use it because it was too valuable, I might never use it. I wouldn’t know it worked unless I actually used it.

“Right. I have nothing to lose.”

Even if they didn’t evolve, they would still get stronger. In that case, what was the harm in using it?

The problem was who to pick. Reflet might be the better choice. If she acquired the Foam skill, then she could have a way to attack. But I couldn’t shake the worry that Reflet would be unable to use the Foam skill. While it was mainly used to hinder enemies’ movements and dealt minor damage, it was still classified as an offensive skill. There was the possibility that an elemental monster, who specialized in crafting, wouldn’t be able to use an offensive skill even if they acquired one.

“Then maybe Perca is the safest choice?” I wondered aloud.

“For what?” Siegfried asked.

“I was thinking of using my Foam Emblem.”

“I-I see. Wow, Yuto.”

I got the sense that Siegfried was getting a little weirded out. I mean, even I knew I was going too far too, but there was no going back now that I’d come this far, right?

I could still use the emblem for crafting, but being able to strengthen my monsters was much better. Reflet was a unique specimen, so she would be strong even without a special evolution. In that case, it was probably a better bet to give Perca a shot at a chance to evolve.

“Okay, Perca it is!”

I’d already been planning to switch out Olea for Perca once we got to the river. It was a little early, but I decided to summon Perca in now. We weren’t that far from the river anyway.

“Honk honk?”

“Hey there, Perca.”

“Hooonk!”

"Oho, you're going to use it on Perca?" Siegfried asked.

"Yeah, since he's probably compatible with foam."

I took out the emblem. Once Perca saw it, he jumped up. He must've known what it was.

"Hooonk! Hooonk!"

"W-Wow, nice reaction."

"He's dancing! Look at him go."

Perca started dancing rhythmically in front of me. He looked like he was enjoying himself.

"This seems like a good sign, right?" Siegfried said.

"Hmm, I think you're right."

It was unusual for Perca to do a happy little jig like this. This sort of response was obviously different from his normal behavior.

"All right! I'm gonna use the Foam Emblem on Perca!"

"Honk hoonk!"

All right! Come on, evolve! From Highway Penguin to what? What?!

Perca started glowing, and I was pretty sure it was even brighter than the light that shone out of Carro! This had to be it!

"WOO—hoo...? Huh?"

"Y-Yuto? What's wrong? That face you're making... I-It can't be, can it?"

"Ha ha."

"A dry laugh!"

Siegfried caught on instantly that, yes indeed, Perca hadn't evolved! Who was it who said that light looked brighter?! *I did!*

"Come *onnn*!"

I felt like I was withering away. It had been a while since I felt so stupefied. I felt sorry Siegfried had to wait for me to get back on my feet.

Our break turned out to be longer than intended, but we managed to arrive at our destination.

"Yuto, look. Could that be the rock?"

"Hmm? Oh yeah, I think you might be right!"

If Siegfried hadn't said anything, I might've stayed in that stunned daze until I had to log out. What a dependable guy. I did

feel a little guilty for being a burden on Siegfried, which helped me kick myself back into gear.

"Man, if you hadn't helped me out back there, we wouldn't have made it here in time."

"I didn't do anything."

"Oh, don't be so humble."

"No, I mean it. If it were me, I would have just logged out right then. I was amazed at how quickly you were able to bounce back. Your positive attitude was impressive."

"No, no, it wasn't like that."

"Yes, it was. I was a little surprised by your optimism." Even at times like these, he just wouldn't take pride in his achievements. He was so modest. "I really didn't do anything, though..." Siegfried repeated.

All right, Siegfried and I couldn't just keep bowing to each other forever. I only had an hour left before I'd be forcibly logged out.

"Just like our information told us, there's the large, tall rock right at the bend of the small river," I explained. "At the base of that rock, the river should be deeper."

"And that's where the yokai will come out."

"Yeah. Just give me one moment."

I activated my Yokai Detection and Yokai Searcher skills, and I got a strong reaction from both. This was definitely the place.

"If we get closer, I'll be able to pinpoint where it is..."

I had to applaud Hamakaze for discovering such a remote place. I heard she scoured any areas where she suspected yokai to be, but it must have been real tough work. After all, this Southern Great Rainforest was filled with countless small rivers. She would have had to take the time to walk around all of them while using skills that could detect yokai. Talk about being tenacious.

"Okay, let's go. Are you ready?"

"Yeah, whenever you are."

"I just need to take out this hanging scroll."

From my inventory, I produced a decorative hanging scroll. It was a Japanese-style painting that depicted a very striking—or creepy, some might say—kappa. It looked like the type of kappa that would

pull out someone's shirikodama and eat it. It was one of the rewards for clearing the Mayoiga that I had bought at the auction.

Appraising the hanging scroll came up with this description: "If you take this painting to a certain location..." That "certain location" was this very place. At last, the time had come where I could use this scroll in the spot it was intended.

"Use the Kappa Hanging Scroll?"

Holding on to the scroll, which was strangely staying dry despite getting pelted with raindrops, I approached the riverbank. As I did, I heard an announcement asking me if I wanted to use the scroll, and a window popped up with options to accept or decline.

"'Yes,' of course!"

As soon as I pressed the button to confirm, I saw a pale blue light shoot up from the deeper part of the river at the base of the large rock. Suddenly, the light expanded, swallowing us in its glow. If I hadn't heard this would happen beforehand, I probably would've panicked.

When the light settled down, we found ourselves inside a translucent dome. It was about fifty meters in diameter, and there were rocks scattered around underfoot. The footing wasn't that bad, though. As long as we were being careful, the rocks shouldn't pose an issue.

The dome was surrounded by crystal clear water, giving us a view of swimming fish and aquatic plants swaying in the current. We must have been on the river bed.

"Silver should be able to run around just fine here."

"Make sure you don't attack it."

"Understood. We'll be your decoys."

Splash!

"It's here!" I cried.

While we were forming a quick plan, a figure burst into the dome. There was a loud splash and it landed right in the center of the dome—a mysterious, green entity.

"Gwak gwak gwak."

"Whoa, an actual kappa," I said. "It looks super creepy."

"So that's a realistic kappa... It's pretty scary."

What had made its entrance into the dome was a Kappa that looked exactly like the one painted on the scroll. There was a dirty plate on its head, on top of its loose, disheveled hair. It had a piercing gaze and drool dripping from its beak. The claws extending from its webbed hands and feet looked frighteningly sharp. Its skirt of bundled straw swayed when it moved, threatening to give a glimpse of what was underneath.

While I said its skin was green, it wasn't completely monochrome; it had a light green base, with tiger stripes in dark green.

This Kappa was a yokai through and through, and bore absolutely no resemblance to the Mini Kappa mascot.

"Gwak gwak gwak!"

The Kappa raised a shrill, grating cry that sounded like a gruffer version of a heron's call, then braced itself. I could sense its determination. *No, its* bloodlust*!*

The Kappa's cry had acted to signal the start of the battle. It was charging right towards us.

"Guys, it's coming at us! Carro, I'm counting on you!"

"Neigh-neigh!"

Instead of facing off against the Kappa's charge, we dispersed. We all observed the Kappa's movements as we ran.

"Come on! Over here!" Siegfried called out.

"Neigh!"

"Gwak gwak!"

Siegfried and Silver were keeping the Kappa's aggro focused on them. Siegfried was acting as an effective decoy by using a skill that accumulated aggro.

Carro probably could have outrun the Kappa, but Siegfried had a higher Riding skill level than I did—overwhelmingly so. He hadn't been riding on a horse from level 1 just for show. He probably had the highest Riding level out of all players in the game. There was no question that he'd be able to pull off being a decoy better than I could.

"Gwak gwak!"

"Good job, Silver! Keep that up!"

“Neeeigh!”

Siegfried and Silver were exclusively focused on evading the Kappa, never attacking it.

The truth was, the last thing we wanted to do was defeat this Kappa. If we defeated it, we’d get regular item drops and be freed from this dome. But that was not our objective here. From the information we were told, we knew that if we kept this battle against the Kappa going for a certain amount of time, an event would trigger and we would be able to form a friendship with the Kappa. I was trying to trigger that very event.

“Gwak gwak!”

“Come on, Siegfried! Silver! You can do it!”

“Ha ha ha ha!” Siegfried bellowed “Right over here! Keep chasing us!”

“Neeeigh!”

Silver, who had acquired the Galloping skill from the emblem, maintained the perfect distance from the Kappa to keep it chasing after them. That would have probably been difficult for Carro to do. Having them here with us was a huge help.

“Gwak gwaaak!”

“Neeeigh!”

“Very nice, Silver! A perfect jump!”

Ten minutes had passed since the battle against the Kappa began. We’d kept up with our evasive maneuvers, so neither side had taken any damage. And by “we,” I mainly meant Siegfried and Silver.

The Kappa’s methods of attack included shooting water from its mouth and dish, and attacking with the claws on its hands. It would also throw rocks at us. That was about it. On the other hand, it was very quick on its feet, so we really had to pay attention to make sure it didn’t get too close. If it weren’t for Silver, we probably would’ve had the displeasure of getting hit with several of its attacks by this point.

Also, sometimes it would charge at my monsters and me, as if suddenly remembering we existed, so we couldn’t let our guards down either.

"Gwak gwak gwaaak!"

"Gah! Gross!"

"Gwak gwaaak!"

The Kappa had opened its mouth wide and spewed out dirty, sticky water. It looked super filthy. I managed to avoid it by crouching.

"Carro! Run!"

"Neigh-neigh!"

Carro ran fiercely across the riverbed in a zigzag. The dirty water shot by our side a couple times, missing us.

"Nice, Carro!"

"Neeeigh!"

I really wished we could have used Carro's invisibility, but it would have only lasted for three minutes.

"Gwak gwak gwak!"

Having missed its target, the Kappa angrily jumped up with incredible force. It burst straight out of the dome.

It was preparing to charge up for one of its attacks that it used once every so often. Outside the dome, we could see the Kappa sucking up a large volume of water and then opening its mouth wider than it ever had before. Then, it spewed out numerous balls of water one right after another.

Since this was all taking place outside the dome, we were powerless to stop it. Well, even if we could have, we wouldn't have attacked the Kappa anyway!

We tried to avoid the balls of water flying our way, but as I had expected, it was too tough.

"At this rate— Guh!"

"Neigh?"

One of the water balls hit me! I'd thought I dodged it, but then it curved! *How's a rearguard player supposed to deal with that?!*

"Shoot!"

"Kee-hee!"

"Honk honk!"

I hurriedly healed myself. Well, I'd already taken into consideration that we would take damage from those water bullets.

Lilith and Perca had taken some damage too. It was impossible to expect ourselves to perfectly evade that bullet hell on our first try.

Once that attack was over, the Kappa's behavior underwent its final change.

"Gwak gwak gwaaak!"

"A red aura! Just like Alyssa said! This is it! Carro, keep it up just a little longer!"

"Neigh-neeeigh!"

As if it had had enough of our running away, the Kappa's face contorted in anger and its body glowed red. That red light was a sign that it was about to use a special move.

The Kappa crossed its arms into an X in front of its face before swinging them downwards as it unleashed a screeching battle cry. Bright flashes of light started shooting out from its body which then turned into red orbs that flew straight at us.

"It's targeting...Siegfried, Rick, and me? No, it's probably targeting Carro! Anyway, run!"

"Neigh!"

"Chirp chirp!"

I knew that the attack targeted one to three of the party members who had accumulated the most aggro, and this time, it was targeting three of us.

The red orbs didn't move that fast, but they had a highly effective homing ability. The orbs swayed and swerved as they chased after us, just like the balls of fire that appeared in graveyards.

The scary aspect of this attack was the fact it was guaranteed to kill in one hit. Alyssa had speculated that this attack was meant to be like a real kappa's shirikodama attack. Which was a very terrifying thought!

I tried having Carro turn invisible, but the orb continued to pursue us. I guessed that once we were targeted, there was nothing turning invisible could do. But Carro had also learned Galloping and received a power boost thanks to the emblem.

"Nice, Carro! You're doing great!"

"Neigh-neeeigh!"

Although the red orbs came dangerously close, they never fully

caught up with us. Once we managed to evade them for thirty seconds, they disappeared into nothingness.

"Phew, we survived."

"Neeeigh."

"Chirp chiiirp."

Carro let out a small sigh of relief and Rick mimed wiping sweat from his brow from on top of my shoulder. *Rick, you started riding in comfort on top of Carro halfway!* I guess I couldn't blame him though. The threat of being targeted with a one-hit kill attack was sure to be very nerve-racking even for monsters.

"G-Graaa..."

"Nice! Its red aura is gone!"

The events that followed unfolded exactly how we'd heard they would.

The Kappa stood motionless in the center of the playing field and its head drooped as if it had exhausted all its energy. In a normal fight, this would be our chance to attack it, but we just held still and watched it. The Kappa then started to change. Its face softened into a gentle expression. Though its kinder expression wasn't enough to make it any less scary!

Ding-dong.

"The battle against the Kappa is over."

"Phew, we did it."

We had fulfilled the special conditions, prompting the announcement signaling the end of the battle. This was exactly the outcome we'd been aiming for.

"Good work, Yuto," Siegfried congratulated me.

"Same to you. In fact, you worked way harder than us. All we did was run around in circles."

"Well then, you should be extending your gratitude to Silver instead."

"You're right. Silver is the true MVP of this fight."

"Neigh."

"I'll give you a carrot later."

"Neeeigh!"

I stroked Silver, and he nuzzled me with that endearing mug of

his. At moments like this, he was actually pretty cute.

"Gwak."

"Whoa!"

"Gwak."

At some point, the Kappa had made its way over to us. Having it appear so suddenly right next to me freaked me out. It was opening and closing its beak and reaching its hands up to me. Its demeanor appeared very friendly. Where had all its burning rage from earlier gone?

"Yuto, don't you have something for it?"

"Whoops, I almost forgot!"

From my inventory, I took out a red cucumber. The second I did, the Kappa's expression locked onto it. Kappas sure loved their cucumbers.

"This is for you."

"Gwak gwak!"

The Kappa took the cucumber and raised it high above its head in triumph. It looked happy to have it.

"You have formed a bond of friendship with the Kappa. Certain skills have been unlocked."

"Nice, everything went perfectly."

The Kappa was also now registered in my encyclopedia.

"Oh, it seems I've unlocked some skills too," Siegfried said. "Spirit Removal and Kappa Sumo. I probably won't use either much."

"Well yeah, I can't see how an insta-kill technique or sumo would be useful for a knight."

Spirit Removal dealt minor damage and had a small chance to instantly kill its target. Kappa Sumo was a martial arts technique based on sumo. Both received a bonus when used underwater, but neither was very useful.

However, our primary objective had been to encounter a yokai, so all in all I'd call the mission a huge success. If we had dealt any damage to the Kappa during the fight, this event wouldn't have triggered.

We had unfortunately taken some damage, but apparently if you didn't deal or sustain any damage at all, then you received a special

reward. That was too hard for us to achieve, though. I had to hand it to Hamakaze for all the hard work she put into verifying these things. In fact, I wondered how many times she had to do this to achieve taking and receiving zero damage. Her persistence truly was remarkable.

"Gwak gwak."

"Oh, see ya."

I waved at the Kappa as it saw us off, though I couldn't say I was that sad to part with it...

"We need to get to the safety zone before I'm forced to log out!"

"Let's hurry!"

"Carro, you're gonna have to run a little more!"

"Neigh-neeeigh!"

Online Forum [What Is a Knight Without His Steed?] A Knight Discussion Thread, Part 17

Everyone follows their own code of chivalry.
All are welcome, even if Knight isn't your job class.
Let us all uphold the spirit of chivalry.

225: Lamorak
I think I will try to become a Dragon Knight. They're strong and they can fly. What could be better?
In fact, as long as I can ride on a dragon, I don't even care if it can fly! Even a dragon like Silver-Haired's mole would be awesome!

226: Renaud
Yeah, Dragon Knight's not bad, but I want to be a Pegasus Knight. A knight should ride a horse.

227: Richard
Personally, I'm interested in riding a griffin.
A lion with wings? Count me in.

228: Rais
Well, I want a unicorn.
A knight astride a unicorn sounds like something out of a painting.

229: Renaud

Isn’t there a myth about unicorns only letting maidens ride them?

230: Lamorak
I doubt that’ll be a problem, since this is a game.
Anyway, saying it’d look like something out of a painting about yourself...
Narcissistic much?

231: Rais
What’s wrong with that? I’m just talking about my avatar.
Feel free to take a screenshot.

232: Richard
I’ll pass.

233: Lamorak
Yeah, me too. In what world would I want a guy’s screenshot...

734: Rais
Besides, if I can conquer a unicorn that normally only lets maidens ride it... Heh heh heh, not bad! Not bad at all!

235: Richard
There’s a pervert in our midst!

236: Renaud
Unicorns! Run away!

237: Rais

Well, who said I was talking about unicorns as in horses?
Maybe I’m talking about a different kind of unicorn.

238: Lamorak
What, like a mobile suit?
A beast of possibility?

239: Richard
He could be talking about a narwhal.

240: Renaud
Or maybe one of those hardcore idol fans?

241: Lamorak
If he’s talking about idol fans, that makes his earlier comment even more perverse!

242: Rais
Nyeh heh heh.

243: Richard
Cut the creepy laugh! At least give us a yes or no!

244: Renaud
You’re more suited for a bicorn!

245: Rais
I’d be fine with that.

246: Lamorak
Uh-oh, combine pervertedness and nefariousness and...
A terrible super pervert is born!

247: Rais
Witness the birth of a Dark Knight who rules over all that is depraved!

248: Richard
Damn it! We knights must join forces to defeat you!

249: Renaud
I will lend my strength!

250: Lamorak
We knights will wipe away this stain upon the honor of knighthood with our own hands!

251: Rais
Mwa ha ha ha! I will make you all as depraved as me! Never again will you shed a tear when you hear the story of Hachiko!

252: Roland
Sorry for butting in just as things are getting interesting, but have you all looked at the Quick-Eared Cats' notice board?

253: Rais
No, I haven't.

254: Lamorak
Did they post something about knights?

255: Richard
I heard some new information came out recently. It's what Siegfried and Silver-Haired told the Cats'

submaster that made her scream.
Is that what you’re talking about?

256: Renaud
Everyone sure is quick to change topics...
Well, I’m also way more invested in this information anyway.

257: Rais
Do you mean the info about the pony Silver-Haired was riding?
You know, I’ve had my eye on that too.

258: Lamorak
A Dark Knight riding a pony...
Can’t say I want to get too close to that.

259: Rais
I bet I could cut through a crowd of people. How fun!

260: Richard
He’s actually gonna do it!
So? What’s the info? If it’s about that horse, I already bought it.

261: Roland
It actually is about Silver-Haired’s horse. The Cats have publicized part of its data.
They still haven’t published where to get it, but you can buy that information from them.

262: Renaud
So if we can get information about where to obtain that

pony if we fork over the cash?

263: Richard
Seriously? They were still verifying things when I went to the Quick-Eared Cats, so it wasn’t for sale!

264: Lamorak
That li’l pony, huh?
It’s not that I’m uninterested, but I think I’d rather have a regular-sized horse.
Before I get a griffin, I first want to get a proper horse.

265: Rais
I wish they’d make a way to strengthen a Packhorse soon...

266: Roland
I don’t know the details, but I’m pretty sure they were selling info about that too.
I didn’t have enough money to buy any of it, though.

267: Renaud
Are you for real?! Was it expensive?

268: Roland
Yeah, very...
I finally learned the meaning behind the phrase “having your eyes bug out of your head.”

269: Rais
I guess that’s only to be expected. Everyone with a Packhorse will want that information.

All right, I’ve got some business to take care of, so I’m off. Take it easy.

270: Richard
Ah! Trying to pull a fast one on us, are you?! Not on my watch!

271: Lamorak
O-Or mine!

272: Renaud
I’m going too!
Don’t think you can just leave me behind!

273: Roland
They must have a lot of money... I’m jealous.

274: Rais
Yeah, same.

275: Roland
Huh? I thought you left to go to the Cats...?

276: Rais
Like you, I’m short on funds.
I just want the Cats to post that info to their notice board ASAP.

277: Roland
Y-You’re so sneaky! You really are a Dark Knight!

278: Rais
Mwa ha ha ha! It’s their fault for being so easy to

trick!
No but seriously, I’m surprised they actually did fall for it that easily.
I didn’t think they’d actually go buy the info... Their simplemindedness is actually kinda admirable.

279: Roland
Can’t argue with you there.

[I Wanna Pet All the Monsters!] Tamed Monster Appreciation Thread for Non-Tamers and Non-Summoners, Part 14

Are you a nonmainstream command-class player or a non-command-class player who wants to express their admiration of monsters? Do monsters make you lose your breath and mind? Then this is the thread for you!
We're looking for any information on the usability of Tame or Summon skills by other classes.
Feel free to just talk about cute monsters.
This includes mascots too.
Please obtain permission before posting screenshots of other players' monsters.

118: Raspu
There have been more reports about players forming friendships with yokai.

119: Longneck
Hamakaze's info has really made its way around.

120: Ruach
There aren't really any benefits to befriending a yokai, but they do have their charm.
I want to complete the yokai encyclopedia, so I'm thinking of going out to befriend them too.

121: LordApple
There *are* benefits. Kappa can grow cucumbers, and I think the other yokai have their own special abilities too.

122: Raspu
Those are benefits for homeowners and farmers. It’s not really worth much to the regular player.

123: Ruach
And the skills that get unlocked aren’t that impressive either.

124: Longneck
Some people in the Verification Clan have been learning those very skills to investigate their usage.
One day they’ll find some great use for them and they’ll become super strong skills!

125: Requiem
Hey, has anyone gotten a demon? I wanna ask Tamers especially!

126: Raspu
What’s this all of a sudden?

127: Requiem
No, I mean, there are those mysterious shadow creatures popping up all around, right? The things that supposedly have something to do with demons?
They don’t leave anything behind, and I haven’t heard of anyone making one their monster.
Since there’s precedent with Silver-Haired’s little

demon, I thought maybe things would be different for Tamers.

128: LordApple
I fought some on the playing field, but I couldn’t tame any.

129: Requiem
What about other Tamers?

130: LordApple
Yeah, I think they’ve probably all tried?

131: Ruach
That little demon sure is cute.

132: LordApple
Every time Silver-Haired does something, I realize I can never catch up to him!

133: Requiem
I thought Necromancers might have a chance, but nope. Maybe Tamers really are the only ones capable?

134: Longneck
Don’t you think Onmyoji would be able to? Or what about Summoners?

135: Raspu
I haven’t heard of any Summoners being able to.
But Demon Summoners are kind of like Summoners, right? If Tamers can tame demons, then Summoners should be able to as well.

136: LordApple
Then maybe no one can command an event-only monster?

137: Longneck
So the only thing we can do is wait until one hatches from an egg?

138: Ruach
There’s probably a chance that it’ll be an event reward. Eggs for Tamers showed up as rewards in the past, after all.

139: Longneck
That’s true! Which means we can anticipate yokai-related items this time around!
I want an old tea kettle or an enchanted sword, but I’d also be happy with any type of yokai!

140: Requiem
Then Necromancers have a chance!
Maybe it’s still too early to throw in the towel.

141: LordApple
Event rewards! Yeah!
But you might have to place high in the rankings to obtain them...
I need to figure out how to rack up the points!

142: Ruach
Before all that, don’t we have to clear this long-term event first?
People seem to think we should be defeating the dark shadows that are crawling all over the place to

progress the event...

143: Longneck
I heard that few players are actively hunting them, since they don’t drop anything.
Sometimes I don’t bother with them either, for that same reason.
But I’ll pick back up again now!

144: LordApple
Me too! I’ll hunt those dark shadows!
If we can progress the event, then maybe some tameable demons will appear!

145: Ruach
I think that could be very possible.

146: Raspu
I’ll go talk to my Summoner friends!
If the prospect of getting a demon is on the horizon, I’m sure everyone will be motivated to defeat the shadow creatures!

147: Requiem
Necromancers will step up to bat too!
I want to get the event rewards! Even if I don’t end up getting a demon!

148: Longneck
Onmyoji reporting for duty too!

149: LordApple
Aren’t there only like ten Onmyoji players?

150: Longneck
Try eight!

151: LordApple
I-I see. Good luck, then.

152: Raspu
You know, Tamers should tell Silver-Haired to participate!
Silver-Haired alone is more capable than a thousand ordinary players!

153: LordApple
Grrr, there’s no denying that!

154: Requiem
There really isn’t...

155: Longneck
But you have a point.
I can just imagine it—while we’re just plugging away and trying our hardest to gather information, Silver-Haired might suddenly beat the boss!

156: Requiem
You’re right!

157: Raspu
Which means—we’re counting on you, Tamers!

158: LordApple
No way! I can’t do it, nuh-uh! No! Way!
I don’t even know the guy. If I don’t go about talking

to him the right way, the Defenders will have my head!

159: Ruach
I think you’re exaggerating, but still, we shouldn’t bother Silver-Haired.

160: Raspu
Ugh! Then what *should* we do?!

161: Ruach
I mean, what’s wrong with just plugging away at taking down the shadow monsters?

162: Requiem
All right! It’s Necromancers’ time to shine, baby!
This game will be filled with zombies and skeletons!

163: Longneck
No! If there’ll be more of anyone, it’ll be Onmyoji!
The devs always release a highlight reel, so I’m sure they will this time too!
I’ll steal the show this time around and get featured on that highlight reel! Just watch!

164: LordApple
The one stealing the show will be Silver-Haired, as always!
Which means it’s a win for Tamers!

165: Raspu
You’re supposed to say *you’ll* steal the show!

166: LordApple

I can’t imagine a reality where I’m the star and not Silver-Haired!

167: Ruach
Anyway, for now, why don’t we go search for those shadows?

168: Raspu
Right! I’ll use the event rewards to become a Demon Summoner!

169: Requiem
Me too! I’ll get a demon with necromancy! Don’t let me down, devs!

170: Longneck
Getting a demon as an Onmyoji... Hmm, I like the sound of that.
I’m on the case!

171: Ruach
You all are forgetting something. First we need to pray to Silver-Haired!
Please let me find a shadow creature! Go Silver-Haired!

172: LordApple
Hold on, how is that a prayer?

“Mmm, what a great way to wake up!”

I logged in to find my mascots and monsters playing in the yard, with ears of rice swaying in the distance...and a kappa raising its arms up at me.

“Gwak gwak.”

“Figured I’d find you here.”

Not only had this happened with the Sunekosuri, but I had learned about it through Hamakaze's information, so I was fully expecting the Kappa to be at my house.

As I thought, whether a yokai appeared at your home depended on its favorability score. In my case, I had formed a bond of friendship with it without hurting it, so its favorability towards me was already high. It was also possible that there were other ways to befriend it that didn't raise its favorability as highly. Plus, in my case, I also had the skill called Yokai Whisperer. It was a skill that helped raise my favorability with yokai, so that probably gave me a leg up with this one.

"You know, you seem a little different."

"Gwak?"

The creepiness that was present during the fight had vanished to the point that the creature was kind of charming now. The biggest difference was its eyes. The piercing gaze from last night had been replaced with big, round eyes. Its hair was glossy and sleek, and its claws were more rounded than sharp. Even its voice had lost its threatening edge and sounded more silly and cute. It had gone from being the monster starring in a Japanese-style horror flick to being a character in a kids' cartoon show.

"Anyway, this is for you."

"Gwak gwak!"

I handed it a cucumber, and it happily started munching on it. It was nice to have a new companion that fit in with my Japanese-style house. Incidentally, Kappas were capable of doing farmwork. Only when it came to cucumbers, though. I decided to entrust growing cucumbers in my garden to the Kappa. I wasn't sure how the Kappa's cultivating skills compared to someone like Olto, so I decided to start it off slowly.

Once the Kappa was finished eating the cucumber, it went back to play with my monsters. They were sumo wrestling each other.

"Hmmm!"

"Gwaaak!"

Um, is that gonna be a problem? There's not going to be any shirikodama taking if Himka loses, right?

“H-Hmmm?”

“Gwak gwaaak!”

Phew. Nothing to worry about. The Kappa had flung Himka away, but he just went right back for round two with a happy look on his face. It looked like they were wrestling purely for fun.

Once I was satisfied that the Kappa was settling in, I headed for my farm.

“I gathered a lot of materials from farming bosses and exploring the Squire’s Forest. Today, I’m going to focus on making fertilizer to use on the farm.”

While I was formulating plans for the day, I saw Olto come running over. He was full-on sprinting, which was unusual for him. *Did he miss me that much?* No, he did not.

“Mmm-mm! Mm-mmm!”

“Whoa, Olto?!”

He tugged hard on my robe, an action that I could only guess meant that something unusual had happened on the farm, so I followed him there.

“Whoa! What’s that weird thing growing there?!”

“Mmm!”

Among the Firestarter Plants had bloomed a mysterious plant with blue flowers. As I stared at it, I remembered something.

“That’s where I applied the elemental fertilizer and plant booster, isn’t it?”

“Mm!”

My experiment had evidently been a success. I inched closer to the mystery plant and appraised it. The name “Freeze Plant” appeared.

“Come to think of it, we applied water-type fertilizer and plant booster to Firestarter Plants, right?”

Fire and water made ice? I wasn’t sure that made a whole lot of sense to me.

“Only one ended up changing.”

One set of the fertilizer and plant booster could cover up to a quarter of a field, but only one plant had turned into a Freeze Plant. There was probably only a very small chance the fertilizer and plant

booster would make a plant mutate, rather than it being a surefire thing.

```
Name: Freeze Plant
Rarity: 4 / Quality: 1★
Effect: Ingredient.
```

"Okay, let's propagate this and grow more of them. Can you take care of that?"

"Mmm?"

"Huh? Is that a no? Can you not grow it here or something?"

"Mm-mm."

"Hm? So you *can* grow it? Ah, but it'll be low quality."

"Mm."

After more prodding, I learned that this plant couldn't reach beyond a one-star level of quality if grown on a regular farm, and I would need to apply water-type fertilizer and plant booster to it. Nevertheless, the fact that it was an undeniably exceptional plant hadn't changed. I decided to use a corner of a field to grow them for now.

"Hmm. If the Freeze Plant grew here, what does that mean for the other spots? Did things grow there too?"

"Mm."

"Really?! Show me!"

"Mm-mmm!"

The Freeze Plant wasn't the only mutation that had occurred. Most of the plants that I had experimented on by applying the fertilizer and plant boosters had undergone some sort of change.

I had applied air-type fertilizer to the Air Plants, which had turned into Breath Plants. The Gale Plants, which I'd applied earth-type fertilizer on, became Desert Grass. The Medicinal Herbs which had received the holy-type fertilizer turned into Purified Grass. *This elemental fertilizer is a force to be reckoned with.*

"Only the Lantern Pumpkins were duds."

"Mmm."

I had applied fire-type fertilizer to the Lantern Pumpkins, but they hadn't changed at all. And their quality was already maxed. Maybe it was pointless to use it on vegetables?

My plan was to make fertilizer and plant booster in mass quantities today, so I could do more experimenting with those.

"Let's clear out some space to use for experimenting. Could you refrain from planting anything in the herb garden?"

"Mm-mm!"

We'd been spending a lot of time adventuring lately. It was nice to have a day dedicated to crafting sometimes.

Once we had squared all that away, I tried to head back home for a brief moment, but apparently Olto had somewhere else he wanted to take me. The moment I tried stepping away, he clutched the hem of my robe, which almost made me topple over. He then led me to a spot where a plant I had never seen before was growing.

"Oh! The Unknown Seed I got at the auction!"

"Mm-mm!"

I had assumed that Unknown Seeds would take an extremely long time to grow, so it caught me completely off guard to see that it was already ready to be harvested.

"It sure is pretty though. It's glowing."

"Mmm."

The light shining from the plant was illuminating us in its pale-blue glow. It sort of looked like a fern with small, round fruits at the end of its slender leaves. Those fruits were the source of the light. I wondered if these could be a new source of material to make fluorescent paint.

However, once I appraised it, paint was the last thing on my mind.

```
Name: Magic-Boosting Miracle Herb
Rarity: 6 / Quality: 1★
Effect: Ingredient.
```

It had, amazingly, a rarity of six—the same rank as a Spirit's Fruit.

And considering it was called a Magic-Boosting Miracle Herb, it obviously had to be useful in some way. I didn't know how strong of an effect it would have, but I didn't know anyone who wouldn't want an item that provided something like a temporary boost to magic. Could I use it to make buffing items?

"This is awesome! Olto, can you grow this?"

"Mm."

I assumed the plant would need enchanted fertilizer to grow, but judging by Olto's smile and thumbs-up, apparently it had no problem growing in a regular field too. Think of all the experiments I could do if we could mass-produce these!

"I'll leave this to you too, then."

"Mm-mm!"

That was the last new plant Olto had to show me, so I tried once again to head back home to get some crafting work done. But then I remembered something.

"Oh yeah, I had another item with the name Miracle Herb."

I had remembered the amber that I had obtained in the last event. I went to go check out the amber that I had put on display with the ammonite.

```
Name: Amber (Miracle Herb)
Rarity: 4 / Quality: 9★
Effect: Ingredient. Decorative.
```

I also had another amber that had a plant inside it, though it wasn't a Miracle Herb.

```
Name: Amber (Plant)
Rarity: 4 / Quality: 6★
Effect: Ingredient. Decorative.
```

Was there a way I could extract the plant from the amber to obtain it as material? I only had one amber with a miracle herb, but I had several others that contained plants. I'd obtained them to use

as decoration, but if there was a chance I could get more crops, then that changed things.

For now, maybe I could try extracting the regular plant from the amber. If that worked, then I could try doing the same thing to get the miracle herb.

"All right! I'll try this out first before I make fertilizer."

The problem was how to go about cutting into the amber. A graver? A chisel?

"Hm?"

"...?"

"Oh? Are you two done sumo wrestling?"

"Hm!"

"...!"

I had placed the amber on top of the kotatsu in the living room and was puzzling over what to do when Himka and Sakura came in. They both inspected the amber curiously.

"I'm trying to think if there's a way to take the plants out from inside. Do you two know any way to do that?"

Among my monsters, Himka and Sakura were particularly handy. Plus, they knew a lot about carving and pounding things as experts in blacksmithing and woodworking, respectively. And wouldn't you know, when I asked them if they knew how to extract the plants, they both nodded with clear confidence.

"Oh, you can?"

"Hm."

"..."

It seemed like Himka and Sakura should be able to manage something with the amber. I decided to let them try taking out the regular plants from amber first, and then move on to the miracle herb. I brought them down to the workshop in the basement so that they could show me how it was done.

"All right, have at it."

"Hm-hm!"

"...!"

They both got to work at once using very similar methods. Himka was using a chisel and hammer for metalworking while Sakura was

using a woodworking chisel to chip away at the amber.

Specialized tools couldn't be used for different tasks. The tools looked the same, but a blacksmithing chisel and a woodworking chisel were entirely different things. Despite that, both types of tools worked on the amber. As I recalled, amber was fossilized tree resin, right? So maybe it had the characteristics of both plant and stone.

Sakura finished cutting through the amber slightly faster than Himka, most likely thanks to her advanced Woodworking skill and her Green Thumb skill. Himka was only twenty seconds behind her, though, so he was plenty fast too.

"...♪"

"Hm!"

"Well done. Let's see, Sakura extracted a Medicinal Herb, and Himka extracted a Paralyzing Plant."

While they had been inside the amber, they had just looked like small fernlike plants, but once they were extracted, they looked completely different. Both had a low quality, so I wouldn't say they were items I would want enough to break the amber for.

Although, the fact that there were different types of plants in each amber was interesting... The idea that there could be an amazing, rare plant embedded inside a chunk of amber made it feel a bit like a treasure hunt.

Why not cut through a few more, while leaving some alone for decoration? I wanted to practice doing it too, anyway.

"Sakura, now that you've shown me the ropes, I want to give it a try!"

"...♪"

Sakura clasped her hands in front of her chest as if she were saying "You can do it!"

I sat next to Himka, who was giving the amber another go, and placed a chisel to my own amber.

"I have a good feeling about this!"

"...♪"

"Hraaah!"

"...!"

Welp, I failed! It was a lot harder than it looked, and I had

accidentally made a large crack in the amber that made it split apart and shatter. That would've been fine if I could just take the plant out from there, but the plant inside ended up breaking apart along with the amber.

"Maybe I'll just let you two handle this."

"...!"

"Hm!"

They seemed to find this kind of work fun, so thankfully they were happy to do it.

After thirty minutes of cutting amber, they had created a spread of all different types of plants.

"Look at all this!" I exclaimed.

"...♪"

"Hmm!"

There were plants of all types of rarities, from common medicinal herbs and poison hemlocks to the more uncommon miracle herbs.

The most notably rare plant was, unsurprisingly, a kind of miracle herb. It was a smallish fern plant with red leaves and gave off a similar glow as the other one. It was taken out of a nine-star quality Amber (Miracle Herb). Sakura was the one who did all the hard work for it.

```
Name: Strength-Boosting Miracle Herb
Rarity: 6 / Quality: 1★
Effect: Ingredient.
```

While I still didn't know exactly what it could do, I was sure this was a great item. I mean, it said it was "strength-boosting." That had to mean it would raise attack power, and I bet it would affect endurance and agility too. And if it did, then speed, HP, and defense would also be impacted. It would be a great asset in battle.

Man, I couldn't wait to try it out. Though I only had one, so I couldn't experiment with it until I could grow more of it.

"And there's one other miracle herb. A strength-reducing one."

"...!"

Name: Strength-Reduction Miracle Herb
Rarity: 6 / Quality: 1★
Effect: Ingredient.

This must be a type of material that would apply a debuff on whoever it was used on. Apparently miracle herbs could do more than grant buffs. Its "effect" descriptions only stated that it was an ingredient, so it probably couldn't be used in this state, and was instead meant to be used as an ingredient to make a debuff item.

The surprising thing was that this item hadn't come from the Amber (Miracle Herb), but a six-star quality Amber (Plant). I'd only had one Amber (Miracle Herb). There was also one Purified Grass. It had come from an amber, granting me one more along with the one that I had picked from my farm. It seemed there was a minor chance to obtain a rare plant from the ambers—kind of like an amber gacha game.

"Hmm. Maybe I should buy a bunch of amber to cut open?"

I had the cash to burn! If it was necessary, I had no problem flaunting my newly found wealth.

No, wait. Wasn't it possible someone else had tried out this very same thing? After all, anyone could see that there were plants inside the amber. There should have been a lot of people who had obtained amber at the end of the event, and many who had brought all that back with them. Should I try poking Alyssa for information? She might have more to tell me about miracle herbs in general too.

Actually, before that, I figured I should ask my neighbor.

I entrusted the miracle herbs with Olto, then headed out to the farm right next to mine. I was on the way to see Tagosack, a top Farmer. I had said hello to her earlier, so I knew she'd be there. When I called her name, a beautiful woman appeared in her usual jumpsuit getup.

"Heeey! Tagosack!"

"Hm? What's up, Yuto? Need somethin'?"

"I wanted to ask you something. Have you heard of a mir—"

"Hold it!"

Right as I tried to ask her about miracle herbs, Tagosack abruptly held up her hands and stopped me from saying anything else. *Huh? Is she in a hurry or something? And her eyes keep darting around...*

"I'll hear ya out, okay? Just come into my farm."

Oh, she wasn't in a hurry, she just wanted to give me her full attention. Nice!

"We can't have any crazy info gettin' leaked."

"Huh? What?"

I didn't quite catch what she muttered at the end there...

"Oh, nothin'. I've just gotten more confident in my herbal tea-making skills. I thought you might like to try it."

"Really? I'd love to try some!"

The herbal tea Tagosack served me was really good. She must have been trying out a bunch of new blends. The flavor was so tasty that I almost forgot the reason that I had come here.

"So, what's up?" Tagosack asked.

"Oops, nearly slipped my mind. I actually wanted to ask you about a crop. Have you heard of a miracle herb? This is what it looks like."

I showed Tagosack a screenshot of the plant and its data as she asked me questions about it. Then, as she peered at the screenshot, she suddenly froze.

"Hold on a second here..."

"It was chiseled out of an amber."

"Hey! You can't just drop a bomb on me like that! And now I've gone and heard some super valuable info! H-How am I s'posed to pay ya back?! God, am I glad I made ya come into my farm!"

According to Tagosack, a lot of people *had* cut through the amber, but there was no word of anyone obtaining a miracle herb from a lower quality amber. And, although she knew of someone who had obtained a miracle herb from a high-quality amber, she hadn't heard of them being able to cultivate it.

"Huh? Really?"

"Yeah. Lots of people are interested in those amber-encased plants. Even the Verification Clan has been experimenting and has

successfully extracted them."

Tagosack explained that the clan had been largely successful in chiseling out plants from six-star Amber (Plant) items. However, the plants that came out all had a low rarity, and none of them seemed particularly useful.

"If anyone had gotten an unknown plant like a miracle herb or purified grass, don'tcha think it'd be a little more of a hot topic?"

"Hmm. So in other words, the chances of getting a rare plant is a miracle?"

"Or, you're the only one who's fulfilled some special condition to make that happen."

A special condition that only *I* fulfilled? But Sakura was the one who did the chiseling... If the requirement was that a monster had to chisel out the plant, then that gave way too much of an advantage to Tamers. But it couldn't be her advanced Woodworking skill. I was sure there were plenty of players who had that skill.

"Beats me."

"That purified grass is a problem too, but the miracle herb? Hoo boy. One of my Farmer friends has tried growing miracle herbs, but with no luck."

"Hmm. I mean, I haven't succeeded yet either... But Olto did say he could grow it."

Considering how confident he looked, I doubted he would fail. Or had a crop appeared that even Olto couldn't grow?

"Tell me when ya figure out how to grow miracle herbs, all right? I'll compensate ya in turn. Oh, but before that, I gotta pay you for the info ya just told me..."

"Don't be silly, you don't have to do that."

"But this is some real big news."

"If I accept any sort of payment, it'll be like I extorted you!"

I was the one who came over here and blabbed everything. Demanding compensation would be way too unfair. But Tagosack wouldn't let it go, so we struck a deal—she would give me some of the herbal tea that she had served me today.

"First I'll double-check with Olto that he can actually grow miracle herbs."

Then, I would stock up on amber and have Sakura chisel out the plants. She was the one who'd obtained the miracle herb, so there was probably something special about the way she did it.

Once I was back on my own farm, I asked Olto about the miracle herbs.

"About this miracle herb, you *are* able to cultivate it, right?"

Based on the answer I got, it seemed so.

"Mmm-mm!" Olto said as he struck a confident pose. Well, the only way to know was to try, so I'd leave him to it.

Next, I headed to the island that had been the site of that grand adventure event. It was currently possible to teleport to the Bazaar, the island's city. My goal was acquiring amber. Tagosack had told me that NPCs were now selling them there.

"Whoa, it's summer!"

"Triii!"

"Kee-hee."

"Neigh!"

I had brought with me the three monsters who hadn't yet had a chance to visit the island. I wasn't planning on fighting anything here, so I was fine without a full party.

Unlike the Town of Beginnings, where the climate was closer to springtime, here, the sunlight was strong and the air hot. Coupled with the more Western style of the Bazaar, I felt like I was in a European town in summertime. Somewhere like Andalusia. Not that I'd ever been there.

Accompanied by my monsters, I headed to my destination: a large market in the center of the Bazaar.

"Just like she said, they're selling amber."

"Kee-hee!"

"Triii!"

The lineup of stores was about the same as it had been during the event, but there was a lot more amber and ammonite for sale.

"Wow! Look at the size of that rhinoceros beetle!"

"N-Neigh?"

"There's a killifish! Hmm, those fish bowls look pretty nice."

There were pet bugs and fish put on display, as well as plenty of

extra-large aquariums available for purchase. Dang it, I wanted it all! The youthful heart I was in danger of losing had healed to full health!

"Aha ha ha ha ha ha!"

"Triii."

"Hmm?"

"Kee-hee!"

"Whoops, sorry. Guess I went a little overboard."

Before I knew it, I had bought loads of different items. I suddenly had one million less gold than I had brought.

"Jeez, where did all my money go? Ha ha ha."

"Neigh..."

"D-Don't look at me like that. What do you expect?! I-It's the city's fault! Their products are just too good!"

"Trii..."

"Sorry."

"Kee-hee."

I'm being comforted by Lilith! By a mischief-loving demon, of all people!

"A-Anyway, let's go buy amber. I think I see a shop selling some up ahead. C-Come on, let's go!"

"Neigh..."

"Triii..."

"Kee-hee..."

"Don't sigh at me!"

A trio of sighs! But at least Carro is fitting in just fine!

Accompanied by my monsters, now glaring at me, I headed for the shop selling amber. It wasn't a proper shop in a building, but an ordinary stall, with piles of amber for sale.

"Welcome," the seller greeted me. "Are you looking to buy some amber?"

"Do you have any with plants inside? Miracle herbs in particular."

"Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. In that case, these might be of interest to you."

The seller had ten ambers for purchase that contained plants, and only one with a miracle herb... But I did see something amazing.

Something I had never seen before—a ten-star quality amber.

"Whoa, now this is something..."

```
Name: Amber (Fossil)
Rarity: 4 / Quality: 10★
Effect: Ingredient. Decorative.
```

This was my first time seeing an amber with the highest quality. It was gigantic, the size of a balance ball, and inside it was the skull of a raptor.

I *needed* it. But it was priced at 15,000,000 G... Even the nine-star amber with a miracle herb inside was only 6,000,000 G. Did it have some sort of crazy good effect? As of now, the only ways that were known to use them were to make them into equipment or use as decoration.

But wait, could an amber that big even be used for accessories? No way, right? In that case, it really could only be used for decoration. Even if I took the fossil out, I didn't know how to use that either. But it looked amazingly cool. Even if it couldn't be used for anything, using it as decoration was reason enough to get it.

"I'll hold back on that for now."

After all, I felt like my monsters were staring at me with some exasperation now. I could be imagining things, but considering their reaction from before, well...

I bought all the ambers with plants and miracle herbs inside, and then I headed to the next shop. This wasn't the only stall that was selling amber. I went around to five more stalls and ended up with forty ambers with plants and five ambers with miracle herbs. With this amount, I wouldn't have to go mining for any.

"I splurged a bit, but...I can still afford it."

Afford what, you ask? An amber-encased fossil! The other stalls had been selling amber with fossils too, and ones that had other bones besides skulls. There was one with a giant fang that looked like it'd come from a Tyrannosaurus rex or a Spinosaurus, and one with the right forearm of a raptor.

Honestly, I wanted all of them, but the one that would look coolest on the display was probably the raptor's skull.

"H-Hey, guys?"

"Triii?"

"Neigh?"

"Kee-hee?"

"C-Can I buy this? It's okay, right? I'm sure everyone will love to see it displayed. Probably. Plus, there might come a day where I can use it for something. So it's probably best that I get it now while I can. I just know it! L-Look, I'll buy you all whatever you want too! How about it?"

"..."

Glares! Such strong glares I've never endured before! The king of all glares!



Well, I still bought it anyway! I wanted it, okay?!

Once we got back home, I'd put this amber-encased skull on display. Oh, and yes, I bought a little something for my three monsters too: a decorative houseplant for Olea, a carrot-shaped figurine for Carro, and a skull lamp for Lilith. Each item matched their personalities.

Once we got back home, I'd put those up for them too. But I wasn't sure where to put the skull lamp...

Chapter Two: Yokai Summoning

After stocking up on amber, I returned to the Town of Beginnings. Then, having remembered something very important, I teleported straight to Red City in Zone Ten.

"I completely forgot that I raised my Riding skill to level 10."

"Neigh!"

"Sorry, sorry!"

I had fulfilled the school quest that I had accepted a while ago without even realizing it.

```
School Quest
Description: Raise Riding skill to level 10.
Reward: 1,000 G
Time Limit: None
```

The original reason I had tamed Carro in the first place had been to complete this school quest, but I had gotten so distracted with the new forest and all the new crops that it had slipped my mind completely. It was, by all accounts, a combat quest, so I guess it just wasn't at the forefront of my mind.

Once I made it to the Magical Beasts' Guild, I asked to see Sagitta, and was able to meet with him right away.

"Oh my! You've raised your Riding skill to level 10! That's fantastic. You've completed the quest!" Sagitta said, excitedly announcing my completion of the quest. Seeing how happy he was about it made me feel a little guilty for forgetting about it.

"Th-Thanks."

"And with that, you are now an official member of the Centaur School," Sagitta informed me. Apparently I hadn't been considered affiliated with the school until this very moment.

"You have earned the title 'Centaur School Apprentice.'"

"Oh, nice."

At last, I was an apprentice. I had a feeling that enrolling wasn't the end of the story, and my title would update as I completed quests for the school. And sure enough, I got a notification for a new quest.

```
School Quest
Description: Raise a long-range attack skill to level
20.
Reward: 1,000 G
Time Limit: None.
```

As soon as the quest popped up, I also heard an announcement informing me I had completed it, and I received the 1,000 G reward. Earlier, Sagitta had told me that magic was considered an acceptable method of attack, and since my water magic was at level 50, the game recognized that I had already fulfilled the conditions.

"Your 'Centaur School Apprentice' title has changed to 'Centaur School Beginner Rank.'"

"Wow, that's amazing!" Sagitta rejoiced. "You've excelled beyond an apprentice! Please continue to be diligent in your learning."

"Y-Yes, sir."

Wait, this is going too fast! I wanted to learn some things as an apprentice!

"Here are the details of your next test."

"O-Okay."

```
School Quest
Description: Defeat 500 monsters using long-range
attacks while on a mount.
Reward: 10,000 G
Time Limit: None.
```

Jeez, this one looks like a lot more effort. Defeating weak

monsters would probably be sufficient, but that would still take a lot of time. But, well, this one didn't have a time limit either, so I could complete it at my leisure.

Having reached a good stopping point with my school quests, I teleported back home from the Magical Beasts' Guild to take a breather. I had planned to craft all day but had ended up doing a whole bunch of other things instead.

"Poko."

"Oh, thanks, Kettle!"

As soon as I sat down on my veranda, Kettle promptly came over and served me tea. By this point, the yokai had developed the impeccable timing of a competent butler.

"Gwak?"

"Kapa?"

"Kappa, you came to hang out? And Taro's here too!"

The Kappa yokai and Taro the Mini Kappa mascot came over to me. They looked friendly with each other, and I wondered if they got along well because of their similarities. In any case, I drank tea and relaxed as the two friends sat by my side. I stroked Kettle's fluffy tail on my right side and admired the kappas sitting on my left. Both the Kappa and the Mini Kappa were eating through cucumbers as though their mouths were electric pencil sharpeners. I was entertained just watching.

A Japanese-style house, yokai, and green tea... This was the life. In that moment, I didn't even feel like I was playing as a Tamer in a Western-inspired fantasy world.

Once I had spent thirty or so minutes relaxing on the veranda and enjoying the view of my cute creatures, I decided to shut myself back into the workshop.

"Sakura, Himka. I brought more amber. Can you work on these too?"

"...♪"

"Hm!"

Sakura and Himka looked super enthusiastic to be given more amber. It was simple work, but they must have enjoyed the gacha aspect of not knowing what was going to come out from inside. I

understood how they felt.

"And Reflet and Fau, you two are going to make fertilizer with me."

"Hum!"

"Aye-aye!"

I left the amber-cutting to the experts while I would be working on increasing our supply of fertilizer, which had been my original plan for the day.

"Tra-la!"

"Oh, do you want to work in here too, Eine?"

"Tra-la-la!"

Eine arrived on scene in the workshop, evidently wanting to work in the same room as the rest of us. She started passing a needle and thread through the cloth she was working on. The needle, which was the size of a rapier during battle, conveniently turned into the size of a normal needle when she used it for crafting.

She seemed to be using her Sewing skill to turn the fabric she had made herself into some sort of item. So far, Eine had been making various types of fabric as well as a good number of test pieces of simple accessories like handkerchiefs and scarves. Of course, she was also able to make stuffed toys, but on top of being time-consuming to make, I thought she wasn't at the point yet that she could make anything that had a very high rarity... But maybe things had changed. I wondered if she had raised her Sewing skill level enough that she could make them more easily now. The thing she was currently working on was clearly three-dimensional.

"What are you making?" I asked her.

"Tra-la-la!"

"Hmm?"

Eine held up the fabric to show me, but since I knew nothing about sewing, I couldn't tell what it was.

"Tra-la! Tra-la!"

"Okay, I get it. I know you're working hard, you don't need to shove it against my face!"

"Tra-la-la."

Anyway, the one thing I was certain about was that Eine was

making something out of cloth. Soon I would be able to add Eine-made products to my unmanned stand. With tableware, meals, and now textile products in the lineup of goods, it barely seemed like a farm stand at all.

"All right, today we'll work on our crafting projects together!"

"...♪"

"Hm!"

"Reflet, can you supply us with water? Fau, you're on Alchemy duty with me."

"Humm."

"Aye."

And so, using all the materials that I had obtained, we made mass quantities of fertilizer. Judging by how cheerful and animated they were acting, my monsters must have enjoyed our crafting time too.

Around the time we finished making enough fertilizer and plant booster, Sakura and Himka were in the home stretch with their amber cutting. They seemed to have gotten a good hang of the process—they were really going at it with their chisels. They were carving away at the amber with such force that I was starting to get worried just watching them. If it had been me doing that, I definitely would have failed, but Sakura and Himka were totally locked in. They were able to extract the contents of the amber without breaking it. Unfortunately, the amber shavings disappeared afterwards, so I couldn't reuse them for something else.

"...!"

"Hm!"

The two of them finished with their last amber at nearly the same time, looking pleased with themselves as they clutched the plants they'd obtained.

"A medicinal herb and a poison hemlock, huh?"

"...♪"

"Hmm!"

Sakura and Himka mimed wiping sweat off their brow with a look of satisfaction. They were happier about the fact that they had successfully extracted the plants than about the plants' rarity.

They had chiseled plants out of a total of eighty-five ambers, which left them with a very large spread of flowering plants on top of the table.

"They're all just ordinary plants, though."

There were medicinal herbs, poison hemlocks, and paralyzing plants—all eighty-five plants were all ones that could be found in the vicinity of the Town of Beginnings. Which meant that all the Amber (Plant) items had all been duds. Maybe the miracle herbs and purified grass that they had extracted earlier had truly been a wild stroke of luck. Or maybe amber purchased from a stall simply wouldn't yield any super rare materials?

If the only chance of getting rarer materials was from amber that I mined myself, that would make things pretty difficult.

"Well, at least you were able to get some miracle herbs from the ones called Amber (Miracle Herb)."

"Hm!"

"...♪"

Sakura and Himka had acquired three new types of miracle herbs.

```
Name: Magic-Reduction Miracle Herb
Rarity: 6 / Quality: 1★
Effect: Ingredient.

Name: Endurance-Boosting Miracle Herb
Rarity: 6 / Quality: 1★
Effect: Ingredient.

Name: Endurance-Reduction Miracle Herb
Rarity: 6 / Quality: 1★
Effect: Ingredient.
```

In addition to these three, they had also extracted a strength-boosting herb and another endurance-boosting herb. Yes, *two* endurance buffers.

"Okay, I'll give the new herbs to Olto, and then... What should I

do with these duplicates?”

I would ideally turn them into potions or something if I could, but I didn’t know the proper recipes. Among the potions and items I knew how to make, not one of them had a recipe that included miracle herbs as a required ingredient. Should I take a shot in the dark and try making a decoction or crushing them up into a mixture?

“Hey, Reflet, Fau. Do you know any recipes that use miracle herbs?”

“Humm.”

“Aye...”

Apparently not. But there was someone else who raised her hand.

“Tra-la!”

“Huh? You know a way to use these, Eine?”

“Tra-la-la.”

I was shocked to find out Eine knew a recipe that used miracle herbs. Eine specialized in skills that had to do with clothing and such, like weaving and sewing. Just the other day, she’d been working on making a fabric organizer and a stuffed toy. But the idea of letting her take the wheel seemed more promising than trying and failing to make potions without any sort of recipe.

“Okay then, I’ll leave it to you, Eine!”

“Tra-la-la!”

“Which one are you going to use?” I asked, placing the miracle herbs in front of Eine.

“Tra-la... Tra-la!”

After some contemplating, Eine picked up the Endurance-Boosting Miracle Herb. Then, she handed the herb to Fau.

“Tra-la.”

“Aye?”

“Traaa-la.”

“Aye.”

After some back-and-forth, Fau took the miracle herb and brought it over to the brewing stand. Eine had apparently asked her to process it in some way. I watched intently as Fau crushed up the herb into a fine powder. Eine was very satisfied with the result. She pinched the powder in her fingers and inspected it with the air of an

artisan. The miracle herb was still sparkling even in its powder form. It looked a bit like glitter.

Eine then picked up the container of fine powder and dumped it into a pot she had set up.

"Tra-la-la."

"Huh? You're adding water?"

"Tra-la!"

Once she poured in the water, Eine lit a fire under the pot, and the concoction started to simmer. Based simply on the steps she was taking, I could only assume she was making a potion. But it soon became clear that wasn't the case. Eine vanished from the room, only to return with a new item.

"Is that fabric?"

"Tra-la!"

```
Name: Small Spirit Silk Cloth
Rarity: 5 / Quality: 7★
Effect: Ingredient.
```

What Eine had brought out was the finest piece of fabric that she had ever made.

Silkworms produced different fibers depending on what they were fed. If fed medicinal herbs or other common plants, they produced regular fibers. If fed plants with an elemental attribute, like Firestarter Plants, they would produce fibers with that element.

And to have them produce the spirit thread used to make spirit silk cloth, the silkworms had to be fed special materials like a branch from an elemental or spirit tree. To make even the smallest wrapping cloth-sized piece of fabric required five to ten pieces of thread. The quality and difficulty to make the cloth changed depending on the number of threads used.

Eine took that small piece of cloth, which had taken so much time and effort to make, and tossed it into the pot without a second's hesitation.

"Tra-la!"

“Whoa, what? What’re you doing?”

“Tra-la-la-la-la!”

Eine rubbed the cloth with her tiny hands like she was scrubbing it clean. Then, once the cloth was properly submerged in water, she used a pole to start churning it.

She did that for ten minutes, which was a long time for crafting actions in this game. Then, she took the cloth out of the pot and started drying it with air magic.

We all watched attentively at the gradually changing cloth. As it dried, it became pale green in color and started emitting light in the same way the miracle herbs did. Eine must have used the Dyeing skill she’d learned at level 40 to transfer the color of the miracle herb to the spirit cloth.

“Tra-la-la!”

```
Name: Small Spirit Silk Cloth (Dyed)
Rarity: 5 / Quality: 4★
Effect: Ingredient. Grants a boost to Endurance.
```

“Whoa! So dyeing doesn’t just make something a different color?!”

“Tra-la!”

Apparently, dyeing could also apply a special effect to a fabric. Now if I used this piece of cloth to make armor, would it grant a bonus to Endurance? That’d be awesome!

But what I was more struck by was the cloth’s appearance.

“Its effects *are* great, but look at the way it’s shining.”

“Tra-la-la.”

The cloth that Eine had used the miracle herb to dye was emitting a beautiful, soft-green light. It wasn’t just that it was a glossy piece of fabric, the cloth itself was shining.

“Anything made with this will be really pretty. Actually, I guess that would make it conspicuous, huh?”

“Tra-la?”

Wearing something made of this cloth would most likely put a big

target on your back in a place like a dark forest. And it would definitely make someone stand out when they were trying to be stealthy. Taking that into account, there were definitely some downsides to making equipment with this cloth. It could be used to make a cute stuffed animal instead, but that would be a waste of its effects. There had to be some type of equipment it could be good for...

"Can you use this to make equipment that doesn't stand out so much?" I asked Eine.

"Tra-la-la." Eine said with a vigorous shake of her head.

"I'll take that as a no."

This time, she nodded. "Tra-la."

So there was no way for her to make something that wouldn't be conspicuous with a cloth that was shining as brightly as this. I figured as much.

"Okay then, then could you make it into something me or one of our crew could equip?"

Eine had gone through the effort of making this cloth, so I wanted to put it to good use. After I asked my question, Eine held the cloth up high and puffed out her chest. *Mm-hmm, cute pose.* Oh, wait. She was probably just letting me know she could.

"Great! Go ahead and make it!"

"Tra-la!"

Eine promptly spread the cloth out on her sewing table and started passing a needle and thread through it. The thread appeared to be spirit silk.

She folded the cloth into pleats, sewed them down, then repeated the process. It looked similar to how someone would fold pleats into the edges of gyoza dough. From my perspective, as a person who had never seen someone sew in real life, it looked like Eine was working at a tremendously fast pace.

"That's amazing, Eine."

"Tra-la-la!"

I ended up getting entranced and watched her work until she was finished. What she had made was a large-petaled flower made of fabric.

"It's a corsage!"

"Tra-la!"

```
Name: Spirit Silk Cloth Corsage
Rarity: 5 / Quality: 3★ / Durability: 380
Effect: Defense +20, Max HP +8, Endurance +3
Requirement: Sanity 10 or higher
Weight: 1
```

Hey, this is pretty good. The extra eight points of HP was a nice bonus, but that +3 to Endurance was also great for a backliner. It wasn't super powerful or anything, but it was definitely useful. The only problem was it was just a little too cutesy for me to wear. It was a glittery, green flower corsage, after all. The flower looked like it was based on a peony. It was clearly meant for women.

"Tra-la-la."

Eine was looking at me expectantly. Did she want me to equip it?

"Is there someone you want to wear this?"

"Tra-la!" Eine exclaimed as she pointed right at me. There was no getting out of it now.

"Of course you do."

There was no denying it was a useful piece of equipment anyway, so why not? *I'll equip it!*

"Wh-What do you think? Does it look good on me?"

"Tra-la-la!"

Well, if Eine was happy with it, that was reason enough to wear it for a little while.

"Okay, let's get back on track. What should I do with the other miracle herb?" I pondered aloud. I could just let Eine make something with that too, but I wanted to make something new out of it.

"Right, I'll pay a visit to Alyssa and see if she knows any recipes."

However, after checking my friends list, I saw that Alyssa wasn't online. Now what should I do? Wait for her? But even just a fifteen-minute break in the real world was an hour in the game. And if she

had left to go run some kind of errand, then she wouldn't be back online for a while.

"Hmm. I want to decide how to use this miracle herb by the end of the day, though..."

No, hang on. Even though I always bought information from Alyssa, I had no real reason not to buy from someone else. I had only been going through Alyssa to buy and sell information because I didn't feel like negotiating with someone I didn't know...

But I *did* know other people in the Quick-Eared Cats now, so why not go buy from them? Lewin specialized in information related to smithing, but there were other people who might be able to help me, like Maple, Carlo, and Highwood.

"The person most likely to know something would probably be...Maple?"

She was a Farmer, which meant the likelihood was high that she knew about miracle herbs. Plus she was online, so I decided to give her a call.

"Hellooo," Maple answered. "It's lovely to hear from you."

"Is this a good time to talk?" I asked.

"Why yeees! How can I help you?"

"I wanted to purchase some information, but Alyssa is logged out right now."

"Aaah, I see. Well, if you don't mind going through me, I would be happy to do business with you."

Woo-hoo! Score! I decided to meet up with Maple right away to buy information from her. Her farm was really close by—only a short, three-minute walk away from mine.

"Thanks for having me over," I said as I entered.

"Mm-mmm."

"Hello and welcome to my faaarm," Maple greeted me.

Her farm was currently an unorganized mess of crops. I guessed she was in the middle of experimenting rather than planting crops for profit.

"Mm-mmm."

"Mmm!"

"Mm?"

"Mm-mm!"

Olto started playing happily with another gnome on Maple's farm. Recently, gnomes had been popping up on many people's farms, thanks to more Farmers learning about the usefulness of gnomes and obtaining Taming skills to get them. Some farms even had multiple gnomes. Gnomes all had slight variations in hairstyles and facial features, so it was fun to walk around farm plots to look at them.

"My Remrem is playing with Olto...!" Maple exclaimed. "Wh-What a marvelous sight!"

"Um, Maple?"

"Ah! They're holding hands! Oh, this is just wonderful!"

"Maaaple?"

"Aaah! My heart! They're attached at the hip already! Th-They've become fast friends!"

Maple was drooling and muttering to herself as she watched Olto and Remrem play. She was acting like a ditzy, doting older sister, and I realized suddenly that she was a big gnome fan. And a bit of an extreme one at that. I also suspected she was probably a bit of a shipper.

"Mrrrghhh!"

"*Maple!*"

"O-Oh no, there's the alarm! I need to calm down. Hee, hee, hoooo. Hee, hee, hooo."

"Why are you doing the Lamaze technique?!"

"Aaahhh!" Maple cried, her expression dazed and unfocused.

"Hey, Maple! Earth to Maple! Snap out of it!" I shouted close to her ear.

I felt like I was committing borderline harassment, but since she wasn't responding to my attempts to grab her attention normally, this felt like my only option. This didn't seem like the time to be worried about common courtesy.

"Oh! Pardon me. It seems I had a small fit. Alyssa's always scolding me for doing that."

"A-A fit...? And you say you have these a lot?"

She got like that so often that she said Alyssa was "always"

scolding her for it? This problem ran deeper than I imagined. The Quick-Eared Cats really were filled with some interesting characters.

I suddenly felt drained, but I couldn't go back home just yet. I still hadn't done what I came here for. I breathed out a sigh, then said, "So, I'd like to buy some information. Can I do that?"

"Yes, of cooourse. Goodness, I almost forgot. You wanted to ask about miracle herbs?"

"Yeah, I wanted to ask about recipes. And other ways they can be used."

Since I had monsters who could perform a wide range of crafting actions, any recipe had the possibility of being useful. Maple gave me recipes for how to make a buff and debuff potion. Since they were original recipes made by players, that told me that the official in-game recipes for these hadn't been figured out yet.

"The effects and quality of the items made with these recipes will be somewhat limited. They won't result in items at the level of those made with a proper recipe," Maple explained.

"So that's why it's called an Inferior Buff Potion?"

"Precisely."

The proper recipe could probably be unlocked with some tweaking of this player-made recipe, but that would require a lot of miracle herbs.

"Anything else you'd like to know?" Maple asked.

"I'm interested in how the herbs could be used as intermediary ingredients. Not just for potions either. It seems like they can be used to make equipment too."

Maple showed me data on a weapon. It was an iron sword made using an Endurance-Reduction Miracle Herb.

Ability-wise, it was like any other iron sword, but it was called an Iron Sword+ and dealt a slight Endurance debuff to its target.

"Interesting, this seems pretty useful," I remarked.

"Yes, doesn't it? We're conducting our own research on it, so we should have more interesting information about it in the near future."

Next, Maple showed me some pretty nifty-looking items: Miracle Herb Potpourri and a Pressed Flower Bookmark.

"Potpourri!" I exclaimed. "And it comes with an effect!"

Around the time I first started playing this game—which, since time passed four times faster in the game, was only two real-world weeks ago—I had tried to make potpourri and failed.

I even researched how to make it in the real world, but I still couldn't make it work, so I had completely forgotten about it... But apparently, someone had figured it out.

"I see, I should be able to make it pretty easily now," I said.

"Yeees, it's simple as long as your Alchemy level is high enough. Aaand it's even easier if you know Concoct and Cooking."

The ingredients were dried flowers, essential oil, and clean cloth. Essential oil was what I hadn't been able to obtain in the early stages of the game and what led me to giving up. But now that I had learned the Alchemy art Extract, I shouldn't have much trouble making it.

If I made decorative potpourri, it wouldn't have any special effects, but it would have a scent that would last forever. If I made potpourri to be used as an item, then it could function to grant special buffs to my party or deal debuffs to enemies. Incidentally, once the number of available uses for the item-type potpourri had depleted, it would turn into trash.

The main purpose of miscellaneous herbs was their scent anyway, so those were best used for decorations that had no effect. If I were to make something with miracle herbs, then I should make an item that would make the best use of their abilities.

"This bookmark looks pretty unique too," I said admiringly.

"Ooh yes, but it's just an ordinary bookmark for anyone who doesn't use spellbooks."

Maple explained that it was an accessory that only granted an effect to the user when it was placed inside a spellbook. Sawyer would be overjoyed to have an item like this. Actually, I had to assume that Sawyer himself was the source of this information.

"Is there anything else?" I asked.

"Nooope, that's all."

"Huh? Really? Okay then, do you know anything about this?"

I showed Maple the cloth Eine made using her Dyeing skill and

the corsage she had made with that. It really was eye-catching.

"Y-Yes, I was wondering what that shiny thing on your chest was! Do you mind if I appraise it?"

"Go ahead."

"Okay then, if you don't mind— Whaaaaat?! I-It can't be!"

"Ah, you too, Maple?"

That hurt my ears! Did *all* the members of the Quick-Eared Cats scream like Alyssa did when they were surprised by something?

I waited until Maple had calmed down, then I told her how Eine had crafted the corsage.

"I-It wasn't an intermediary ingredient? That must be why there's no plus sign... I don't believe anyone has tried to use miracle herbs as a dyeing agent yet. At least, we haven't received any information about it..."

Maple was muttering to herself for a while as she took in the information, but it didn't take long for her to look back up and stare at me with a probing look.

"Y-Yuto."

"Y-Yes?"

"Handling significant information like this falls under Alyssa's domain. Next time you have information to sell, please go directly to her."

"What? Seriously?"

"Yes, you absolutely must."

"O-Okay, I will."

Even though I had gone to Maple to buy information, I somehow walked away with more money. Just a little, though, since I had bought more information on top of the recipes.

"Now that I have these recipes, what should I do with my remaining miracle herb?"

My options were potpourri, a potion, or a bookmark.

"I can't go wrong with a potion," I decided.

I had no use for the bookmark, and I could try making potpourri another time with ordinary flowers. First, I figured I should start with attempting to make a more common item. The recipe for making an Inferior Buff Potion was a miracle herb, five-star quality or higher

water, a healing-type ingredient, and a medium-grade medicinal herb.

"I'll use this Strength-Boosting Miracle Herb, water I collected in Zone Ten, a Spirit Peach, and a Medium-Grade Medicinal Herb. That should do it."

I decided to start by using the best items I had at my disposal. Now all I had to do was combine them together.

"Concoct— Hmm. Inferior was a good way to put it. The quality is low."

Even though I used top-notch ingredients, since I hadn't used an official recipe, I hadn't been able to avoid the inferior quality.

```
Name: Inferior Buff Potion
Rarity: 5 / Quality: 2★
Effect: Minor boost to Strength for one hour. Effect
does not stack. 18-minute cooldown time.
```

Honestly, I wasn't sure if it had been worth the effort. The amber-encased miracle herb had cost me six million G, and I used some valuable ingredients. There was no denying this had put me in the red.

Although, if I could successfully mass-produce miracle herbs, then I might be able to figure out a recipe that granted a better effect. For now, though, the potion was getting stored away in my inventory.

"Next up... How about potpourri?"

Generally speaking, potpourri was made by adding essential oils to dried flowers to give it a scent, then placing the mixture into bags to let it age. There were more steps to it when making it in the real world, but it was a quick and easy process in game.

"Aye!"

"Tra-la! ♪"

"Oh hey, you two. Wanna help out? Okay then, first, let's go pick some flowers."

"Aye-aye!"

"Tra-la!"

We weren't growing a huge number of flowers, but we had a decent spread that included tulips, sunflowers, and cosmos. And it was finally their time to shine.

"All right, let's get a few of each, but don't pick them all!"

Together, Fau, Eine, and I picked flowers, dropping them into a basket as we went. After not even ten minutes, we had a full basket.

"Aye!"

"Oh, do you want to carry the basket, Fau? Be careful not to drop it."

"Aye."

The basket was even bigger than she was, but Fau lifted it and carried it towards the barn. Next to her flew a little girl with white hair, the pair surrounded by a field of colorful flowers.

"Hmm, now that's a fantastical sight."

"Tra-la?"

"Nothing, I'm coming."

We would have to make do with the barn as our crafting location. Himka and Reflet were using the workshop right now, after all.

"First step is drying the flowers. Fau, could you do the honors?"

"Aye-aye!"

"And Eine, could you make the cloth bags? Something small, and they don't need to have any effects."

"Tra-la!" Eine said with a salute.

Man, it had been a while since I'd gotten a salute from my monsters. Fau and Eine looked razor-focused, but they still just ended up looking adorable.

"As for me, I'll be extracting the essential oils."

There were two methods for doing this. The first was using Extract, an Alchemy skill. The other method was to crush and press the flowers. There were other ways to do it that required special tools, but those first two methods were the easiest methods for me to try.

"I'll go ahead and try both of those methods."

And so, after producing essential oils using both methods, I found that they produced more or less the same result. It was hard to tell

a difference since the oils didn't have any special effects. In that case, it was best to go with the easier method from now on, which was using Extract.

Since essential oils were used to give things a scent, what if I tried mixing them into a potion or something? Actually, never mind. It would probably be hard to down a potion that smelled like flowers. Besides, my goal right now was making potpourri.

From my attempts at making several different types of essential oils, I found that I could use Extract on nearly all of the flower types. One other thing I found was that despite it being possible to extract essential oils from fruit skins, attempting to do so in game only resulted in the skins turning into trash. I tried using whole fruits instead, but I just ended up making juice, so I gave up on that for now.

"The fun part starts now," I announced to Fau and Eine. "Let's try out a bunch of different combinations."

"Aye-aye!"

"Tra-la-la!"

"What should we start with?"

I began by pouring lily essential oil onto dried cosmos. The scent was just okay.

"Aye...! Aye!"

"Tra-la."

"Aye-aye..."

"Tra-la.♪"

Hey now, what's that about? Fau sniffed the fragrance she created and then pulled a face. She must have created something awful. Meanwhile, Eine seemed to have a certain sense for this. She was an air elemental, so maybe fragrance was part of her area of expertise. She let me sniff her creation—it smelled heavenly.

From there, we tried making several more combinations and confirmed something devastating.

"I have a bad sense of smell. And so do you, Fau."

"Aye!"

"Ahhh! D-Don't get mad!"

Apparently, telling her she had a terrible sense of smell had hurt

her pride as a fairy. She was flying around my face in a huff.

"Aye-aye!"

"I-I'm sorry! Please don't be mad."

"Aye."

"All right, well, let's put everything into bags for now. Maybe their scents will change after having time to age."

"Tra-la!"

The last step was letting it age for a few days. How would they turn out? I couldn't wait to see.

◇◇◆◇◇

Once I was satisfied with the amount of crafting we'd done, I made some preparations to go to Zone Ten. My next stop was Green City, which faced the Great Snow Forest in the north.

"All right, although it's summer in the real world, we'll be marching through the snow here."

"Honk honk!"

"Kee-hee!"

Part of the information I had purchased from Maple pertained to a certain event that took place in the snowy forest.

"The area around Green City should be fine, but there's apparently more snow the further into the forest you go."

The snow made it difficult to walk; even riding on a mount was slow. I wanted to be able to fight while riding Carro to complete the school quest I just received, but that might not be possible in this forest.

Of course, I didn't really expect myself to defeat very many enemies in Zone Ten anyway. The enemies were strong here. I could defeat way more enemies in thirty minutes around the Town of Beginnings than I could in three hours in this area. Having combat skills geared specifically towards fighting in the snow would make things easier, but the battles would still be tough if I were the only one in my party who had them...

So, in my current party, I had brought along Rick, who was lightweight enough to be able to fight on top of the snow, and

Perca, whose Skate skill allowed him to slide atop it. I also brought along Fau, Lilith, and Eine, since they could fly, and Drimo, who could deal long-range attacks with earth magic and was powerful enough to push his way through the drifts.

"Okay, we're headed to a shrine in the backwoods of the Great Snow Forest. It'll be night by the time we get there, so we'll have to be careful."

"Aye-aye!"

"Chirp chirp!"

"Tra-la-la!"

I was less than comforted by my monsters' enthusiastic responses. Had they *actually* understood what I was saying? Even Perca and Lilith looked more pumped than usual, like they were ready to do something mischievous.

"D-Drimo! I can count on you, right?"

"Squeak," Drimo replied with a thumbs-up.

"Drimo, you're the best!"

"Squeak squeak."

"You're right. We need to stop messing around and get going."

"Squeak."

Feeling heartened by Drimo's encouragement, I led us out of Green City. Thanks to Drimo clearing a path in the snow ahead of me, it was very easy for me to follow. Man, sometimes I felt bad how much I depended on him.

"Chirp chirp!"

"Wha? An enemy?"

At some point while we were walking through the snow, Rick suddenly let out a cry of alarm. A second later, three monkey-like monsters jumped out of the shadows. They had white fur and were each about the size of a baby gorilla.

They were called Mini Yetis, and they were known to attack by throwing snowballs with their long arms. They were the most well-known monsters inhabiting the Great Snow Forest, though it was no surprise they were famous, given that they were yetis. The name alone was enough to garner attention.

My party had gotten stronger, so three Mini Yetis posed no issue

for us, no matter how aggressive they were. Drimo and Eine held down the front as tanks while the rest of us went all-in with our attacks. If we kept this up, we'd win without taking much damage at all. Though to be fair, top players could apparently take these monsters down in a single blow.

However, the Mini Yetis were acting erratically. They were targeting me like crazy! I wasn't being super mindful about how much aggro I was generating, but it was still weird how they ignored Drimo in the vanguard and kept attacking me instead.

We managed to win the battle, but I ended up taking a bit of damage. I tried to figure out why the yetis had targeted me.

Then it hit me. I was wearing the sparkly miracle herb corsage on my chest.

"Maybe the yetis go after shiny things?"

It was either that, or the corsage had a hidden provocation effect or something. I decided to take it off for now. And sure enough, in the next fights, I was not targeted.

"Well, sorry, Eine. Looks like I'll have to keep the corsage off for a while."

"Tra-la..."

Seeing how disappointed Eine looked made me want to put it back on, but I really had no choice but to keep it off around here. *Forgive me, Eine! I'll wear it when we're just chilling out at home!*

And so, we continued making our slow and steady way through the snow. When we stopped at a safety zone along the way, we ran into a familiar face, one I hadn't seen in quite some time.

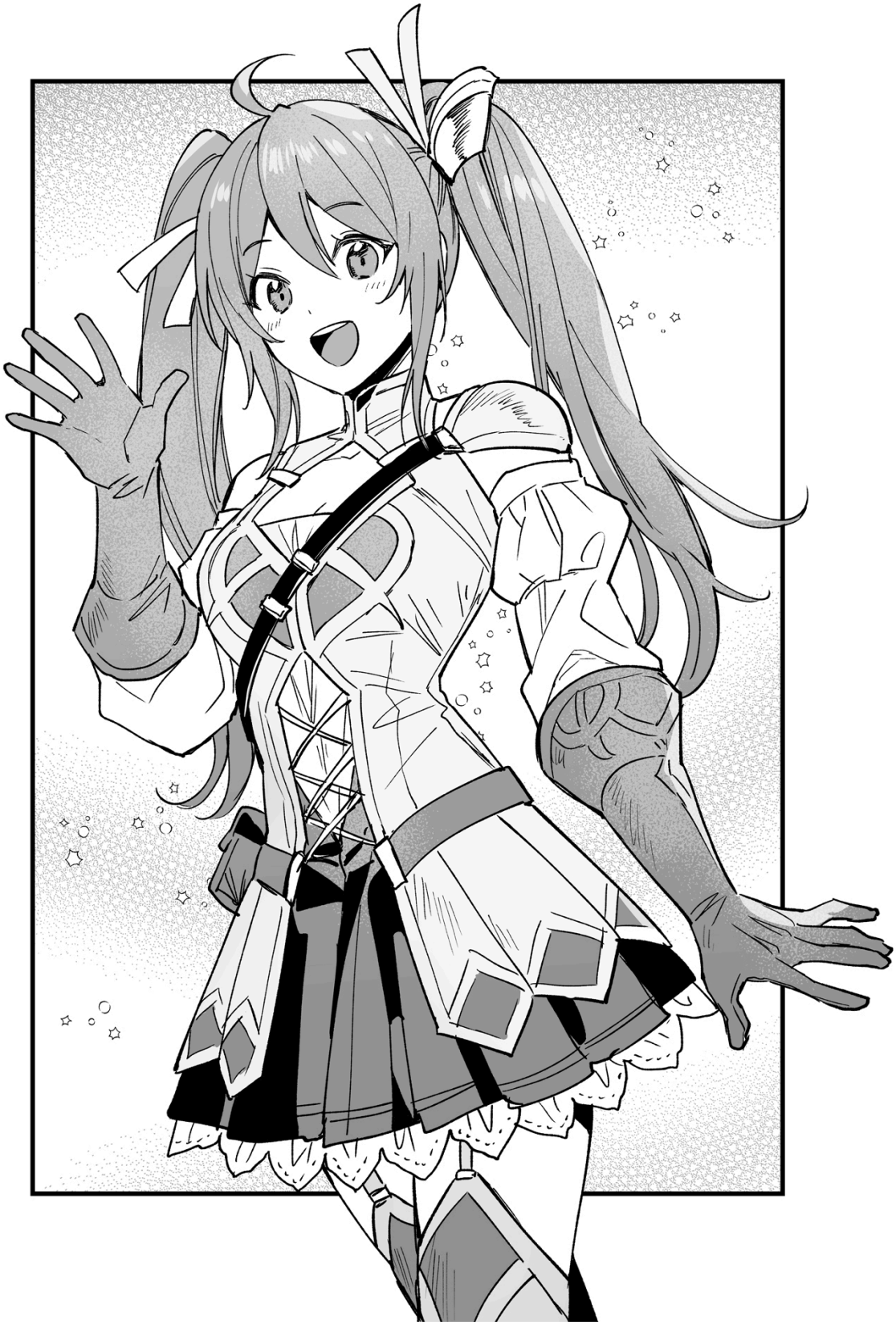
"Oh? Is that you, Yuto?"

"Akari? Wow, it's been a while."

"Yes, it has! It's good to see you again. And your monsters!"

"Aye-aye!"

"Chirp chirp!"



It was Akari, a solo player and a fellow holder of a unique title: the "Ruby Red Explorer." She was eating a sandwich on a straw mat she had spread out in the snow-free safety zone.

"Are you here collecting materials?" she asked me.

"Oh, no actually. I'm on a mission."

"You are? Maybe we're on the same one. Are you going further up ahead?"

"Is your mission related to Hamakaze's info?"

"Yes, it is!"

Surprise, surprise, Akari and I were headed to the exact same spot. You see, I had come to the Great Snow Forest in hopes of encountering another yokai in Zone Ten. Hamakaze had discovered the one here as well and had sold her findings to the Quick-Eared Cats. It took a pro like Hamakaze to discover a yokai in such a vast forest that was so challenging to traverse. She was the source of all yokai-related information.

"Did you do a lot of prep work?" Akari asked. "Like bringing potions and such."

"Yup, I'm all set. I made them myself. Though I am worried about the battle. It's over if we lose that."

The fight was supposedly easier than when we faced against the Kappa, but there would still be fighting.

"I see..." Akari said. It looked like she was thinking deeply about what I said. "Um, Yuto, would you like to form a team?"

"Huh? With you? You heard what I said, right? We might not be any help in the fight."

"Yes, and I'm just the opposite. I can manage the combat part, but I'm worried I won't have enough items to heal myself."

"Oh, I get it. So that's why you want to team up."

"Yes. What do you think?"

"That'd be great, honestly."

The battle for this event was a little unique. The enemy hardly ever dealt direct attacks. Instead, it used various methods to inflict status ailments. In order to form a friendship with the yokai, you had to stock up on a large quantity of recovery items and hold out for a certain amount of time.

The nature of the battle made me feel like I had a higher chance of succeeding alone here than I had in the battle against the Kappa. With Akari added into the mix, though, that raised our chances of success exponentially.

"Thank you!" Akari said. "Don't you worry, I'll protect you and your monsters!"

"And I'll do everything to support you. We'll have each other's backs."

"Yeah!"

With a new, dependable teammate on our side, we continued on through the Great Snow Forest in high spirits. It became clear during the battles along the way that Akari was carrying the team. If we had been alone, this journey would have been much more of a struggle.

After some time, we reached our destination.

"Let's see, it's supposed to show up in the middle of a bamboo grove, so it should be around here," I said.

"It should be at the base of one of the larger bamboo trees, right?"

"I think the info said it would be around some thicker bamboo trees growing close together..."

"Oh, is this it?"

"Nice catch. They *are* thicker, but not by much..."

I used my Yokai Detection skill and got a clear response. If I had been looking around here without knowing where to look, I would have completely missed it. Hamakaze had some really incredible powers of observation.

"Well, let's go ahead and try digging around the roots here."

"Squeak squeak!"

Drimo started clearing away the snow with the same efficiency he displayed when digging holes. As he removed the snow, the shrine we had been looking for appeared, right at the base of the bamboo tree. Once it was visible, a window popped up in front of me.

"Use the Demonic Ghost Hanging Scroll?"

I was reminded of the first time I met Akari. She had saved me from dying to some ghost monsters. Funny coincidence.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No, it's nothing. Is it okay if I use the scroll now?"

"Yes, please do."

"All right! Let's start this battle!"

I used the Demonic Ghost scroll. A light shone from the shrine, and our surroundings changed in an instant from a snowy bamboo grove to a bare-earthed clearing. A ring of densely packed bamboo trees encircled the clearing, barring us from any sort of escape. Just like when we had fought the Kappa, we had been sent to a boss arena.

And in the middle of the arena was the enemy we were here to fight.

"Oooooh..."

"Whoa, freaky!" I shouted.

"I-It's so creepy!" Akari squeaked.

Akari and I both backed away from the creature. It looked absolutely horrifying. Similar to how the Kappa had resembled its artistic depiction, so too did this yokai look exactly like the spine-chilling Demonic Ghost on the scroll.

I wondered if its appearance was toned down a bit for people using a filter. This ghost was scary enough to make any child cry. Or even any adult. I was fine because I knew what to expect, but if this thing were to surprise-attack me out of nowhere, I might've collapsed from shock.

"I-It's a ghost! A real ghost!" Akari cried.

"You said it."

The Demonic Ghost boss looked just like the female ghosts depicted in traditional Japanese paintings. A pair of wide, startled-looking eyes peeked out from behind her long, unkempt hair, which was streaked with white. She was so skeletally thin that I couldn't make out her age, and she had pale, wrinkled skin. Cracked, filthy nails grew from the ends of long, scraggly fingers.

With her white burial clothes and translucent appearance, I was half afraid she would really drag us away to the great beyond.

"Squeak squeak!"

"Ah, right! This is no time to be scared! We need to hurry and put

some distance between us! Thanks, Drimo!”

“Squeak.”

I knew I could count on him! Drimo never lets me down!

“Everyone, I’m using the paralysis resistance potions now!”

“Aye!”

“Chirp chirp!”

The Demonic Ghost was a tricky boss who inflicted status ailments, the most terrifying of which was Paralysis. That wasn’t to say the other ailments weren’t scary too, but for my party specifically, nothing was scarier than being unable to move. To protect against that, I had prepared potions that boosted our paralysis resistance. I had also brought whatever I could to heal other types of status ailments too.

“You ready, Akari?”

“Yes! Leave the vanguard to me!”

“And leave the rearguard to me. I’ve got plenty of potions!”

“That’s great to hear!”

“Aaaaaaah!” the Demonic Ghost wailed. She had been watching and waiting, but now she was making her first move. Just as I had learned from the Quick-Eared Cats, the ghost started with a screeching wail that inflicted multiple status ailments, affecting everyone within the boss field.

“Eeek!” Akari shrieked. “I’m poisoned!”

“Oh, shoot! I’ve got you!”

“Squeak squeak!”

“You too, Drimo?!”

Akari was wearing equipment that increased her resistance to status ailments, but she still got poisoned. Even though each status ailment had a low chance of hitting, the probability for each was calculated individually, so the likelihood of getting inflicted by at least one of them was high.

“Aaah!” the Demonic Ghost wailed. She remained in place and summoned her small, basketball-sized ghost minions.

“We can defeat the smaller ghosts, right?” Akari asked to confirm.

“Yeah. Anything except for the Demonic Ghost is fair game!”

In order to form a bond with the Demonic Ghost, we had to make

sure not to attack her. The same rule didn't apply to the small minion ghosts, though, so Akari was free to go all out on them.

I was really lucky to have run into her at the safety zone. Without her, my party would have had to deal with the ghost minions by ourselves. I had done some simulations just to be prepared, but there was still a pretty big element of risk involved.

My monsters and I stuck to the edge of the field and fought back against the small ghosts. Their main method of attack was ramming into us, which didn't deal that much damage. But in addition to being immune to physical attacks, they could also pass right through our weapons and shields.

The other tricky part was that, since we felt no physical impact from their attacks, if we weren't careful, our HP would drop substantially before we were even aware of it. In fact, Hamakaze had apparently died several times to this boss for that very reason.

"Kee-hee!"

"Honk hooonk!"

When I first met Akari, my party had been nearly wiped out by ghosts because they were impervious to our physical attacks, but we didn't have that same problem this time. Both Perca and Lilith could attack with magic spells *and* use attacks with elemental attributes. Those small ghosts stood no chance against them; one after another, they fell.

Of course, those two weren't even the ones doing the most work. That honor went to Rick.

"Chiiirp chirp chiiirp!"

Rick used Mental Magic to boost our resistance to status ailments that affected our mental states, and also to inflict ailments to the small ghosts. It worked like a charm on the ghosts. They must have had a low resistance to begin with; they fell into an amusing mixture of confusion and fear. All across the field, ghosts began attacking one another or quaking with fright where they were.

Both Rick and Lilith were dominating the playing field with their status ailments. And with Akari helping out, we definitely had the advantage in this fight. The only downside was that, even though things were going better than I had expected them to, we wouldn't

get the zero-damage bonus.

"Aaa-aaaaah!"

"I got poisoned again!" Akari cried in dismay.

"Come over here!" I called out to her.

"Chirp chiiirp!"

"Oh no, Rick! Did you get hit with Bleeding?!"

These fieldwide wails that inflicted status ailments were a huge pain. My heart nearly jumped out of my chest anytime I heard the Demonic Ghost start screeching.

"I'm running out of potions faster than I thought I would..." I groaned. This was looking like it was going to be a close fight.

We continued putting up a fight and enduring status ailments, and eventually, the Demonic Ghost started to change.

"Ooo-aaaaah!"

"Eeek!" Akari screamed.

"Damn it! Stupid poison!"

At the ten-minute mark, the Demonic Ghost changed up her pattern. She began summoning minions at a slightly faster rate, and she unleashed her wail more often, which also had a higher chance of inflicting status ailments.

The worst change was that the Demonic Ghost's wail also inflicted a set amount of damage now. It was only twenty points at a time, but that meant we'd be nearly dead after six or seven hits. Add being poisoned on top of that, and our HP would drop shockingly quickly.

From this point on, we had to be even more on top of our healing. I decided to swap out some party members. I sent away Lilith, Perca, and Rick, and summoned in Reflet to be our healer, along with Bear Bear and Olto since they both had high HP. Our focus from now on would be healing damage loss and status ailments while having Bear Bear and Olto be our tanks.

We kept up enduring the boss's wailing and the smaller ghosts' relentless attacks for a bit, until the Demonic Ghost underwent another change. A red aura appeared around her, the red light against her white kimono giving it a bloodstained appearance, which only made her look even more terrifying.

"This is just like we heard!" I called out.

"Yes, it is! We can do this!"

"Growl growl!"

"Mm-mmm!"

The Demonic Ghost was going into what was known as a boss's rabid state. Up to this point, she had only been using her wailing move, but now she started unleashing regular attacks. This was when the boss fight turned into a pretty difficult bullet hell sequence, so it was often referred to as the true start of the battle.

"Aaa-aaaaah!"

"Here she comes!" I yelled.

"Eww, gross!" Akari squealed.

"You can say that again!"

The Demonic Ghost spewed out what looked like ectoplasm right at us. I could understand why Akari was so grossed out by its off-putting appearance.

The boss also started pursuing us around the field, so not only did we have to deal with the smaller ghosts and heal our status ailments, now we had to dodge the ectoplasm. It was a lot harder than I had anticipated, but I had survived the Kappa's curtain fire, so I wasn't going to let something like *this* bring me down!

"Aaaaaah!"

"Gah!"

"Squeak squeak!"

Of course I get hit after acting so confident in myself! I'm really trying, Drimo! Don't get mad!

"Mmm-mm-mmm."

"Huh?"

"Mm-mmm."

I felt something heavy fall against my lower back. When I turned around, I saw Olto clinging to me from behind. His face was bright red, and there was a bubble effect floating above his head. I had seen this affliction before, at my flower-viewing party.

"Mmm."

"You're drunk?!"

"Mm-mm."

Olto shook his head at my accusation. Then he started doing calisthenics to prove he wasn't drunk. It might have been convincing if he wasn't staggering around so much.



"Okay, sure. We'll pretend you're *not* totally wasted. Now drink this." I handed the intoxicated Olto a recovery item. At least he had no problems drinking it.

At first, the only status effects the boss inflicted were Poison, Paralysis, and Bleeding. But as the battle went on, more status ailments were introduced. In addition to the first three, we now had a chance of being inflicted with Sleep, Burn, Freeze, Blind, and now Intoxication.

Intoxication impaired a player or monster's ability to attack and there was also a chance they would attack their teammates. Luckily Olto wasn't a strong fighter, so his attempt to attack me hadn't done much damage. I was really glad that Olto had been the one to get Intoxicated.

"I'm pretty sure I remember that Charm will be thrown in next," I said.

"Hamakaze said that she respawned four times because of Charm!"

When Hamakaze had challenged the Demonic Ghost with her party, her Charmed teammates had turned on one another and wiped the party.

In order to ensure a welcoming atmosphere, it usually wasn't possible to deal friendly fire in this game. I supposed there had to be some kindhearted people among the management team, for them to have come to that decision.

However, during boss battles, it was possible to attack your teammates when Charmed or Intoxicated. It made things really difficult. No one was ever keeping a close watch on their teammates' attacks, so someone getting hit with Charm could throw even a top party into chaos. Not many enemies used Charm either, so there wasn't yet a well-known strategy for coping with it.

If a decent attacker used one of their strongest moves, they could easily take out a backliner with one hit. *Yeesh.* Just the thought gave me chills.

In my party's case, we'd have big problems if someone like Drimo were charmed. There'd be no question that I'd be dead meat if he used Dragon Blood Awakening on me. Bear Bear would be bad too.

One slash of those sharp claws and I was a goner.

"Maybe I'll swap them out."

We weren't supposed to harm the boss anyway, so I decided to reform my party with our weakest attackers: Olto, Reflet, Eine, Himka, Fau, and Carro. Even if worse came to worst and they became charmed, any damage they could do would be minimal.

Since we were just going to evade the boss and not attack it, this plan could work, not that it was a method that would be favored by players who didn't care about forming a friendship with the boss and just wanted to defeat it to get drops. Still, I felt bad having to send Bear Bear away so soon after summoning them in!

"Aaaah!" the Demonic Ghost wailed.

"Hmmm!"

"Here we go!"

Himka got charmed! He came at me with punches, but he didn't actually deal much damage. Though that smug look on his face was kind of annoying!

Changing up my party had been a good idea after all. The battle went on for a bit longer, until the Demonic Ghost let out her loudest shriek yet.

"Aaa-aaah-aaaaah!"

"Here comes her final move! Duck!"

"H-Hmmm!"

"Tra-la-la!"

The Demonic Ghost spewed out ten shots of ectoplasm at once. We guarded against them as well as we could, and after we had managed to hold out against the attack without anyone dying, the Demonic Ghost underwent her final change. In a heartbeat, she went from being a horror movie monster to a beautiful woman. Though she still wore white burial clothes and a white triangle headband, making her look similar to Oiwa, a character from "Yotsuya Kaiden," a famous classic ghost story.

She stared at me with a piercing gaze. She had dark shadows under her eyes, and I could see the whites surrounding her iris. But despite her threatening appearance, the marker above her didn't label her as an enemy anymore, and she had stopped attacking us.

"The battle against the Demonic Ghost is over."

"Phew," I breathed. "We did it."

"Good work," Akari sighed.

Although we hadn't taken much damage, it had been an exhausting fight. Plus, even though the battle was over, the event was not.

"Yuto, she's coming towards us!" Akari cried in a panic.

"C-Calm down, Akari. We already knew this would happen."

"That doesn't change the fact that it's *scary*!"

The Demonic Ghost, who now had the appearance of a beautiful, melancholic woman, flew over to us without making a sound, just as the Kappa had approached me after the last battle. It *was* a bit shocking to watch a transparent, floating ghost come towards us so quickly, though.

"Oaaah," the ghost moaned.

"Um, would you like this?"

"Ah."

I guess this is what she wants. The item I handed the ghost was, according to the Quick-Eared Cats, her favored item, but it was startling to see her actually look happy. I had given her a high-quality poison. Obake also enjoyed eating poison mushrooms, so I guessed ghostlike creatures liked poison.

"Ooaaah."

The Demonic Ghost held the bottle of poison up high and made an expression that looked like a smile. I was starting to worry what she planned to use it for. Her whole vibe screamed that she was going to use it for revenge or something. *She isn't, is she?*

"You have formed a bond of friendship with the Demonic Ghost. Certain skills have been unlocked."

"Oh, nice! I got the announcement!" I said triumphantly.

"Me too."

The Demonic Ghost was now registered to my encyclopedia and I had unlocked two new skills.

"I unlocked Wail and Demonic Ghost Hand."

Wail was the move that the Demonic Ghost used on us. The user unleashed a shout that inflicted a status ailment on any enemy that

heard it. My party used status ailments often, so this would be a welcome addition. Though I'd be kind of embarrassed to scream in the middle of battle.

Demonic Ghost Hand was a skill that dealt damage while ignoring defense, like an imitation of ghost-type enemies' attacks. It wasn't very strong, so I was on the fence about acquiring it. Plus it had a short range, so it didn't seem like something I personally would be able to effectively use.

And with that, I had five entries in my yokai encyclopedia. The Hanami Vandal, the Tea Kettle Tanuki, the Sunekosuri, the Kappa, and the Demonic Ghost. I thought something might happen when I registered five of them... But nope!

I stared disappointedly at my encyclopedia when I heard Akari groan at her screen.

"Hmm."

"What's wrong, Akari?"

"Well, I registered the ghost to my encyclopedia, but now I'm wondering if I even want to learn this skill."

"Yokai Summoning?"

"Yes, that one."

Just as other job classes besides Tamer and Summoner could learn Tame and Summon, anyone could learn the Onmyoji skill called Yokai Summoning. However, there was a skill exclusive to tamers—Monster Taming—and likewise, Talisman skills were exclusive to Onmyoji.

Talisman skills allowed an Onmyoji to seal the power of a yokai into a talisman for later use. Various types of abilities could be sealed, not just attacks, so it was actually a pretty versatile skill. Without Talisman skills, the only thing you could do with yokai was summon them into battle to fight.

"Unless you get more yokai, I don't think it'll be a very useful skill," I told Akari.

"That's exactly what I was thinking. Are you going to bother acquiring it?"

"I'm still trying to decide."

"I'm right there with you."

The thing that was holding me back was how few yokai I currently had. If I had at least ten yokai I could summon, then I could see myself regularly using the skill, though...

While I was ruminating, Akari nodded to herself with a decisive look on her face.

"I'm going to learn Yokai Summoning!" she declared.

"Huh? You are?"

Akari had even fewer yokai than I did. It would be way more practical to learn another magic technique or something...

"I plan on learning it at some point anyway, so it's probably better that I start using it now to level the skill up," Akari explained.

"Ah, good point."

Akari opened my eyes to the light. She was right. I was going to acquire the skill at some point too, so what difference did it make if I got it now?

"Hmm, you know, that doesn't sound like a bad idea," I said.

"Right? This skill will let me summon adorable yokai whenever I want. I absolutely need to have it!"

I was pretty sure the only yokai Akari had that could be considered cute was the Sunekosuri.

"It probably is better to start leveling up Yokai Summoning a little at a time now instead of rushing to do so after getting more yokai," I reasoned aloud.

"Exactly!" Akari agreed.

We nodded at each other determinedly when Olto tugged on the hem of my robe, looking *very* bored. Everyone else did too—they were gathering around me, clambering over one another and being generally noisy. They started pulling on my robe too. A bit too hard, in fact. They were practically jerking me back and forth.

"Mm-mmm."

"Hmmm."

"What's up with you guys? Are you bored? It won't be long now. Oh, wanna give your input? Should I learn Yokai Summoning?"

"Tra-la?"

"Hum-hum!"

"Neigh!"

That sounded like a resounding yes. Reflet made some sort of hand signal and Carro pretended to get hit by an attack. *Are they playing pretend Onmyoji?* My other monsters cheered at the show. Fau even started strumming some slow, traditional song.

"Laaa-di-laaa. ♪"

That must have been one of the songs I bought at the music convention. I was happy to see her put it to use so quickly.

I think it's safe to say all my monsters are fully on board with the idea.

"All right, that settles it!" I exclaimed. "Okay, I learned it."

"Me too!"

"Should we try it out?"

"Good idea."

When I activated the skill, a list of summonable yokai—the ones in my encyclopedia—popped up.

"Umm, I summon you, Sunekosuri!" Akari said.

Of course she'd pick that one. No surprise.

"Sneeeh!"

"Hello, cutie!"

Akari played happily with the Sunekosuri, which had a weaselike body and catlike face. It hung around like any other summoned creature. The sight of a cute girl giggling and chatting with the small animal on her shoulder was very picturesque. But I knew Akari would play with the Sunekosuri forever unless I intervened.

"You should try sending it back too," I suggested.

"Oh, I'm sorry! I got so distracted! Right. Sunekosuri, return!"

"Sneh? Sneeeh."

Having understood it was being sent back home, the Sunekosuri waved its tiny paw goodbye as it disappeared.

"Awww, it's gone," Akari said sadly.

"That part's very Summoner-like too."

It was an interesting skill. And there was something exciting about being able to summon yokai at will! *I need to get more yokai ASAP!*

"I'd like to try this out some more," Akari said.

"So would I. Should we look for a safe area to do that?"

"Smart thinking!"

And so, Akari and I decided to try out Yokai Summoning a bit before returning home. It was dangerous to test out a new skill in Zone Ten, so we teleported back to the Town of Beginnings.

"Oh, Yuto! There's a Fanged Rat over there!"

"Wow, good eye. It's so far away."

"I have a skill that improves my eyesight!"

I would expect nothing less from the Ruby Red Explorer.

The Fanged Rat hadn't noticed us yet, so at this distance, it was like a sitting duck.

"Okay Yuto, you first!"

"You sure?"

"Yes! Show it what you're made of!"

"Right! Leave it to me!"

I strutted forward, stuck my right hand out in front of me, and yelled, "I summon the yokai, Sunekosuri!"

"Sneh sneeeh!"

Poof! There was a puff of smoke, and then the Sunekosuri appeared.

"Get 'im!"

The only skill the Sunekosuri could use was Telekinesis. I couldn't wait to see how powerful it was going to be.

"Sneeeh!"

"Huh?"

Um, what? The Sunekosuri vanished without doing a single thing. I thought maybe it had used its invisible attack, but nothing happened to the Fanged Rat. Or maybe the Sunekosuri had missed? I looked at my MP. Some of it had been consumed. *Okay, so I* did *use Yokai Summoning...*

"What happened?" Akari asked.

"No clue."

"Why don't you try summoning a different yokai?"

"Right, good idea!"

I used Yokai Summoning again, this time calling in the Kappa.

"I summon you, Kappa!"

"Gwak."

"Now, atta— Oh, come on!"

The Kappa vanished without making a single movement, just like the Sunekosuri. According to its description, it should have been able to use Water Arts and Sumo... Maybe Water Arts only applied buffs or debuffs? But it didn't seem like that had happened either.

I should have asked for more details about the Kappa's abilities when I was buying information from the Cats. I'd neglected to ask since I hadn't been planning on acquiring Yokai Summoning at the time. I had heard that if you learned several command-type skills and tried to level them all up, you'd end up not becoming fully proficient in any of them. For that reason, I had planned to only use my Taming skills.

"Tea Kettle Tanuki! Come out!"

"Pom poko!"

"Gaaah! Not Kettle too!"

I had no idea why, but this skill was clearly not functioning right. My yokai returned home without moving a muscle, let alone attacking anything. What was going on? Was this a bug?

"I-I'll try this time," Akari offered.

"Th-Thanks."

I was crouched over on the ground groaning in frustration when Akari suggested she try. *Uh-oh, did I make her cringe*? *Did I overreact?* But really, it wasn't fair. I couldn't use the skill I just got. I had spent eight points to get it—I didn't want those to go to waste.

"I summon the yokai, Sunekosuri!" Akari cried.

"Sneeeh."

"It worked! It's here!"

Akari's Sunekosuri appeared, and it looked more or less the same as my own Sunekosuri. Yokai didn't seem to have very many unique characteristics that distinguished themselves from one another. Also, I realized that Akari had also had to endure the Sunekosuri's tickling hell. It was funny to imagine Akari cracking up with laughter while getting tickled.

Anyway, this was the moment of truth.

"Sunekosuri! Attack!" Akari yelled.

"Sneeh sneeeh!"

"Yay! You did it!"

The Sunekosuri used its Telekinesis to send the Fanged Rat flying. Its attack was strong enough to kill the rat in one hit. Was its Telekinesis skill stronger than the one used by players? It was an invisible attack, so it was perfect as a diversionary tactic. *If* I could use it, that is!

"Why did it work for *you*?" I asked Akari.

"Hmm, I'm not sure."

"Sneeeh?"

"If only my Sunekosuri could tell us, we'd know right away."

"Sneh?"

"But you can't talk, can you?"

"Sneeh." The Sunekosuri tilted its head to the side.

"Hold on," I said, realizing something, "why is the Sunekosuri still here?"

"Huh? Ah! You're right, it is. Why is that?"

"Sneh?"

Akari's Sunekosuri remained on the scene instead of being sent back home.

"Maybe yokai can only be summoned in as perma-summons?" I wondered.

"Oh! That must be it!"

Summoners had the ability to summon monsters in two different ways. One was as an Instant Summon, where the monster was brought in temporarily to use one attack, and the other was as a Perma-Summon, where the monster was summoned in as a party member. If you wanted to bring in a monster as a perma-summon, naturally you had to have an open slot in your party.

It seemed like Yokai Summoning could only be used for perma-summons. So of course I, with no free slots in my party, could not use it properly right now. I had my answer for why I failed.

"Dang, seriously...?" I groaned. "Well, this is a bust."

"I'm sorry! I was the one who convinced you to get the skill!"

"It's not your fault, I should have done more research."

This sort of information was readily available on the forums, if I had bothered to look. This was entirely my own mistake.

"I can see myself using it in boss fights, so it's fine," I said, but was it really fine? I couldn't level up the skill if I couldn't summon yokai. Did I have to leave one spot open in my party just for them?

"Hmm."

This was a problem, a problem that I decided to think about later. Maybe it was time I headed back home for now.

"By the way, do yokai eat anything?" Akari asked.

"Kappas eat cucumbers... But I can't seem to remember what Sunekosuri eat."

I had no memory of feeding my Sunekosuri anything at home.

"Okay then, maybe it'll like this? Here, for you!"

"Sneh?"

"Aww, you don't want it?"

Akari placed some herbal tea in front of the Sunekosuri, but the creature showed no interest in it. I tried offering a few different types of foods too, but it still gave no reaction. Maybe Sunekosuris really didn't need to eat food.

Meanwhile, I was just curious about Akari's herbal tea.

"I see your tea is called Akari's Blend. Did you make it yourself?"

"This one? Yes, I did!"

A while ago, Akari had been inspired to learn Cooking after sampling my homemade herbal tea. I knew she had been making herbal tea on her own now, but I was surprised to see she was already making her own blends too.

"Would you like to try?" she asked. "I can give you some."

"Oh, really? I'll share some of mine too, then. I have a lot of varieties, though. I'm not sure which one you'd like..."

"How about we do a taste test of each other's teas?"

"I like that idea! Where should we go? I could put a straw mat down here."

"Hmm... Oh! I know, why don't we go to your house?"

"My house? I guess that's fine..."

"I've always wanted to go inside!"

Ah, Japanese-style houses must still be pretty uncommon. It made sense that someone else would be interested to see it.

Akari and I went back to my house, where we were promptly

welcomed by the newest resident, the Demonic Ghost.

"Ooooh."

"Already here, huh?"

"She's so cute and affectionate!" Akari gushed.

As this implied, the Demonic Ghost wasn't as terrifying as she was before. She now looked like a beautiful, translucent woman dressed in white. With her hair covering her eyes, it was kind of hard to tell if she *was* beautiful or not, but her chin, mouth, and nose all looked nicely shaped. I was sure she was beautiful. *Fingers crossed.*

"Ooo-oooh."

"Booo."

"Looks like the Demonic Ghost and Obake are getting along," I observed.

Seeing how Kappa and Mini Kappa had also gotten along well, that suggested yokai and mascots of similar types were likely to become friends.

The Demonic Ghost, like the Kappa, was capable of farmwork, but similar to how the Kappa could only cultivate cucumbers, the Demonic Ghost could only cultivate poisonous crops, like Poison Hemlock and poisonous mushrooms.

Accompanied by the Demonic Ghost and Obake, Akari and I headed to the living room.

"Oh wow, a kotatsu!" Akari exclaimed when we walked in. "How cool!"

"I know, right?"

We relaxed under the kotatsu as we each lined up the homemade herbal teas that we were particularly proud of on the table. As we sampled each other's teas and shared our impressions, we moved on to the topic of yokai.

"Since I've gone through the effort of obtaining the Kappa and Demonic Ghost, I'm thinking I also want to find the remaining two," Akari said.

"Yeah, me too," I agreed.

"They must be to the east and west, right?"

"Right, because the Kappa was in the south, and the Demonic Ghost in the north."

If we assumed there was one in each quadrant, then the final two were in the Great Mountains to the east and the Great Wilderness to the west. And the last two yokai were the Satori and the Double Cocoon.

I took out their hanging scrolls. The Satori looked like a cross between a monkey and a dog; it was covered in thick, brown fur and had a long tongue lolling from its mouth. The Double Cocoon looked like a white cocoon covered in some phosphorescent substance. The inside of the cocoon wasn't visible, but considering Tefu-Tefu's appearance, it was probably a butterfly or moth cocoon.

"The Satori gives me a bit of the creeps," Akari said.

"Yeah, it'd be a nightmare to be attacked by that thing."

"But I also don't love the idea of a giant moth."

"I think I prefer the cocoon, personally."

If we considered that the Satori was a beast-type yokai, and the cocoon a bug-type yokai, then couldn't we make a guess as to which one inhabited the Great Mountains and which the Great Wilderness?

That had been my initial thought, at least, but neither stood out to me as being a more likely habitat for either yokai.

"Should we just go ahead and try checking out one of those areas?" Akari suggested.

"Good idea."

However, it was getting dark, which meant our options were limited. Monsters spawned in stronger at night, and it wasn't exactly the ideal time for exploration since we wouldn't be able to see well.

"Mountain climbing will be hard in the dark, so how about we go to the Great Wilderness?" I proposed.

"Yes, let's do that."

And with that, we were off. Since I wanted to try using Yokai Summoning, I left one slot in my party open. But before making our way to the wilderness, Akari wanted to stop by the Adventurers' Guild in Zone Ten.

"Accepting a few quests will make this journey even more productive!"

"Now that you mention it, I haven't done very many quests for the Adventurers' Guild."

I took on quests from the Magical Beasts' Guild and Farming Guild fairly regularly—almost every day in the case of the Farming Guild. Both guilds had persistent quests like delivering vegetables or medicinal herbs, so I just did those every morning.

I would get way more money selling my crops, but I completed these quests to earn contribution points with the guild. I never took on combat quests, so the only way I could increase my rank was by earning points little by little with the delivery quests.

And it was thanks to that slow and steady grind that my rank in both guilds was over 10. In comparison, my Adventurers' Guild rank was only 5!

"Have you finished choosing quests, Yuto?"

"Oh yeah, I have."

I had selected several quests that were available to me for the Great Wilderness. Akari and I showed each other the details of the quests we chose on our way to our destination. The quests more or less asked the same things of us. Our quests overlapped about eighty percent in terms of the enemies we had to defeat and items we had to deliver, only differing in how many of each were required.

Akari had to defeat more enemies and deliver more items for her quests. The discrepancy was due to our different ranks in the guild. Players with a higher rank were given more difficult quests, but in return, they received better rewards and more contribution points.

I decided to accept a bunch of combat quests this time around, since fighting alongside Akari would help me clear them. In exchange, I planned to help her with gathering items. Though I wasn't sure how much help I would be, since she was perfectly capable of doing so herself.

Akari had learned plenty of gathering skills—not a surprise for the person who earned the title "Ruby Red Explorer," which was given to the player who had gathered the most items at the start of the game.

Not only did she know the regular gathering skills, but she also knew a skill that specifically helped her find ingredients, a skill that increased the number of items she gathered, and a skill that extended her gathering range. Calling her a gathering specialist

would not be an exaggeration.

Akari took enjoyment in exploring all sorts of places and collecting items there. She was the real deal, evidenced by how she was second to none in the number of items she had registered in her encyclopedia. It was no wonder that she would want to fill out her yokai encyclopedia too. Maybe it had stoked her collector's spirit. I could understand that.

Honestly, I was feeling anxious that I'd even be much use searching for the yokai, but I supposed two heads were better than one.

"Okay then, ready to go?" Akari asked.

"Neigh!" Carro whinnied in response.

"Aye!" Fau cried from her spot on the pony's head, pointing far off into the distance. She was already in the exploration mindset. Of course, she was pointing in the opposite direction where we wanted to go, so we would *not* be going that way!

"Carro, this way," I said.

"Neigh."

"Aye-aye?"

The Great Wilderness was an arid, rugged expanse of land with rocks, shrubs, and sand. The area offered little in the way of food, so it would be difficult to recover hunger using locally sourced ingredients. Not only that, but this area was unique in that our hunger depleted here faster than normal.

That wasn't a problem for a party like ours, since we had plenty of our own food, but I had heard stories of parties specializing in combat having a rough go of it here in the early game. Another feature unique to this zone was the fact that many enemies could attack from underground. If we didn't walk with caution, we could be hit with a surprise attack. Unlike the snowy forest and the mountains, however, most of the ground here was mostly flat, so at least walking was easy. And with Rick and Akari keeping a watchful eye out for enemies, the rest of us could focus on gathering items.

"I hope we can find the yokai, but where could it be?" I wondered aloud.

"Aye."

“Neeeigh.”

We had accepted several quests though, so it was important that we completed those too. We searched for both the items we needed to gather and the monsters we needed to defeat. It didn’t take long for Akari to spot a suitable monster.

“What about that one over there?”

“A Fat Horn?”

“That’s the one!”

Fat Horns were bovine monsters that were, you guessed it, fat little cows. They were black-and-white, like Holstein cattle, and they were as round as a balance ball. Instead of using their four limbs to walk on the ground, the cows moved by rolling around. While they had high HP and defense, they were slow and had a limited range of attack, so they were the perfect enemy for trying out new skills on. Plus, if we defeated one, we’d get cow meat and milk.

But for some reason, Akari’s face suddenly fell and she said, “Um, actually, is this really a good place to try out the skill?”

“Huh? Why not?”

“There’s so many people watching...”

“Well, we’re just practicing. I don’t see a problem with that.”

It’d be another story if we were trying out a super rare skill no one else had, but Hamakaze had already uploaded videos of herself using Yokai Summoning. There was no point in us trying to hide it.

We were still around the entrance of the Great Wilderness, so there were a lot of players around. If Akari didn’t want anyone to see us, then we would have to go further in. Personally, I was more concerned about a couple of the onlookers themselves rather than the fact of being watched.

“Hey, Takkun. Isn’t that guy over there Silver-Haired?”

“Huh? Hmm, maybe. Oh, but that girl next to him is definitely Ruby Red.”

“You don’t know what Silver-Haired looks like, but you can recognize Ruby Red right off the bat? Takkun, don’t tell me, is she your type?”

Since there was no PvP element and players were free to just play casually, LJO had a lot of female players. Because of that, a lot

of couples had been cropping up lately, including couples like "Takkun" and "Mami" over here. Although I had never seen a couple be as unreserved about it as these two.

I had heard of there being forum threads specifically about couples, like the "Thread to Discuss Emergency Measures Regarding In-Game Couples" and the "Couples, Get Lost! Singles-Only Thread." Though I was curious what they wrote about there, I also sort of didn't want to know. All I knew was that if I ever did take a look at those threads, I'd probably just walk away depressed.

"She's a celebrity, that's how I recognize her! Don't forget that you were the one who recognized Silver-Haired, Mami."

"Oh, please. He's not my type at all. *You're* my type, Takkun. Tee-hee! ♪"

"And you're my type, Mami."

"Oh, Takkun. ♪"

Why did I feel like I just got rejected? *Well, you're not my type either, so there! And get a room, damn it!*

"Ugh!"

"Yuto?"

Whoops. I forgot myself for a second there. With a cooler head, I could see I was in the wrong. I was just some guy listening in on a couple flirting with each other and then getting mad over it... In real life, that sort of behavior would come across suspicious enough to warrant getting reported. Actually, it was also plenty suspicious in the game.

Akari hadn't heard a word of Takkun and Mami's conversation at all, based on the confused look she was giving me. She really was cute, though. *Um, no, brain.* Obviously my head still hadn't cooled down completely.

Actually, that thought made me realize something. Even though it was only temporary, the fact that I had teamed up with such a pretty girl like Akari meant that I was on the winning side, right? I bet there'd be plenty of guys gritting their teeth in envy at the sight of us. Of course, it was so clear to me now. I was someone people were jealous of! *Mwa ha ha ha ha! Sucks doesn't it? To be unpopular with women even here in the game!*

"You'll protect me, won't you, Takkun? ♪"

"You bet I will, Mami. ♪"

"Grrr..." I growled.

Oh no! At this rate, I was going to turn into one of those people from the "Couples, Get Lost!" thread! I needed to calm down and ignore them!

"Yuto?" Akari called my name gently.

"I'm going to try using Yokai Summoning."

"Huh? Why do you look so down all of a sudden? Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine. Just feeling a little miserable about things."

"O-Oh..."

It was time to put aside my jealousy as an unpopular man and put some serious effort into summoning a yokai. I was fortunate to have the help of such a famous and strong player as Akari, so I needed to make the best use of our time and test out this skill.

"Okay, I'm going to go ahead and use it," I said.

"You've got this!"

"Thanks!"

My excitement started to rise the moment I decided to use the skill. I was astonished at my own egoism, but the sooner I was able to summon yokai, the sooner I could pretend to be an Onmyoji. There was no way I couldn't be excited about that.

"Who will you summon?" Akari asked.

"I guess I should try one I haven't summoned yet."

That would be either the Hanami Vandal or the Tea Kettle Tanuki. The Hanami Vandal had two attacks: Whip and Peach Smoke. Both were pretty self-explanatory. The first was a physical attack that the Hanami Vandal dealt using its tentacles, and the second was a smoke attack that inflicted status ailments.

But how about Kettle? The tanuki also had two moves: Calling Blessing and Tea Tricks. I already possessed the skill Calling Blessing, but maybe Kettle's version had a slightly different effect? Though it would probably still provide some sort of luck-boosting effect.

So what was Tea Tricks? Would it pour piping hot tea on the

enemy? Or use its iron kettle to give it a good wallop? I couldn't get a good idea of what either skill was capable of. The only option was to summon the yokai and find out.

"I summon you, Tea Kettle Tanuki!"

"Poko-pom!"

Kettle appeared, and for real this time! Without vanishing right away! Success!

"Kettle, could you use Tea Tricks?"

"Poko!"

In response to my command, Kettle started dancing in place. The yokai was on its tippy toes, spinning around like a ballerina. Tea was flying out from the ladle it held with both hands, scattering around like water from a sprinkler.

It wasn't an attack. As I watched, wondering what was going to happen, my body started to glow faintly and I healed a little HP.

"Wow, look at you! You can heal!"

"Pom!"

And Kettle hadn't used any ordinary healing skill, but one that could heal within an area. Although it didn't heal much, the fact that it could heal the entire party at once was amazing. That meant that Kettle could heal us while also raising the rarity of item drops with Calling Blessing. I had been kind of regretting learning Yokai Summoning, but maybe it had been the right move after all.

I decided to keep Kettle around for a little longer to keep testing things out.

"Kettle, can you use Calling Blessing?"

"Poko."

"No?"

"Pom."

Kettle shook its head. So, it couldn't use Calling Blessing right now. It must have needed to wait until it could use another move. Instead of each individual ability having its own cooldown time, it seemed yokai needed a break in between each skill they used.

"Okay then, how about a direct attack?"

"Pom!"

Kettle put its tea ladle in its mouth and dashed off. Apparently, a

regular attack was no problem. This was my first time seeing the yokai run, but as I expected, it ran on all four legs.

You'd think it'd be slow, since it basically looked like an iron tea kettle that had sprouted short legs, but the tanuki ran surprisingly fast. Something about its scampering little legs was amusing and adorable to watch.

Right before Kettle reached a Fat Horn, it leaped up high, took the ladle out of its mouth, and then struck it against the enemy.

"Poko!"

"Mooo!"

The ladle made a cute bonking sound as it hit, and the Fat Horn's HP dropped by a tiny amount. It was a super weak attack, but it was enough to anger the cow.

"Mooooo!"

"Pokooo!"

Ah, Kettle got sent flying with a horn attack.

"Oh no! Kettle, you all right?!"

"P-Pom..."

Crap! Kettle only has ten percent of its HP left! That attack just now wasn't a critical hit, though. Were yokai just that weak? Kettle appeared even weaker to physical attacks than Fau was.

Wait, should I really be surprised? My yokai were only as strong as my summoning skill was. Right now, my skill was at level 1, so my yokai were also considered to be at level 1. In fact, I should consider it lucky that Kettle hadn't died in one hit.

"Will potions work on you?"

"Poko."

"Great, at least I can heal you the same way I can monsters."

I still wanted Kettle to use its area heal spell and Calling Blessing while we progressed through the wilderness. My only choice was to stick the tanuki in the rearguard until I had leveled my skill up a bit.

"Kettle, stay in the back line and support everyone else. Can you use Calling Blessing yet?"

"Poko!"

Kettle moved to the very back of our party and brandished two fans, holding them at the ready. The fans looked like celebratory

fans, with a crane and a tortoise drawn on both.

"Pokooo!"

Kettle started to dance and its body emitted a faint light. The tanuki looked to be having a lot of fun waving its fans up and down.

Then, Kettle started dancing around in a circle, and now *my* body began to glow faintly. I guessed that Kettle had to dance for a certain length of time before the skill activated, which meant it might be hard to use it in the middle of an intense fight.

"Oho, interesting. This feels sort of the same as when I drank the Bizarre Tea."

"What does?" Akari asked.

"Calling Blessing."

When I checked my stats, I saw that I was currently under the status effect "Calling Blessing."

Similar to Bizarre Tea, its effects weren't useful for combat, but it supposedly increased drop rates as well as had an effect on crafting and gathering. It was hard to say what the concrete effects were, but it would be beneficial to use during boss fights. Calling Blessing wasn't among the buffs that Fau could cast, so I could summon the yokai at the start so it could use Calling Blessing, and then afterwards it could use Tea Tricks to heal and tank.

Eventually, the Fat Horn fell to one of Akari's attacks, and we continued making our way through the Great Wilderness. Kettle and Akari's Sunekosuri were still in our parties.

It cost some MP every hour to have them stay in our parties, so we were worried it would be unfeasible to keep them around for the entire time. This, too, was similar to a Summoner's Instant Summon. For now, though, we decided to keep our yokai with us to see how things went.

Kettle could only use its Calling Blessing during battle, being unable to activate it before gathering or doing other actions on the playing field. It was safe to say that Kettle's Calling Blessing was, in essence, an enemy drop rate booster. Also, its effect stayed active the entire fight after using it once, so it was best to activate it at the very start of boss battles. Meanwhile, Tea Tricks could be used whenever. The two abilities didn't have the same restraints on when

they could be used.

I felt I had learned a good amount of information about Kettle, so after a point I swapped in the Hanami Vandal. The pink sea angel that was even bigger than me. Plus it floated, which meant it stood out quite a lot.

It also moved very slowly, so it probably wasn't the best yokai to summon when I was progressing through an area. Although it did have an advantage of having considerably high HP. Even though it was essentially at level 1, it only lost about thirty percent HP when taking hits from monsters here in the Great Wilderness.

If I could raise my Yokai Summoning skill level, then the Hanami Vandal had the potential of turning into a tremendously strong super tank. An unbeatable tank that could absorb enemy attacks as it scattered status ailments over the battlefield—now *that* was a tank I wouldn't want to mess with.

Yokai Summoning was looking to be pretty powerful if I trained it up a bit more.

As we continued walking around the Great Wilderness testing out our new skill, something caught Lilith's attention.

"Kee-hee?"

"What is it? Did you spot something?"

"Kee-hee!"

Night had already fallen, so the rest of us couldn't see very far ahead. But Lilith, with her handy Night Vision, could see much farther.

"Is it the yokai?"

"Kee-hee?"

"Guess not, then?"

"Kee-hee-hee?"

"Let's just go over there so I can see for myself."

Lilith guided us through the dark wilderness, and eventually, I started to see a dim figure in the distance.

And it did *not* look like a yokai.

"Oh wow, travelers!" said someone.

It was a little girl with gray hair and gray dog ears. Judging by her marker, she was an NPC. But what was she doing in a place like

this so late at night?

Chapter Three: The Beast-Hybrid Village

"Hiya, travelers."

The girl, who had suddenly come into view, came briskly walking over to us. She walked with sure and steady footsteps despite it being night. I wondered if she had Night Vision too.

The ears on top of her head looked like dog ears, so I surmised she was a dog-human hybrid. Unlike the NPCs that lived in the towns, she was mainly dressed in fur pelts, which gave her a very wild appearance. She sort of looked like an old-world hunter.

"Good evening," she said, as if we were meeting under normal circumstances.

"G-Good evening," I stuttered in response. She looked totally at ease and not like she had lost her way at all.

"Um, what are you doing out here?" I asked. "It's already night."

"I can see just fine in the dark. This is actually my favorite time of day."

"O-Oh, really?"

She wasn't an enemy, was she? I had never encountered an NPC smack-dab in the middle of an area like this, so I had no idea how I should interact with her.

The girl, unconcerned with how bewildered I was, stepped forward boldly. "I'm Weris, a wolf. I'm a hunter from a tribe of hybrids."

Weris raised the bow she held up high and howled a small "Awooo!" She seemed like a girl who definitely marched to the beat of her own drum.

"Deadeye Weris, the wolf hunter, is out looking for prey!" she exclaimed. Apparently, she was in the middle of hunting. And she wasn't a dog but a wolf. I was glad I found out before saying

something wrong. It was the norm for wolf-hybrids in media to get upset when they were mistaken for being a dog, and vice versa.

"I'm Yuto."

"And I'm Akari."

"Yuto and Akari, huh? Whatcha doing around here?"

"We're looking for yokai," Akari explained.

"Yo-kye? Never heard of 'em."

"Really? That's too bad."

"Yeah, sorry I can't help."

Akari's communication skills were impressive. She had no problem talking to the girl. Seeing how well she was handling things, I figured I could leave the talking to her, but then I realized Weris had been staring at me the whole time.

"Hey, are you the Yuto guy people have been talking about lately?" she asked.

"Wha? People are talking about me?"

What could she mean...?

"Yeah. An old man in the village was. He said you were some amazing traveler."

"Seriously? You must have the wrong guy."

"But your name is Yuto, right, Yuto?"

"W-Well, yeah... But why me?"

Akari was by far stronger and had accomplished more things than me. Why were people talking about *me*?

In any case, based on what Weris said, it sounded like this was part of some event that I had somehow triggered.

I dropped my voice low so only Akari could hear me and asked, "Do you know anything about an event like this?"

"No. But it's definitely *your* event."

"What do you think they're saying about me? What could I have done that's so amazing?"

"I don't think it's that weird for NPCs to have heard about you considering all that you've done."

"Uh-huh, I heard you're a real decent, reliable guy," Weris cut in.

Akari and I had been speaking quietly, but she overheard us anyway. Those wolf ears of hers weren't just for show.

I had a feeling that the reason the NPCs knew about me wasn't because of anything I had done, but because of their favorability towards me. Though I had no memory of befriending any beast-hybrid NPCs, so I wasn't too sure about that either.

As I was mulling things over, Akari turned to Weris and asked, "You mentioned a village?"

"Yup, sure did."

"Is the village near here?"

"Yup, sure is."

Oh yeah! That was right, Weris had mentioned she'd heard about me from an old man at a village! I'd never heard of there being a village of beast-human hybrids! Maybe this was an even more significant event than I thought.

"C-Can we visit that village?" I asked her.

"Yup."

That was quick! Her response was so nonchalant, could we actually take her word for it?

"Can I come as well?" Akari asked.

"Yup."

Thus, with the laid-back Weris leisurely guiding the way, we arrived at the village in almost no time at all.

"I can't believe there was a path there," I muttered to Akari.

"No one could have noticed that," she replied.

The path itself was smooth and uncomplicated, but we came across something exciting. At one point, Weris passed through a rock that seemingly swallowed her up. The rock was an illusion that hid the entrance to a cave. Once we passed through that illusion and made it to the end of the short cave behind it, we came to the village.

There were houses in a hall-like space inside the cave made of wood and stone, creating an atmosphere that suggested this place was a hidden village. Was it really okay for Weris to bring us here like it was no big deal? It felt like the kind of place that we'd have to clear some trial before getting access to. Both Akari and I kept a cautious eye on our surroundings. It didn't seem unlikely that someone would swoop down on us for breaking some law.

Weris, on the other hand, was wagging her curled wolf tail and mumbling a tune as she walked. “I am Weris the wolf hunteeerrr. Not a wandering one, but still a hunteeerrr,” she sang.

“Aye.”

“Fau, no. We have to behave ourselves.”

Fau was itching to play an accompaniment to Weris’s humming, but I really didn’t want to make a lot of noise here. She’d have to stay quiet for a little longer.

“Weris, is that you?” someone called out.

The first villager we ran into was a short elderly woman with cat ears. They actually fit her appearance really well. In fact, she looked cute. It turned out tabby cat ears on a wrinkled old woman wasn’t a bad combination.

“I thought you were out hunting?” the old woman asked.

“Hi, granny. We have visitors.”

“And who are they? They look like travelers,” the old woman said, casting a stern glare our way.

I knew Weris was too carefree about leading us here. We probably *did* have to clear some sort of trial first.

“That’s Yuto, and that’s Akari,” Weris said.

“Oho?”

Despite the old woman’s wariness of us, once Weris told her our names, she immediately relaxed her guard.

“I see! So you’re Yuto the traveler!”

“Y-Yes. You know who I am?”

“We’ve never met, of course, but I’ve heard tales of your feats. Even we in this remote village have heard of your name.”

“M-My feats?”

I had no idea what feats she could be referring to, so her praise made me feel a little uncomfortable. Well, at least now I knew that these beast-human hybrids knew my name and liked me well enough, even if I didn’t know exactly why.

“Is it okay for us to be in this village, ma’am?” I asked.

“By all means. It’s not as though this is a hidden village.”

“Huh? It’s not? Even with that rock illusion?”

“Ah, that’s just to protect our village from monsters.”

So this wasn't a hidden village after all, just a regular village that was hard to find. I wished I could spend some time looking around and browsing their shops, but there was something more important I had to do right now.

"Weris, does this village have an inn?"

I needed to log out soon, so exploring would have to wait for next time.

◇◇◆◇◇

It took me a second to remember where I was when I logged back on.

"Ah, right. I logged out in the Beast Hybrid Village."

I had stayed in the village's only inn, which Weris had shown us to last night.

Despite this place being a tiny village hidden in the wilderness, it offered all the normal amenities like shops, guilds, and an inn. It had obviously been built with the expectation that players would be making use of it.

"Kee-hee?"

"Aye!"

"Growl."

"Morning, guys."

I tried to get up, but found that I couldn't. Lilith and Bear Bear were snuggled up to me on both sides, and Fau was lying on top of my stomach, having at some point crawled into the small bed with me. It had been a while since we had slept like this together.

I roused my monsters awake and we left the inn. Kettle was nowhere to be found, which must have meant that yokai were sent back home upon log-out.

"Where's Akari? Oh, there she is. Hey, over here!"

"Good morning, Yuto."

"Morning."

Akari and I were both up bright and early, so we would be teaming up together again today.

"And good morning to you too, monsters!"

“Sneeh.”

“...♪”

“Neigh!”

Akari had already summoned her Sunekosuri. She seemed to really like being able to walk around with a yokai at her side.

“Oh, they’re so precious!” Akari gave a happy wiggle at the sight of her Sunekosuri and my monsters greeting one another.

“Should we head out? I was thinking we’d map out the village while we checked out the shops and guilds. How’s that sound?”

“Sounds fun! No objections from me!”

With Akari on board, we all walked around the village together. We didn’t know where the shops were, but I figured we’d find them one way or another. There were only one hundred buildings here, so with a little patience, it wouldn’t be all that difficult to visit them all. Besides, it was fun enough just walking around underground like this.

Besides, for being underground, the village was surprisingly well lit. This was thanks to the luminous moss that was growing densely on the ceiling of the cave. Fascinatingly enough, the glow of the moss became dimmer at night. I wondered if it was the same type of luminous moss that I grew on my farm, or if it was a different variety. I wouldn’t mind getting my hands on something new, if so.

In the center of the village was a small spring where water was freely available. It was just ordinary water, but I was thankful I could replenish my stock.

There had been a few people around last night, but even more villagers were out and about now that it was daytime. Naturally, all the villagers were beast hybrids. There were all types of hybrids, not only the more commonly seen ones like wolf, cat, and bear hybrids, but also less common ones like weasel, koala, and seal hybrids.

It was interesting to see beast hybrids outside of the basic ones that players could choose from. I had a feeling there were people out there who’d want to play as one of these more exotic animals. I wondered if that was possible.

I saw some parents and children around and noticed there were some interesting combinations, like a horse-hybrid child with a cat-

hybrid dad and a dog-hybrid mom. I guessed the characteristics of children of beast hybrids were just randomly generated.

"Oh, look! There's a sign!" Akari pointed out.

"Oh, what is it? A blacksmith?"

We approached a building that had a sign hanging out front and saw that it was a shop selling all types of metal products that a village might need, from weapons to tableware, along with other miscellaneous goods. There wasn't anything particularly novel here that we couldn't find in any one of the bigger towns, though.

The other stores we stopped at offered more or less the same products. All the items here were pretty generic, nothing particularly rare. Since we were in Zone Ten though, the quality of the products was pretty high, so at the very least it was a good chance to restock on some things.

That wasn't to say there were no interesting shops at all, though. One place sold a variety of equipment exclusively for beast hybrids. There were swords that raised attack power only when equipped by wolf hybrids and shoes that raised the agility of cat hybrids. They were interesting to see, even if I couldn't wear them.

The equipment made use of furs and plants to give off a wild look that would complement a beast hybrid's appearance. I had a feeling Weris's own fur equipment was from this shop.

However, it *was* surprising to learn that there was race-specific equipment in the game at all. Or maybe I was alone in not knowing about it and this type of equipment was actually widely available? I would happily buy Halfling-specific equipment, if it existed. While there wasn't really a point in trying to raise my attack power, something that gave a bonus to Dexterity or Intelligence would be nice.

Another interesting shop was one that sold avatar skins, items which only changed the appearance of your avatar. As was to be expected from a skin shop in a place like this, it sold skins for animal ears and equipment made with fur.

After we had walked around most of the village, we decided to head to the Adventurers' Guild, thinking that there might be some quests specific to this area.

“How about this one?” Akari suggested, pointing a quest out to me. “Although, it’s not really something unique to this village...”

“Gathering mushrooms? I don’t think very many mushrooms grow in this area.”

“If I had to guess, I’d say we’re supposed to gather them here in this cave.”

“Huh? Do you think this cave keeps going?”

“Maybe, but I’m not sure. But asking players to gather twenty mushrooms in the wilderness seems like a pretty difficult task, don’t you think?”

“Hmm, when you put it like that, it makes sense.”

Other than the mushroom-gathering quest, there were other requests that asked for deliveries of ore and monster materials. They were all monsters that were not found in the Great Wilderness: Dark Rats, Black Bats, and Dark Bugs.

Akari was right. There had to be more to this cave than we had seen.

We asked the guild’s receptionist where we could gather items, and she readily told us. Incidentally, the receptionist was a deer-human hybrid.

“Do you know about the pond near the back of the village?” the receptionist asked.

“Oh yeah, I do remember seeing a small pond,” I replied.

I had spotted it while we were walking around. Unlike the spring in the middle of the village, the water in the pond was somewhat murky.

“Behind that pond, there is a narrow path. Though you’ll have to look hard for it,” the receptionist explained. “If you follow that path, you’ll find a gathering spot.”

So this cave *did* extend farther. We had to investigate it.

“Yuto!” Akari said excitedly.

“Yeah, we’re right on the same page.” It looked like we’d spend today doing some cave exploration.

And so, we followed the deer receptionist’s directions and headed to the back of the village. There, we found the small pond, which was about ten meters in diameter. I had already checked the area

out during our tour of the village.

Moss grew thickly around the edges and inside of the pond, which made the water opaque and obscured the bottom, but also gave the impression that it was thriving with pond life. Although we hadn't accepted any this time, there had been fish delivery quests at the guild as well, so I was pretty sure there had to be some fish in this pond. Once we found the time to, I wouldn't mind doing some fishing here.

As for right now, our goal was finding the passageway that led deeper into the cave.

"Hmm..."

"Yuto! I found it!" Akari called out.

"Nice! That receptionist wasn't lying, it *is* hard to find unless you're right next to it."

There was a big rock blocking the pathway, which meant the path was almost impossible to see when searching from the village side. Even if you knew there was a path to look for, you still had to search around the pond to find it. At first glance, it just looked like a dead end.

"Shall I go in first?" Akari offered.

"Yeah, please. Lilith, go with her."

"Kee-hee!"

Akari, with her sharp detection abilities, and Lilith, who could see in the dark, made the perfect team for cave exploration. Carro, Fau, and I followed behind them, and Sakura and Bear Bear brought up the rear.

"Oh, one more thing... I summon the Demonic Ghost!"

"Ooo-oooh."

"We're exploring a cave right now. Can you help keep an eye out for enemies?"

"Oooh!"

The Demonic Ghost had no problem maneuvering in the dark, and she could pass through objects and people, which meant she could move around in this cramped space without getting in anyone else's way. Whether we were attacked from the front or from behind, she could swiftly head in either direction to offer support. She was

the ideal middle guard.

"I wonder if it's a bad idea to use Wail here, since we're in a cave. It'd probably echo like crazy. I guess we should test it out first."

"Oooh?"

If the Demonic Ghost unleashed a piercing scream right next to me, it might burst my eardrums. If I remembered right, hearing loss was a possible status ailment in the game. I had never experienced it myself, so it must take something more than any ordinary loud sound to be affected by it, but it didn't hurt to be careful. It was best to test it out first.

As we stayed on guard for any possible surprise monster attacks, we stepped into a passageway that led further into the cave. The area didn't offer anything new or unusual, though. It was just a normal cave, like any other that could be found in the game. There were numerous stalactites hanging down from the ceiling, and the ground under our feet was damp. It was difficult to walk, but not enough so that it would be impossible for us to fight in here, and the passageway was wide enough for three people to walk side by side.

There were gathering and mining nodes along the way, so we were able to obtain a lot of items from those. We didn't find anything remarkable, but since it was hard to find mushrooms and plants in the Great Wilderness, I was just glad to find some readily available here. They were also of a pretty high quality.

"Aye-aye!"

"Oh, these are the mushrooms we need to deliver."

I already had a stock of them in my inventory, but I had decided not to use them to immediately clear the quest. I wanted to see the cave's main gathering spot, as I had a hunch that some sort of development would occur if I went there.

While I was gathering mushrooms at the gathering node Fau spotted, Akari raised a warning cry.

"Monsters!"

"Here we go!"

I followed Akari's line of sight and saw a large bat, a black rat, and a rolling sphere the size of a basketball that had some sort of black haze rising from it. The first two creatures were recognizable

as the Black Bat and Dark Rat we had to defeat for our quests. As for that ball, was that the Dark Bug?

"Let's take down two of them first, and then I'll try using Wail on the last one."

"Got it!"

And so the fight began. These cave monsters were pretty tough. They might have been even higher leveled than monsters in the Great Wilderness.

"Skreech skreech!"

"Agh! Damn it!"

The Black Bat was fast as hell! And it took out twenty percent of my HP with just a graze!

"Squeak squeak!"

"...!"

"Kee-hee-hee!"

The Dark Rat was also very quick on its feet, so we weren't able to get a clean hit on it. It evaded Sakura's whip and blocked Lilith's spear with its incisors.

But the most troublesome of all of them was the Dark Bug.

"What?! It can go up walls?!"

"Kree kree kree!"

"Aye!"

"Fau!"

The Dark Bug, which looked like a pill bug, moved by rolling around at a high speed, allowing it to move up the walls and onto the ceiling of the cave. Its body-slam attack was incredibly powerful, and it was even capable of using Dark Magic.

Even though we were only up against three monsters, they were completely steamrolling us. If Akari hadn't been here, we would have been in really deep trouble.

"Hyaaah!"

"Growl growl!"

"Aqua Ball!"

Akari was able to land blows on the enemies from her position in the front line. With her slowing them down, the rest of us were able to start hitting them with attacks too.

"Phew," I breathed. "We managed to beat the bat and the Dark Bug."

"Now all that's left is the Dark Rat! Are you going to try using that attack?"

"Yeah. I need to know if you can use it inside here. Demonic Ghost! Use Wail!"

The Demonic Ghost looked happy to hear my command. She eagerly moved towards the front of our formation and opened her mouth wide.

"AAAAAAHHH!"

Ow, my ears! That was deafening! I checked my status and, as I had feared, I had been inflicted with Hearing Loss. Thankfully, it went away after a few seconds. Akari had also been able to protect herself by covering her ears, so it didn't seem like the ghost's wailing had that severe of an effect on hearing, at least.

"I think it's safe to say I can keep using this going forward."

"Yes, I think so too," Akari agreed. "It was even able to paralyze the Dark Rat."

The chance of being affected by any one of Wail's status ailments was calculated individually, so unless the target had perfect resistance to everything, there was a good chance at least one would stick. It was a skill useful even in an area with much stronger enemies.

"Okay then, let's keep moving!" Akari said.

"R-Right."

Honestly, if I were on my own, this would have been the part where I turned back. But we would be fine with Akari here. I just had to hustle so that I didn't hold her back.

The village's cave system was less complex than I had been expecting. We only ran into a fork in the path a few times, and the routes seemed to converge back together again anyway.

If we took into account the items we gathered and experience we earned, this area wasn't really the best hunting grounds for us. The monsters were too strong. Personally, I thought the area would be just barely doable for even a party made up of players who were all on Akari's level. We were only really able to push our way through

because we had stocked up on enough recovery items.

After three hours of exploration, we made it to what appeared to be the innermost part of the cave.

"We've mapped the entire cave. All that's left is what's past those doors," Akari said.

"Seems like it. Should we head in?"

"Let's do it! We have this just in case!"

Akari took out an item from her inventory. It was a small orb that glowed with a mystical blue light. The item was called a Super Escape Orb. When used, it allowed players to escape from a dungeon. It was an upgraded version of an Escape Orb that had recently become more widely available.

What made it "super" was the fact that it could be used even in the middle of a boss fight. That meant you could challenge the boss to gauge how strong it was, and if it looked like you were going to lose, you could escape with the orb.

There was no penalty for respawning with one of these, and it allowed you to gather information about a boss. There were some restrictions, though, like not being able to use it during raid boss battles, but it was still a nifty item. Personally, I didn't think I would use one myself. Why? Because it was *very* expensive. They were sold in the Zone Ten cities, but a single orb cost 500,000 G. It was actually more economical to just take the death penalty.

However, we had gotten some great items from loot boxes, so we decided to use the orb this time around. We could have left this area to put the items away, but that would take up too much time.

Akari and I had decided to split the cost of the orb if we used it, and I was also interested in checking out the boss.

"Did you already equip them, Akari?"

"Yes, I did! I like them!"

Akari had changed into the equipment that she'd gotten from the loot box. The items she had obtained were leg armor called Tiger Boots and an accessory called Bat Cloak.

The Tiger Boots were an exceptional piece of gear that granted high defense and muffled the sound of the wearer's footsteps. They had spikes on the soles that kept the wearer firmly in place even on

unsteady ground. They were just the sort of shoes needed for cave exploration.

The Bat Cloak concealed the wearer's presence and allowed them to slip into the shadows. Something like this would be indispensable for stealth missions. Akari was super pleased with both items.

"It's too bad you can't use your items in the cave, Yuto."

"Yeah, both the items I got are for the outside playing field."

The items I had obtained were a Wolf Hatchet and a Herbivore's Bell.

The Wolf Hatchet was a small ax for cutting down trees, and it protected the user from being attacked by weak wolf-type monsters. It did nothing against bosses or predator monsters, but wolf monsters were everywhere, so there was no shortage of areas where this hatchet could be useful. And honestly, I was just happy to have a high-level logging ax.

The Herbivore's Bell was a magic tool that produced a barrier thirty meters in diameter and alerted the user of any trespassers. It was a handy item that allowed players to rest without having to be vigilant the entire time. And it had a generous thirty uses.

Usually, these sorts of items could only be used ten times at most, so the fact that it could be used thirty times alone meant this was probably a highly valuable item. According to Akari, this was just the type of thing frontliners would kill to have. *Hey, if I could get a lot of money for it, then maybe I* would *sell it.*

"Okay, I'm opening the door!" Akari announced.

"Let's go!"

With Akari at the head of our group, we went through the door and found ourselves inside a giant dome-like area. The ceiling easily reached over thirty meters high. The area wasn't well lit, which made it hard to tell just how wide the place was, but my guess was over two hundred meters in diameter, maybe even bigger.

I had a bad feeling about this place. Akari seemed to share my concerns.

"Hey, with an area this big, doesn't it seem like we're about to have to deal with...y'know?"

"So you think so too, Yuto?"

“Yeah.”

We were both talking in whispers. I felt like something bad would happen if we spoke too loudly.

Boss fields were typically made big enough to accommodate for the size of the boss that would appear there. Small fields for small bosses, big fields for big bosses. At the very least, the fields needed to be big enough not to hinder the boss’s movements. That might not necessarily be the case from here on, but at least for Zone Ten, that held true. So, what sort of monster could a field this vast have been set up for?

I got my answer immediately.

“Whoa! Something’s there!”

“...!”

“Kee-hee-hee!”

Sakura and Lilith both looked frightened, and who could blame them?

“Is that a three-headed lion? It’s enormous!” Akari said.

When we walked further into the domed area, we started to see a giant figure in the darkness. As we got closer, we could tell exactly what it was. Looming before us was a gigantic lion with golden fur that shimmered even in the dark. Even from its position lying down on its side, we could grasp just how massive it was. I estimated that if it stood up, it would be just under thirty meters long and over ten meters high.

And it had three heads. Was it supposed to be a lion version of Cerberus? Given its size, it definitely looked like it’d be a tough adversary.

There was one more thing that left Akari and me dumbstruck. Although we hadn’t engaged it in a battle yet, there was already a red marker above it and we could see its HP bar. All signs that this was a raid boss.

“G-Growl...”

“Aye...”

Even my normally bubbly monsters were acting timid. They must have known that if we provoked that thing without a plan, we’d be wiped out.

"Super Escape Orbs can't be used during raid boss fights, right?" I asked.

"Right," Akari confirmed.

I paused. "Should we try escaping before the battle starts?"

"You read my mind."

We really lucked out. Thank god this wasn't the sort of battle that began just by passing through the doorway! The battle probably began if we had attacked first or walked closer to the lion.

We all held our breath as we made our way back through the door. Once we were back on the other side, we exhaled sighs of relief and sank to the floor.

"Jeez, that boss had me shaking in my boots even just lying on the floor."

"That was terrifying. I'm so glad the doors opened back up for us."

"Growl!"

"Kee-hee."

After a short break, we decided to head out of the dungeon. We'd finished mapping the area, so we were able to find our way back a lot quicker. It took about an hour to get to the exit. Once there, I did some stretching exercises. Doing so helped me feel refreshed, both physically and mentally. My game avatar never got stiff muscles or anything, but it was just something I did unconsciously.

"That part of the cave really kept us on our toes the whole time," I remarked.

"It sure did."

It had been a while since I'd felt so tense. I could go a while without doing that again. Of course, the idea of going back for more loot boxes *was* enticing... Loot boxes spawned randomly in the cave, and we hadn't found a single one on our way back. The fact that we had found two on our first trip through must have been nothing short of a miracle.

It was only now that we could look back and laugh at how scared we were not knowing if we'd be able to open the doors again to leave. The doors probably would have locked once the battle actually began.

“So, what now?” Akari asked. “We found a raid boss, of all things...”

“Good question. It looked really strong.”

“Definitely. I appraised it, so I found out its name is Cerberus Lion, and five parties can join in on fighting it, with a maximum of thirty players.”

Raid bosses were made to be extremely hard to defeat on the first try. They became weaker after being defeated once, but they always gave players a hard time before being brought to that weakened state. In fact, they slaughtered frontliners across the whole game.

Raid bosses that allowed one hundred players to participate but went undefeated for a long time were responsible for making thousands of players respawn. Sometimes the verification clan recruited players to help them challenge raid bosses dozens of times over.

This wasn’t the sort of boss we could take on at our level, so the best thing to do here was probably sell this information to Alyssa. But while *I* had come to that conclusion, Akari proposed something else.

“Let’s call in some reinforcements.”

“Huh? Why?”

“So we can challenge that boss, of course!”

“Wha? You want to challenge it?”

“Well, yes. We found it, after all. Don’t you want to try fighting it?”

Spoken like a true top player. Of course her mind would go straight to thinking up a plan to beat the raid boss. Though on second thought, maybe that was the normal reaction. Keep this information a secret for a little bit while trying to clear the boss ourselves first. Yeah, that was probably how frontliners rolled.

It wasn’t like I was particularly dying to share this information anyway, and I wasn’t hurting for money. If Akari wanted to keep this raid boss under wraps for a bit, that was just fine with me.

“You’ll need a full team to take on a boss like that,” I said.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

"Do you know twenty-nine people you can call?"

Akari gave me a puzzled look, and I realized it was a silly question. Unlike me, who had few connections, Akari's contacts were probably stacked with frontliners. She could probably assemble twenty-nine fighters in no time.

However, I was wrong about why she was giving me that look.

"Huh? Did you count wrong? We won't need twenty-nine people. Just twenty-three."

"You said the max was thirty people, didn't you? So I was right with twenty-nine."

"Wait, Yuto, are you not going to join?"

"Come again? Me, fighting *that* raid boss? No way!"

Akari had apparently been under the impression that *I* was going to participate in the raid battle. And with my whole party. We'd be useless. If my monsters and I used up an entire party slot, we'd ruin any chances of winning.

Even if I participated alone, I'd only feel bad for leeching off everyone else. When I explained as much to Akari, she vehemently denied this.

"You could never be a leech! We need you there, Yuto! It'll boost our chances of winning by a mile!"

"Come on, what? There's no way that's true."

"With you and your monsters there, you'll inspire everyone to do their best! I know I'm more motivated to fight well just to impress your monsters!"

So we'd be like cheerleaders? I had a feeling Akari was only saying these things so I would join without feeling guilty, but since she was going through the trouble of trying to make me feel better about it, then I supposed I could join. That raid boss was terrifying, but it'd be a good experience either way!

"A-All right. I'll participate."

"Yay!"

"So, how should we find members? Should we stick to friends?"

"Hmm, let's see... Do you have any good ideas of who to call?"

"Let me think. Who, of the people I know, are the strongest fighters..."

The first ones who came to mind were Kokuten and his party, and Siegfried, since they were all top frontliners. Then there was Marca, who I'd befriended during one of the prior events, Sakkyun, the flashy Summoner, and Murakage, the ninja wannabe. I felt like all of them would be a reliable asset in this fight.

Alyssa and the other Quick-Eared Cats were also among the top players, but they weren't purely fighting classes.

Oh, there was also Rikyu, Filma, and Kurumi, and Sawyer the young elf—they were strong players too. Plus, there was also Ashihana, the woodworker who was obsessed with Bear Bear, Fuka the cook, Tagosack the farmer, and Sukegawa the lewd blacksmith. They were all crafters, but that didn't mean they couldn't fight.

And if I asked other tamers to join, like Amelia, Ursula, and Eulenspiegel, then we'd be able to fill up the party slots in a heartbeat.

"I think that about covers it."

"W-Wow, you're very well-connected!"

"Huh? You think so?"

"I do. You're honestly amazing."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. My contacts were amazing, not me. Anyway, Akari had some contacts she could call up too, so between the two of us, we should be able to form a pretty decently strong group.

Though now that I thought about it, I really had made a lot of friends in LJO. I hadn't been sure how things would go when I first started playing this game, but maybe I wasn't doing so bad after all.

"So what's our game plan?" I asked.

"I was thinking, maybe we should ask someone who's experienced in raid boss fights for advice first."

"Like who?"

"The clan master of the Monster Hunting Division, Kokuten. His clan makes it a point to fight raid bosses that have already been defeated several times over."

"You know, I do remember him saying that he wanted to play LJO so he could fight giant monsters."

In this game, raids usually occurred in the form of dungeon

bosses or as a requirement to unlock an area. In the case where the raid boss was blocking the way to a new area, the enemy had to be defeated as a raid boss only the first time. To be more precise, after the raid boss was defeated once, parties could decide for themselves if they wanted to challenge the enemy as a raid boss or a regular boss. Though most parties tended to pick the regular boss version.

A regular boss was leagues weaker and much easier to beat. Also, since there wasn't any evidence to indicate that there were items dropped only by the raid version of the boss, it was much more painless to farm drops from the regular version.

Verification had been done to compare gathering a large group to go all out on a raid boss versus preparing a single party to challenge a regular boss. There had been extensive discussions about various aspects, like drop rates and time efficiency, and they had concluded that farming a regular boss was the better choice.

All that is to say that there were very few players who would do something as rash as go out of their way to challenge a raid boss, outside of those who fought them to film videos or for verification purposes. Kokuten and his clan were among those "very few." He and his Monster Hunting Division clan, made up of solely working adults, were big fans of fighting giant monsters.

"All right then, should we call Kokuten first?"

"Yes, good idea. Let's do it now!" Akari insisted enthusiastically.

"O-Okay, sure."

I searched for Kokuten in my friends list and saw that he was online. Hopefully he picked up my call...

"Hello, Kokuten speaking. How may I help you?"

Wow, he picked up right away. And talk about a professional greeting!

"I actually wanted to ask you for advice about something. Do you have time to talk?"

"Oh? You want advice from *me*?"

"Yeah. You see, I ran into what I think is an undiscovered raid boss—"

"*I beg your pardon?!*" Kokuten shouted.

Gah! So loud! I wasn't expecting him to yell!

"T-Tell me more! What kind of monster is it?! How can I find it?!"

I knew Kokuten loved fighting raid bosses, but I wasn't expecting his personality to do a complete 180 at the mention of one. I never would have imagined that the normally calm Kokuten could sound this hyped about something.

"Wh-Why don't we meet up and talk?" I suggested.

"Yes, of course! Where should I meet you? I'll go anywhere! I'll come right now!"

"O-Oh, sure. Then how about..."

Ten minutes later, we arrived at Yellow City.

"Silver-Haired!"

"Kokuten! Over here!"

After we met up in front of the teleportation circle, Akari led us to the Adventurers' Guild to use one of the conference rooms there. They were available for parties to hold meetings. A café that had private rooms also would have been fine to use, but none of us were familiar with any fancy cafés like that. I thought about looking for one, but since Kokuten seemed like he didn't want to wait much longer to hear about the raid boss, we decided to head to the closest guild with a place for us to talk.

We entered the conference room, and as soon as Kokuten sat down on a chair, he immediately pressed us for details.

"So, you found an undiscovered raid boss?"

His excitement still hadn't settled down one bit! He was speaking so fast! *And that look in his eye is scary!*

"Y-Yeah, that's right," I said. "I'm not sure if it's undiscovered or not, but I'm pretty sure the general public doesn't know about it. Neither of us had ever heard about it. Right, Akari?"

"Right, I had no idea it existed," Akari affirmed.

There was a possibility that other players had found the raid boss but were concealing the information like we were, but we were almost positive that nothing had been made public.

"Frankly, it seems to be an incredibly strong opponent," Akari said.

"That's why we were thinking you could lend us your wisdom."

Spurred on by Kokuten's intense, wide-eyed gaze, we got right to

business. Even my monsters were politely sitting in their seats without making a sound.

"Aye..."

"Kee-hee..."

"Growl..."

They must have instinctively understood that they'd be scolded if they caused any interruptions. They were as silent as dolls. Actually, dolls and stuffed toys modeled after my monsters didn't sound like a bad idea. Maybe I could ask Eine to make some?



"Silver-Haired? Did you hear me? Can you tell me more about the raid boss?"

"O-Oh, right. So, at first we were just searching Zone Ten for a yokai..."

I told Kokuten about how we had embarked on a mission to find a yokai, encountered a beast hybrid NPC who showed us to her village inside a cave, and then explored the area behind the village, where we found the raid boss.

Kokuten leaned forward excitedly and said, "There is a high chance that defeating that raid boss will unlock a new zone. I'm certain people will voluntarily join the fight, and you could even charge money for it. What are your thoughts on that?"

"Unlock a new zone? Charge money?"

"Huh? Now that you mention it...perhaps so."

"I can understand how Silver-Haired was unaware, but I'm surprised you didn't realize, Ruby Red," said Kokuten.

As of now, the world of LJO had only been unlocked through Zone Ten. The entire player base was stuck from moving any further, as the route to progress to Zone Eleven remained undiscovered. There were various theories floating around for why this was, like that there were perhaps certain hints or key items people had missed, or even because the next zone simply hadn't been implemented yet.

Nevertheless, as Kokuten explained, a good portion of the top players refused to give up and were working around the clock to find the way forward.

I typically had nothing to do with progressing into new zones, so this news was completely unexpected. Even Akari, who mainly played solo and explored the outskirts of areas and farmed dungeons, hadn't been paying much attention to zone unlocking either.

"Wait, but then, how did *I* find it?"

I didn't want to brag, but I hadn't even traversed that much of Zone Ten yet, and I had never searched for any new routes. I hadn't encountered any events or discovered information that seemed relevant to something like this. Weris had just appeared in front of

me out of nowhere one day. In order to meet Weris, I must have done something to trigger that event before going to the Great Wilderness. But I had no idea what that action could have been.

"I'm not sure of the reason either, but there must have been something that only you have done, Silver-Haired," Kokuten said. "But we can leave figuring out what that might be to the Verification Clan, and move on to discussing what to do about this boss."

"I'll be honest, I have no clue how to prepare for a raid boss fight. I can gather any items we'll need, but I think I'll have to rely on you two for assembling players. Of course, I'll help reach out to any of my friends that you want to invite."

"Is there anyone you can think of who you want to invite?"

"Hmm, I don't think there's anyone I absolutely need to invite at all costs."

My friends who I felt relatively on closer terms with, like Tagosack, Sawyer, and Ashihana, were all crafters. I was already enough of a burden; I couldn't possibly tell them that I wanted to invite even more crafters.

"Also, I don't think we need to charge money... What do you think, Akari?"

"I agree, making people pay a participation fee would be asking too much. Also, I don't have many close friends in the game, so I'm inclined to depend on Kokuten for forming the parties too..."

"You two are as selfless as ever. In that case, leave assembling the players to me."

What a reliable guy! Kokuten got right to writing down players names, murmuring and nodding to himself as he did. He must have been picking out players among the people he knew who he thought would form a well-balanced advance, middle, and rear guard. I peeked at his notes and saw that I recognized all of the names he'd written down. Our circle of friends actually overlapped quite a lot.

After ten minutes, Kokuten had finally finished choosing his list of potential candidates. The next step was to call and invite them.

"First, one party will be you and your monsters, Silver-Haired."

"We'll do everything we can."

"And as we agreed, my party will take up another slot."

"That'd be a big help!" Akari said gratefully.

Including Akari, we had two parties and one player as our initial members. The remaining spots available were two parties and five people.

"I will take care of reaching out to people. I'll contact them tomorrow morning," Kokuten said.

Once that was settled, we temporarily went our separate ways. We'd ended up leaving everything to Kokuten, but it seemed like he enjoyed doing this type of work. He skipped away, eager to assemble the team of the strongest players that he had thought up.

"Well, looks like we have some free time again until tomorrow."

"What are your plans, Yuto?"

"I think I'll go back to that pond. I want to see if I can catch some fish there."

"Do you mind if I tag along?"

"Not at all, but I won't be doing any fighting."

"That's perfectly fine. I'm more interested in the prospect of catching new fish!"

Right, of course—filling out her encyclopedia and collecting items was something Akari genuinely enjoyed doing.

"All right, should we head back to the village?"

"Yes, let's go!"

Back at the Beast Hybrid Village, we stopped first at the Adventurers' Guild to take a look at the noticeboard and gather information.

"It makes the most sense to think that we'd be able to catch the fish for these delivery quests in the village's pond," I noted.

"That must be the case for the shellfish too, then," Akari agreed. "There are some shellfish that live in freshwater too, right?"

"Yeah, we should be able to catch them by freediving. Reflet, Perca, can I count on you to do that?"

"Hum!"

"Honk honk!"

After we split up with Kokuten, I had briefly stopped by my house to change my party members. Right now, I had Reflet, Perca, Olto, Eine, and Drimo with me. I had selected my party members based

on who was best suited for catching fish underwater and gathering items inside a cave. I also planned to summon the Kappa to join us at some point. I was interested in seeing what it was capable of.

After we selected a few quests that we could fulfill around the pond, we headed to the back of the village. Along the way, we ran into a beast hybrid carrying a fishing rod on his shoulder. I could tell by his ears that he was some sort of herbivore animal, but I otherwise couldn't pinpoint what exactly he was based on. The clothes he wore were zebra-striped, but that couldn't mean that he was a zebra himself...could it?

I appraised him to get an answer, and lo and behold, he *was* a zebra hybrid. *Come on, devs...* It wasn't a bad thing to be able to tell what he was based on his appearance, but wasn't this just a little *too* on the nose?

"Humm?"

"Oh, an undine? Is she your tamed monster?" the zebra-man asked.

"Ah yeah, sorry. Looks like she's curious about your fishing rod. Reflet! You can't just go up to people and touch their things!"

"Hum..."

Before I could stop her, Reflet had rushed over to the man with clear interest in the fishing rod he was carrying, reaching out her hand for it as she did.

"Oh, that's all right. It's nothing grand, just something I made myself. Here, have a look."

"Thank you, sir."

"Humm."

Reflet and I bowed our heads to the man. We were lucky this guy was so easygoing. Some NPCs got a little peeved when players were rude to them. This zebra-man was one of the nice ones though. He actually handed Reflet his fishing rod himself.

"Humm."

"Honk."

"Oh, has the handle caught your eye? That part gave me a lot of trouble to make."

"Hum!"

"That's right. You just hold it in your palm like that and reel in the line nice and easy."

"Honk?"

"Nope, it's not made of wood."

"Humm!"

"Honk honk!"

At some point, Perca had also joined their group, and the man began some sort of fishing rod lecture. Hobby enthusiasts knew how to speak each other's language.

There was nothing original about the zebra-man's fishing rod. It was completely ordinary, without any clever mechanisms or interesting design, the sort of fishing rod anyone would imagine if you asked them to think of a fishing rod. But maybe it was sophisticated in a way that I didn't understand.

I had the Fishing skill, so I wasn't exactly uninterested in knowing more, but since Akari was with us too, I didn't want to waste much time talking to this guy.

"We'd like to hear more, sir, but we've really got to go," I told the group.

"Humm."

"Honk honk..."

"Are you folks going to the pond?" the zebra-man asked. "If so, we're headed in the same direction. Let's walk and talk. Oh, and drop the 'sir,' if you don't mind. Being called that makes my skin crawl, ha ha ha."

Now that he said it, it seemed obvious that the zebra-man was on his way to the pond too. He *was* carrying a fishing rod, after all. As we walked to the pond, we were able to ask him about a few things.

"So you used to be able to purchase materials to make fishing rods here in the village?"

"That's right. I used the silk from stalactite spiders that show up deeper in the cave."

"Deeper in the cave... Do you mean past that giant lion?"

"Yeah, we're not too sure what to do about that beast."

The zebra-man—Pollick, his name was—explained that right before the arrival of the players, the three-headed lion had taken up

residence in that room and blocked access to the rest of the cave. Unable to get past the lion, the villagers were no longer able to obtain various types of materials that had been accessible to them in the past.

"Also, we've been having trouble with our food situation now that we can't trade with the other side of the cave."

"Pollick!" Akari exclaimed excitedly. "Are you saying there are people living on the other end of the cave?"

Pollick nodded. "You bet, there's a big town over there."

Based on how easily he gave that information up, I guess it wasn't a big secret or anything. And that pretty much confirmed that the lion was the boss to unlock Zone Eleven. Man, this was a lot of responsibility for someone like me. But I already said I'd join the fight, so I just had to do what I could.

"Do you happen to know if that lion has any weaknesses?" I asked.

"We've tried a few things here and there to get through, but nothing worked."

The villagers had tried various methods to get past the boss, like using a decoy to lure the lion away and setting up traps. But according to Pollick, they'd had no success.

There was no way for NPCs to pass through the boss room in the first place. From their perspective, the boss had used its power to produce a barrier that kept them from being able to leave the room.

I wondered how the villagers survived that encounter, but apparently they had an item that allowed them to escape even from a raid boss. Though according to Pollick, the item was too valuable to give to travelers. It must have been some item exclusive to NPCs for story purposes.

"The only thing we managed to figure out is that we can't get through unless that monster is defeated, and it likes fish more than meat," Pollick summed up. The lion had been more interested in their traps when they were baited with fish.

"Hum-humm!"

"Honk hooonk!"

"Ack, hey! Stop pulling me!" I cried out.

Pollick laughed. “Ha ha ha. Looks like they’re tired of our yapping.”

My monsters had either gotten bored of listening to us talk through this complicated ordeal, or they were just excited at the sight of the pond. Reflet and Perca started running towards it, pulling me with them by my arms.

Come on, guys! If Pollick wasn’t such a nice person, this sort of behavior would’ve made him angry!

“Hum-hum!”

“Hooonk!”

“Huh? Wait, are you guys not gonna stop?”

Did their overexcitement make them lose control of their brakes? Reflet and Perca were still dragging me with them as they jumped right into the pond!

“Wait, I really don’t wanna jump into that murky water!”

“Hum-hummm!”

“Honk honk hooonk!”

I splashed around uselessly in the pond. The water was so cloudy that I couldn’t see a single thing! *Wh-Which way is up?*

I realized that I was panicking a little. Drowning wasn’t painful in this game, and it wasn’t as though my HP would deplete all at once while I struggled. Plus, thanks to my Swimming skill, my regular clothes didn’t weigh me down, so as long as I calmed myself, I should be able to save myself pretty quickly.

I felt I needed to explain myself. Imagine suddenly being dumped into a body of murky water that completely obscured your vision. Who wouldn’t get flustered, and even panicked, in a situation like that?

But after a few seconds underwater, I realized that I wasn’t drowning. In addition to having the Swimming skill, I was also wearing my Air Necklace. Since I was going to be around water, I had equipped it beforehand just in case.

Name: Air Necklace
Rarity: 3 *Quality: 9* ★ Durability: 200

```
Effect: Defense +4, grants breathing bonus.
Weight: 1
```

It would actually be difficult for me to drown with this on. Reflet and Perca must have known that their little prank wouldn't have put me in any real danger.

After I had calmed down, I used Aqua Lung, which was a skill that allowed me to breathe freely underwater for about ten minutes. However, I still couldn't see much, thanks to all the mud and algae turning the water a greenish brown. I could only see at best fifty centimeters in front of me. I couldn't see any creatures around us, nor the bottom of the unexpectedly deep pond.

What I *could* see was that I was holding Perca in an iron claw and Reflet in a headlock. But why did they look like they were having fun? This was supposed to be their punishment!

"Humm!"

"Honk honk!"

I guess to them, this still counted as physical affection. They were both grinning wide. If they didn't see this as a punishment, then there was no use for it. I released both of them from my hold, then suddenly remembered my Water Exploration skill. I decided to use it. It had been a while since I had, so I had completely forgotten it existed. It was a skill that functioned like sonar, searching the area around me and showing me its topographical data. It looked like the deepest part of the pond was at about fifteen meters. There were no monsters, but there were fish and shellfish, and one clearly man-made object sunken at the very bottom. It looked like some sort of mechanism made up of thin metal frames.

I decided to take Reflet and Perca down there to get closer to the mysterious object. Once we were close enough to see it, I appraised the item and found it was called a "Giant Broken Trap." It looked sort of like a bear trap used by hunters. It was over five meters wide, so it must have been intended for some pretty big beast.

I put the trap away in my inventory, then swam quickly for the surface. Once I was out of the water, I saw Akari and Pollick peering

worriedly at the pond.

Akari was the first to call out to me. “Yuto! Are you all right?”

“We got worried when we didn’t see you resurface.”

“Sorry,” I said sheepishly. “I decided to investigate a bit underwater since I was in there.”

I probably should have let them know I was okay first. I bowed my head in apology to Pollick and Akari, then I took out the item I had just found underwater. When Pollick saw the broken trap, he looked ecstatic.

“Oh, you found it! That’s the trap we villagers used when we fought against the giant boss in the cave!”

After failing to get past the boss, the villagers had fled back home and accidentally dropped the trap in the pond. There were only a few people in the village who could swim underwater for a long period of time, so retrieving the trap had been put on the back burner.

“Can this trap work on the boss?”

“Hmm, when we tried it, it only worked for about ten seconds.”

“Huh? You were able to stop it for ten whole seconds?” Akari asked in surprise.

“Well, sure.”

I was surprised to hear that too. If this trap could keep that giant raid boss from moving for ten seconds, then it was a *very* useful item.

“Who does this trap belong to?” I asked Pollick.

“Are you thinking of getting it fixed?”

“If it’s possible.”

“Then you should go to the hunter Yadan’s place. That’s his trap, so he’ll be the only one who knows how to fix it.”

“Great, thanks! Should we go there after we’re done here?” I asked Akari.

She replied enthusiastically, “Yes, we should!”

I was starting to feel a glimmer of hope. We could probably find a few hints and key items for fighting the boss around in the village.

Right now though, our main objective was fishing.

“Reflet, Perca, could you two go catch shellfish and crabs?”

"Hum!"

"Honk!"

Those two had been all smiles ever since they dunked me in the pond. I guess it was all fun and games to them. Didn't they know how much that had freaked me out? Oh well, they were cute, so all was forgiven!

"Oh, before I forget! I summon the Kappa!"

"Gwak gwak."

Nice, nice. I was able to summon it without any issues.

"Kappa, can you go catch fish underwater with Reflet and Perca?"

"Gwak!"

"Glad to hear it!"

I was a little worried since Gather and Fishing weren't listed among its abilities, but apparently it was still capable. It would be pretty weird if a kappa couldn't do things underwater.

There were four kappa abilities that players could also learn. In addition to Kappa Sumo and Spirit Removal, there was also Underwater Activities and Plate Making. Underwater Activities probably included gathering and catching fish underwater. As for Plate Making... Well, I'd have the Kappa do something with that in the workshop at some point.

"Dive away, then."

"Gwak!"

"Honk honk!"

"Hum-humm!"

The underwater duo-turned-trio eagerly dove into the pond. The way they jumped in reminded me of when some kids in my hometown had excitedly jumped into the river from a bridge. Those three just really loved being in water.

"Meanwhile, we'll be fishing up here."

"Mm-mm."

"Squeak squeak."

"Tra-la-la."

What kind of fish can we catch here? I wondered excitedly as I cast out my line. After some time, I managed to catch several new varieties of fish, like a Cave Char, Cave Shrimp, and Cave Trout.

Akari was happy to have registered new fish to her encyclopedia. And since we also learned a lot of information from Pollick, I'd say that coming back to the village was the best thing we could have done.

After we were finished at the pond, we went to deliver our fish to the Adventurers' Guild, and then we set out to find the home of Yadan the hunter. The guild receptionist had given us clear directions on how to get there. I wondered if it was a good idea for her to just give out personal information so easily like that, but she told us that she made an exception for us since we had caught and delivered so many fish. The village was really struggling to secure food ever since their trade with the other side of the cave was cut off.

"It's all thanks to you three."

"Honk!"

"Humm!"

"Gwak!"

The underwater trio, amicably walking side by side, had fished that pond empty.

In exchange for giving us directions, the guild receptionist made us promise to bring more fish again later, so we'd have to make another delivery of fish sometime soon. Which meant I'd have to ask for the trio's help again. Though these three enjoyed fishing, so I was sure they'd do so happily.

Plus, once we had defeated the raid boss, trade would flourish once again, which would take care of the village's food problem. What I was more concerned with right now were some of the names of the fish that we had to deliver.

"Hey, Akari. Have you taken a look at all the fish delivery requests yet?"

"No, I haven't. Did you notice something weird?"

"Yeah. The part where it lists the fish we need to deliver, it says Begini Goby, Begini Sea Bass, and Begini Black Porgy."

All the names of the fish that we had caught in the pond started with "Cave." But not these three.

"I've never heard of those fish."

"Me neither."

I had done what I would call a good amount of fishing in this game, and Akari was a bona fide item collector. We should have caught all the fish that had been discovered thus far. If neither of us had heard of these fish, then there was a good chance they were completely new.

Something else about these names had stood out to Akari. "You know, aren't goby, sea bass, and black porgies all fish that live in brackish waters?"

"Brackish water? Isn't that where a river meets the sea?"

"Yes. I'm pretty sure those three are fish that can be caught in brackish waters."

Akari explained that she knew a bit about fish because one of her family members fished as a hobby.

"If we consider the fact that there may be some requests left over from when people could access the other side of the cave, then..."

I finished Akari's thought. "Then the cave must lead out to brackish waters, which means there's a sea over there?"

"There has to be! And I'm sure we'll find many new ingredients and items there!"

The sea, huh? I had experienced the sea on the event island, but not yet in the main game. If there really was a sea over there, then there'd be plenty of food ingredients and other new things to discover. And new monsters too. Man, the possibilities were endless!

"We *have* to defeat that raid boss, Yuto!"

"Yeah. We can do it. And we need to get this trap fixed so we can use it against it."

"Right!"

Feeling some renewed motivation, we picked up the pace and sped to our destination. Yadan's house was in an isolated spot a short distance away from the other houses in the village. Once we saw the detached house with a barn, we knew we were in the right place.

"Is anyone home?" I called out.

"Yeah! Come on in, the door's open!"

Yadan was a pretty trusting person. He didn't even come out to

check who we were.

As he instructed, we walked inside the house, where we saw an older bear-human hybrid grilling fish while having a drink. It was weird to see a man with such clearly Western facial features skillfully using chopsticks. But now that I thought about it, I had never paid much attention to how NPCs ate food. The developers of this game were Japanese, so I guess this wasn't that odd.

"Hrm? Who might you be?"

"Hello, sir. I'm Yuto, and this is Akari. We're travelers who recently arrived in this village."

"Oh! *You're* the travelers! Welcome, welcome. We're happy to have ya here! Oh, and drop that formal stuff. We're equals here, y'hear?"

A lot of people in this village seemed to dislike overly polite speech. Behind this man's foreboding appearance, he was actually an incredibly friendly guy. He grinned and offered me a drink and Akari a cup of tea.

"So, what can I do ya for? What brings ya out all the way out here?"

"Well, we found a trap sunken at the bottom of the pond."

"Didja now? Can you show me?"

"Sure."

As asked, I took the broken trap out of my inventory and showed it to Yadan.

"Yep, there's no mistakin' it. This is my trap. That blockhead Pollick dropped the darn thing."

"We're planning on fighting the boss in the cave, and we'd like to use this trap when we do."

"Are you now! Imagine that!"

Yadan had no more use for the trap, so he was more than willing to let us use it. And he'd be able to fix it for us too.

"Let's see here, I think I should be able to get it back in workin' order by tomorrow afternoon."

"That's great!"

"But you'll hafta give me somethin' in return."

"Money?"

Money was no problem for me! But of course, I should have known better than to expect such an easy deal in this game.

"No, I don't need yer money."

"Oh, of course."

"What I want is to chow down on some tasty fish. Bring me three fish dishes. If I like 'em, I'll give ya the trap."

Perfect. This was just the sort of request I was capable of fulfilling! In fact, I could fulfill it right that second. From my inventory, I took out my highest quality cooked seafood dishes and placed them down in front of Yadan. They were meals intended for Reflet, but I had enough to share. Akari looked a little crestfallen. I guess she'd been excited about the thought of cooking the dishes. *Sorry, but it's much faster this way.*

"These look great! Are they for me?"

"Yeah, dig in."

"Don't mind if I do!" Yadan said before taking a bite. "Holy smokes, this tastes great! This stuff's amazing!"

It sounded like the meals were a hit. Yadan polished off all the meals in only three minutes, never once taking a break to put down his chopsticks. His appetite was truly something to witness.

"Ga ha ha! I'm stuffed! I can't remember the last time I ate fish this good. I think I might just be able to rig up an even better trap than before!"

Did the quality of the meals not only impact whether or not he would agree to lend us the trap, but also the quality of the trap itself? If so, then I was really glad I had given him my highest-quality dishes.

Yadan continued to sing his praises for my food. "I'd bet even that big brute in the cave would wanna sink its teeth into somethin' like those meals!"

"Big brute? Are you talking about the lion?"

"You got it. We tried all sorts of things to distract that beast. What we found out was, it likes fish more than meat. And it likes cooked fish over raw."

"So it prefers cooked meals over just the fish itself, huh?"

"That's right. Oh, and we think it's resistant to poison, since

poisoned food did nothin' to it. Though if you can make a delicious seafood meal with poison strong enough to overcome its resistance, ya might get some interestin' results."

This was obviously crucial information that would help us in the boss fight to come. We had better keep asking around the village to see what else we could find out.

I looked over at Akari, and she looked back at me and nodded. We were both thinking the same thing.

"All right, we'll be back tomorrow," I told Yadan.

"Sure thing! I won't let ya down!"

◇◇◆◇◇

Soon after logging in the following morning, we met up with Kokuten to exchange information. At Akari's insistent request, we convened at my house.

"Eeek!"

"Mm-mm!"

"Tra-la-la!"

Akari had arrived a little early to play with my monsters. They were playing hide-and-seek a little while ago, but it looked like they had switched to playing tag now.

They raced past the veranda, where Sakura and I were relaxing. Akari was always a pretty smiley person, but right now she was acting like a little kid. It was as if hanging around my monsters had lowered her mental age. I could relate. Whenever I played around with my monsters, I always got into a weirdly hyper mode too.

Akari and my monster's energetic game of tag ended up lasting for almost thirty more minutes, until Kokuten arrived.

"Akari, are you all right?" he asked her.

"I'm all right!" Akari answered with a thumbs-up, panting.

I saw Kokuten cringe a little, but he quickly recovered and got the ball rolling as if nothing had happened. He was mature enough to take things in stride.

"So, here is the list of people who replied," he said.

"Let's take a look."

“Oh! Siegfried said yes!” Akari said excitedly.

“Amimin and Mattsun aren’t joining? Well, I guess that makes sense. They usually keep to themselves.”

“Murakage is joining, but Ayakage is busy...?”

It made sense that some people wouldn’t be able to join. This was a very last-minute invite.

As of now, there were nine confirmed members: Sawyer, Siegfried and his horse Silver, Murakage, Sakkyun, Ashihana, Fuka, Sukegawa, and KTK.

Inviting KTK had been all Kokuten’s idea. I had heard that she was mainly a solo player who hardly teamed up with anyone outside of her small circle of friends, but she had apparently agreed to join us. Kokuten was a miracle worker.

Since Amimin, Mattsun, and Ayakage had declined, there were currently eight spots open.

Incidentally, Kokuten had invited the crafters not only so they could provide support, but so they could help gather information about the boss from a different angle. I had wondered if maybe he had gone out of his way to invite my friends, but apparently that wasn’t the case.

None of us were under the impression that we could take down a raid boss in one try. No other raid boss that unlocked a new zone had been beaten that easily, after all. That was why Kokuten had assembled a group of players who could gather information during our first attempt at fighting the boss. He was hoping that the crafters might be able to bring their unique viewpoints into the fight and notice something that a fighter might not. As for what we’d do after we gathered information, that would depend on how strong the boss was.

Kokuten had explained his game plan to everyone, so there might be some players who would only participate for the first fight depending on how things went. Those with weaker fighting capabilities, like myself, would probably step out and be replaced with frontline attackers.

“How should we fill up the remaining spots?” I asked.

“I think we should invite Rikyu’s group.”

"Oh, you do?"

"Yes. Filma is a very skilled Lancer. Having her there will really help us out."

I had brought up Rikyu, Filma, and Kurumi when Akari and I were first brainstorming ideas, but Kokuten had ended up not inviting them at first. Rikyu had a reckless streak and Filma couldn't make full use of her talents on land. Also, although he didn't mention it out loud, Rikyu didn't exactly seem like Kokuten's favorite person. He probably found it difficult to interact with her.

Rikyu perplexed even the unflappable Kokuten. She was a force to be reckoned with.

"Siegfried has also recommended someone," Kokuten added.

"He did? Another knight?"

"Yes, that's right. An individual that is highly regarded among knights. Siegfried attested to his skill."

"Wow, really?! That's awesome!"

If Siegfried, who was a top player in his own right, considered this person to be strong, then it must be true.

"He mentioned he has a bit of a difficult personality, but since he knows he'll be an asset in the fight, he asked if he could bring him along."

Siegfried, who saw the good in everyone, said he had a difficult personality? But if he still recommended him despite that, then he must not be a bad person.

"I have no problem with that. What do you think, Akari?"

"Same, I think it's a great idea!"

"Okay then, two spots will go to the knight Siegfried recommended and his horse."

That left three spots remaining.

"There is one other person I would suggest inviting. Do you mind?"

"If you recommend them, Kokuten, I don't see an issue. Do I know them?"

"I'm not sure. She's a Bard, but she's known to be even more nimble than a Thief. Her name is Nyamun."

"Nyamun-chan?!"

“Oh, so you do know her?”

Know her? I was practically an expert on her! It was Kokuten’s buddy Sekisho who dragged me to her music booth and told me all about her!

“Is she strong?”

“She is. I’m not sure how she allocated her stats, but she is famous for the way she swiftly evades enemy attacks while playing music without pause.”

“That’s incredible.”

With the help of LJO’s system assist, it was easier to play musical instruments in the game than in real life. But it was difficult to move your fingers accurately when performing strenuous movements, so running around at top speed would bump up the difficulty of playing an instrument up by a lot.

According to Kokuten, Nyamun was currently the only player who was capable of pulling that off. Fau could do that, but the effects of her Musical Performance was not as good as a player’s.

“Since she’s able to keep singing while using unbelievable maneuvers and stunts to evade enemy attacks, people have started referring to her by several names, like Pouncing Cat, Jumping Cat, Super Dimension Fortress Cat, and Cat Who Remembers Love.”

“What’s with those last two?!”

I guess I could understand how those nicknames came to be considering her ultra-fast maneuvers and musical talents... But if anything, her nicknames should reference not the original series in that specific franchise, but ↗! Call her Totsugeki Cat Heart or something!

“Now that leaves two spots. I had Holland and Huey in mind, but what do you think?”

“Wow, Kokuten, those are some impressive connections!”

Kokuten could contact Holland, the current strongest player in the game, and his friend Huey.

“Can I take that to mean you wouldn’t mind them joining?”

“Huh? I mean, why would I say no?”

Kokuten looked relieved at my reply. I wasn’t sure why. Was there a rumor going around that I was on bad terms with Holland and

Huey or something? But why? We had barely even talked.

"Holland is considered to be the best player right now. If he joins the fight to unlock the next zone, his reputation as the best will only be solidified. Are you okay with that?"

"Well, sure. Why would that bother me?"

"I-I should have never doubted you, Silver-Haired. You are as charitable as ever."

I mean, it really had nothing to do with me. Maybe one of the top parties who were closer to catching up with him would feel a certain way about Holland pulling further ahead of them, but why would an ordinary player like me care about competition among top players?

"But will they join if it means having to leave their other party members behind? I'm sure they have a six-person party usually, right?"

"I don't think that will be a problem. I can't imagine they will turn down the opportunity to participate in something as enticing as a raid boss battle to unlock the next zone. In fact, I'm sure even one of them would be willing to join alone. If we're successful, it will go a long way in helping their party progress the game from here on out."

"I see no problem, then."

I could leave the duty of assembling members to Kokuten while I moved on to a task that was within my capabilities.

Once we split up with Kokuten, we made our way back to the Beast Hybrid Village to gather more information that would help us in the raid boss fight.

"Eine, don't drop that. Be *veeery* careful."

"Tra-la..."

"Yeah! Just like that!"

"Tra-la!"

My monsters and I had found ourselves in the hermitage of an old woman who was an apothecary. I had learned about this place while gathering information around the village yesterday before logging out.

When I said I wanted to talk to her about the raid boss, she asked me to tidy up her storage room, which we were all currently in

the middle of cleaning.

I entrusted Eine to take care of the out-of-reach spots, but the sight of her moving vases and other fragile things around put me on edge. She was stronger than she looked, so I knew she'd be fine, but still. It wasn't good for my heart to watch such a small girl lifting a vase that was nearly as big as she was.

"Hum?"

"Oh, are you done washing that? Then could you refill the cistern with water?"

"Mm!"

"...!"

"You two are finished sorting the medicinal herbs? That was fast. Good job."

"Mm-mm!"

"...♪"

Thanks to my monsters' hard work, we got the room sparkling clean in no time. The old woman was super pleased with our work and happily told me information regarding the raid boss.

"The beast that's taken up residence deep in the cave has got a real keen sense of smell. Smoke screens, illusions, and being stealthy won't work on it."

"So basically, we can't hide from it?"

"That's exactly right. The beast had no problem spotting one of our stealthiest hunters. You'll be needing someone else to distract it really well for something like that to work."

Apparently, the lion had such a good sense of smell that it could pinpoint someone's location from the slightest whiff of their scent. It would be hard to pull off a surprise attack, then. But maybe there was a way to use the lion's sense of smell to our advantage?

The old woman still had more to share. "You've done such a good job cleaning up my storage room. I feel like you deserve more information as thanks. Let me tell you one more thing."

"What is it?"

"I'll tell you the recipe for a special poison I developed. I can't say for certain it'll be effective on that lion, but I've heard it works wonders on similar types of monsters."

“Wow, thank you!”

“Don’t mention it, dear. Here, take this with you.”

The old woman handed me the recipe for the special poison and one completed poison. This was great.

After I left the old woman, Akari and I walked around the village a bit more and obtained more pieces of important information.

“It’s strong against fire, and weak against wind.”

“And there was what the apothecary lady told us about poison...”

“She said that she’s not sure it’ll work, but it supposedly works against raid bosses.”

Combined with what we found out today, our attempt to gather information had turned out to be very fruitful. We now knew the raid boss’s elemental weakness, its behavior patterns, and its means of attack. And we had been given a new poison recipe.

“Okay, I’ll make a summary of all the information we’ve found out,” Akari said.

“And I’ll try making that poison.”

“Aww yeah, that does sound fun. But organizing all this information takes priority. I’ll trust you with the poison.”

And with that, I returned home and got right to work in my workshop.

“It’s time...for poison cooking!”

“Hum?”

“I’m going to cook a seafood dish that contains a deadly poison that might just work against the raid boss!”

“Hum...”

We had learned that the lion liked cooked fish, and the apothecary had given me her recipe for poison. Combine those two pieces of information together, and the most logical conclusion was that we should feed poisoned food to the boss.

“Reflet, I know to a fish-lover like you, this looks like I’m wasting food. But this is all part of our preparations to face up against the raid boss.”

“Hum...!”

“This is the least I can do. Otherwise I’ll just be dragging everyone else down.”

What I had to do wasn't difficult in and of itself. All I had to do was cook a meal and put poison in it. First, as a test, I decided to use food I had already made and add the poison the old woman had given me.

"I'll use...this!"

"Humm!"

I took out one of Reflet's favorite meals, acqua pazza. Not the low-quality acqua pazza I had made when Reflet had first joined our team, but a high-quality version that I had made using more or less the same recipe as its real-life counterpart.

"Hum..."

"Hey, don't start drooling! I'm about to put poison in this!"

"Hum!"

"Don't grab onto me! It's fine, I still have some in my inventory! And I have enough ingredients to make more!"

I had plenty of ocean fish in my inventory, and we grew the olives, herbs, and vegetables ourselves on the farm. As I explained as much, Reflet finally released her hold on me.

"Since this poison is a powder, I guess I can just sprinkle it on top?"

I dusted the acqua pazza with the white powder, and the name of the dish immediately changed to Acqua Pazza (Poisoned).

"Looks like it worked... Huh?"

"Hum?"

I didn't know if it would be effective, but I immediately noticed a problem.

"It kind of smells."

"Hum!"

The acqua pazza now had a peculiar poisonous smell. The raid boss was supposed to have a good sense of smell, which meant this dish was a bust.

"Maybe I'm not supposed to sprinkle it on top, but add it while I'm cooking..."

The process for making the poison wasn't very difficult, but it required fairly valuable ingredients, so it wasn't the sort of poison I could make on a regular basis. Though all of the ingredients were

ones I could gather from my farm.

"I'll have to use some of the Flarestarter Plants and Swimming Plants. And I *just* started mass-growing those."

The recipe the old woman had given me was for a poison called Magic Poison. It was a poison that affected the target's magic rather than their physical state, which meant normal poison resistances wouldn't protect against it.

This was scary stuff. If I considered the possibility that enemies might use this against me too, then it seemed that I had better start stocking up on antidotes.

The final step of the recipe was to mix in the glowing moss that grew on the cave ceiling above the village, which would turn the poison into a special magic poison that was effective against raid bosses.

"I guess I have no choice but to trial-and-error this."

"Hum..."

"Come on, don't look at the acqua pazza so forlornly. It's poisoned. You can't eat it."

"Hum."

Did she actually get what I was saying?

"All right, let's make as much as we can!"

"Humm..."

Almost immediately after I got to work making poisoned meals, I had to stop so that I could walk to the entrance of my farm to show in the crowd of people that had gathered there.

"Thanks for coming," I greeted them.

"Omigosh! Yoo-hoo, Bear Bear!"

"You are as cute as ever, Miss Tree Nymph."

"Wow, you've got so many food ingredients! This place is wonderful!"

They're not even listening to me!

"Aha ha ha. Sorry, Yuto. Everyone's just really excited..."

"Jeez, Sawyer, you're the only one paying attention to me!"

The players who had arrived were the crafters joining in on the raid boss fight.

At first, I had only contacted Fuka to ask for cooking advice.

Ashihana had happened to be with her and insisted she come along too since she wanted to show something cool to Bear Bear. I seemed to remember she had already been coming to my farm every day to see Bear Bear, though.

Sawyer had called me to thank me for inviting him to the raid, so I had ended up inviting him to come to my farm as well. As for Sukegawa, well, I just felt bad leaving him out, so I went ahead and invited him over too.

All these individualistic crafters gathered together meant everyone was doing whatever they wanted. If Sawyer weren't here, they'd be even more chaotic.

"Anyway, you mentioned you're making items for the raid?" Sawyer asked.

"Right, I did. Here's the thing..."

I told the group about the broken trap I'd found and what I had learned about adding poison to cooked meals.

"Interesting. That definitely sounds like useful info for fighting the boss."

"I thought so too. So, my thought was to make a poisoned meal and bait to lure the boss to the trap."

"So that's why you called me! Let me show you what I can do!" Fuka exclaimed.

With her cooking talents, Fuka would be able to whip up a tasty dish. Sawyer could help make the poison, so together, I was sure we could make something effective.

"I'll devise a container for it," Ashihana said.

"A container?"

"Yeah. There are plates that have an effect that can draw an enemy's attention."

"Great idea! I didn't think of that!"

I had once used my Engraving skill to make a plate that diffused a meal's scent around the area. Something like that could very well be useful in this fight. That thought hadn't crossed my mind until now.

I took out the plate I had inscribed using Engraving (Wind) and showed it to Ashihana. She started examining it with keen interest.

"Ooh, this could work too."

"Is this not what you were thinking of? Then, what was your idea?"

"This is definitely a good option too, but I was thinking of making something more like this."

Ashihana pulled out what looked like an ordinary plate. The surface was free of any designs and engravings. It just looked like your standard, simple, easy-to-use plate. But when I appraised it, I saw it wasn't just any old plate at all.

"It has a lure effect?"

"Yup. If you put food in this dish and place it in the playing field, it'll attract monsters that like that food."

"That's a pretty interesting effect."

"Yeah, but it's not super practical."

"Why not?"

"Well, it doesn't always work."

Unlike incense, the plate didn't always successfully lure monsters to the meal. At best, it had a slight possibility of luring monsters who were in the area if they liked the food that was being offered. And sometimes it was so effective that it would lure *too many* monsters, and then you'd have to fight a larger group than expected. As a substitute for incense, it wasn't the most practical choice. Not only that, but adding poison to the meals reduced the lure effect, so there was no guarantee that it would work for our purposes.

"Changing up the materials and paint will give us a different effect too. And if we make plates with a monster-luring effect and then engrave the character for wind on them, I think we can get some interesting results."

"I hear you."

"If I make a bunch of plates, can you handle the engraving?"

"Sure thing."

Now the only one left was Sukegawa...

"What should I do?" he asked.

"Hmm..."

"Huh? Silver-Haired?"

"Um, give me a sec."

"What?"

I had invited him here on a whim, but I couldn't tell him that I didn't have a job for him. *Think, Yuto! Think!*

"I-I know! Sukegawa, maybe you can make plates with Ashihana! I'm sure metal plates and wooden plates will give us different results!"

"Uh...but I've never really made plates before."

No dice! After giving it some more thought, I decided to take the now bummed-out Sukegawa away from my farm. We made our way quickly through the Great Wilderness until we arrived at the entrance of the Beast Hybrid Village.

"Whoa, so this is the hidden village! Awesome! Look at all the cute beast-girls!"

I was glad Sukegawa liked the village, but I didn't bring him here to charm him with the locals.

"This way, Sukegawa."

"Is this the blacksmith you were talking about?"

I had brought Sukegawa to Yadan's workshop. I called out to let him know we were here, and we walked in to find him in the middle of working.

"Oh? What brings ya back here, traveler?"

"I came to bring my friend here, actually. He's a blacksmith who's going to help fight the boss, so I thought he could take a look at the trap."

"Is that right? Come on, then. It's over here."

"Th-Thanks very much!"

Sukegawa bowed deeply and then followed Yadan. He looked pretty nervous around the stern-faced older man. Was this a side effect of being so girl-crazy? But once the two of them were in front of the trap and talking, it didn't take long for Sukegawa to loosen up. The two got into the nitty gritty details of their craft, to the point that I couldn't follow what they were saying at all. They totally clicked in just three minutes of conversation.

"Ga ha ha! Boy, yer a hoot! And ya know yer stuff! I like ya!"

"Th-Thanks!"

"I'll teach ya how to make traps so long as you give me a hand

here. Whaddya say?”

“Huh? Uh...”

Sukegawa glanced over at me, so I nodded, giving him my go-ahead. And just like that, Sukegawa would stay here to help Yadan in his workshop while learning all about traps in exchange.

“Silver-Haired.”

“Yeah?”

“Can your tree nymph stay as my assistant-slash-cheerleader—”

“Well, I’m off. Good luck.”

A few hours after I had foisted Sukegawa onto—I mean, left Sukegawa to learn all about traps from—Yadan, the rest of us managed to finish up making a successful poisoned meal.

“Finally, we made odorless poisoned dishes.”

“We did it!” Sawyer cheered.

“That took forever,” Fuka sighed.

While Sawyer and Fuka were celebrating our success, Reflet had long left the premises. Not because she couldn’t bear watching us waste food, but because she had to. At a certain point, we had shifted to adding the poison in during the middle of the cooking process, but that had caused the poison to evaporate and permeate in the air as we were simmering and grilling the food.

The process had successfully lessened the smell of the poison by a great deal, but the poison was so pervasive in the room that we were continually being affected by it. The three of us almost died because of that. If Sawyer hadn’t provided us with equipment that acted as gas masks, we wouldn’t have been able to continue cooking. Monsters couldn’t equip the gas masks, so Reflet had no choice but to leave. The rest of us, decked out in translucent gas masks that covered our faces as we cooked the poisonous food, must have looked like we were working in some evil laboratory.

However, it was thanks to those efforts that we were able to cook up a dish that contained a very toxic, odorless poison. And yes, we tested the strength of the poison ourselves. I was not expecting to be both paralyzed *and* poisoned at the same time. I seriously almost died. Thankfully, Fuka healed me right away, so I avoided having to respawn.

"I'll store away these duds for now. I'm sure I can use them somewhere."

"That was fun, even if it was a little harrowing," Sawyer said.

"I agree! We're going to kick that raid boss's butt!" Fuka declared.

"I finished making the plate too. We got this!"

Ashihana and I had also completed the plate that would waft the smell of the food, so this had all been time well spent.

I left the other crafters and went to pick up Sukegawa from the village. His time with Yadan had also been a success, and he'd crafted a good number of traps. However, whether they would work against the boss or not remained to be seen.

"And even though they cost a fortune, they can only be used once," Sukegawa lamented.

"Are they really that expensive?"

"About as expensive as a weapon for a frontline player."

"Oof..."

And it was a single-use item...? Incidentally, Yadan's trap was also single-use. But then, why had I been able to collect it from the pond? Just game logic at work, I guess.

I compared Yadan's trap to Sukegawa's and saw they varied considerably. Their designs were the same, but they had a different shine to them, which I chalked up to their use of different materials.

"It looks a lot nicer than before," I commented about Yadan's trap.

"Ga ha ha ha! I outdid myself! I made this trap better than ever! I have a good feelin' it'll hold that big brute back for even longer!"

The trap I'd pulled out of the pond had been rusted all over, but this new-and-improved version was shiny and bright. The dangerous glint on the teeth gave me the impression that a regular monster would die just from one snap of this trap's jaws. In real life, it'd probably turn an animal into mincemeat.

Yadan turned that trap into a scroll and gave it to me. The installation was easy. Like home objects, all I had to do was place the scroll on the ground, activate it, and the trap would automatically be set up underground.

"All right, I'm gonna head back to my workshop. I learned a lot

today. Thanks," Sukegawa said before taking his leave. He was going to log out early to make sure he could join the raid later.

"What should I do now?" I said to myself.

"Hum?"

"Honk?"

"No, we can't go fishing today."

Perca and Reflet clung to my sides and looked up at me with stars in their eyes. They clearly wanted to go fishing, but that wasn't happening right now. I hadn't accepted any requests to fulfill either. Though I supposed it couldn't hurt to pop into the Adventurers' Guild to see if there were any quests I could complete on the way to the raid boss.

"Battle quests, gathering quests... Looks like there's a new one here."

A quest to slay the Cerberus Lion was now available. Had it been unlocked because we had spotted it? There were no penalties for failing, and success was rewarded with money and a house in the village, which could be used as a simple home. I had been wishing there was a teleportation circle here, but the ability to teleport wouldn't be available until after the raid battle was won. At least teleporting to and from a simple home was free of charge. That would make progressing through Zone Eleven much easier.

As I was checking to see if there were any other new quests, I saw Weris the wolf girl walk into the guild.

"Oh, hello there, traveler," she greeted me.

"Hi, Weris."

Weris waved at us as she walked over to the receptionist's counter.

"I brought back some meat, miss."

"Oh, thank you. This will help a lot."

Weris had apparently gone on a hunting quest. So NPCs in this village did quests too, huh? That was probably because of the village's food shortage that Pollick had informed us of. As a hunter, Weris was doing her part to alleviate that.

"Are there any rules about what kind of meat can be delivered?" I asked the receptionist. "I have meat and fish that I hunted in other

areas.”

The only quests on the noticeboard were ones that required deliveries of animals hunted in the cave and the Great Wilderness, but if I could just give the village provisions, then I had plenty to spare that I had obtained elsewhere. I especially had a good stock of fish and meat that I kept on hand to cook with.

“That would be very much appreciated! However, since we’re unable to offer much money for those types of deliveries, we don’t officially request them. And you won’t earn any guild points for doing so.”

I was indeed offered a paltry sum in exchange. I would receive way more money if I sold my stock at an NPC shop. Plus, I wouldn’t earn any guild points this way... But I had already told the guild receptionist that I had food, and the village was going through hard times. Now wasn’t the time to worry about making a profit.

I handed over fish, vegetables, herbs, and a large amount of low-rank meat to the receptionist. Both her and Weris looked delighted. Even though I gained nothing from this, it felt good to help.

“Thaaank you,” Weris said in a singsong voice.

“No problem. We should help each other out in times of need.”

“I knew you were a nice guy, traveler.”

Did her favorability towards me just go up? Doing these kinds of good deeds was probably what bolstered my reputation among NPCs, though I didn’t recall going above and beyond for any other NPC, at least not enough that it would have raised my favorability scores that substantially.

“Be careful when you fight the cave monster,” Weris said.

“We’ll be fine,” I told her. “It’s not like we die for real.”

“Oh, right.”

“Do you have any tips for fighting the boss?”

“Hmm. I know wind is really effective against it.”

I guess she has nothing new to tell me?

“And watch your step,” she added.

“My step?”

“Stalagmites pop up from the ground. You could trip and fall on those.”

"Gotcha."

"Watch out for the ceiling too. Stalactites sorta break and fall down."

So not only did we have to watch out for spikes protruding up from the ground, but also falling from the ceiling? I expected no less from a zone-unlocking boss. A strong monster wasn't the only thing this battle was going to throw at us.

"Okay, thanks. I'll keep that in mind."

"Yeah. Good luck," Weris said supportively as she gave me a thumbs-up. Even though she was only an NPC, it was still motivating to be cheered on by a cute girl.

Although we certainly wouldn't be able to beat the boss on our first try, nothing could stop us from beating it eventually! This was just the first step to victory!

"All right, I should log out before the boss fight too."

Chapter Four: The Three-Headed Golden Lion

In the real world, I recharged by eating and taking a nap. Then, I logged back on to meet up with Akari at the entrance of Yellow City.

"Hi, over here!" Akari called out to me.

"Hey. Were you waiting long?"

"Mm-mmm!"

"Oh, not at all. I just got here now."

It felt like we were meeting up for a date, though obviously that wasn't what we were doing.

"Hello, Olto!"

"Mm-mm!"

"Follow me, we're meeting up over here."

We had made plans ahead of time to head to the meeting place for the raid boss battle together. It would have been fine if we had gone separately, but since Akari and I were the ones who discovered the raid boss, we figured it would be more efficient for us to arrive together so we wouldn't be asked the same questions over and over.

Our rendezvous point was Yellow City's Adventurers' Guild. When we walked into the conference room that was booked in advance, we were greeted with Kokuten and his party composed solely of mature men. There was Kokuten, wearing his soldier armor, and Sekisho, looking like a quintessential mage. In addition to those two, there was Todo, the lanky, sardonic scout; Gio, the handsome lancer; Nanzan, the glasses-wearing, kindly older brother-type healer; and Byden, the tall and muscular shield master.

I knew all of Kokuten's party members by this point. We were familiar enough to give a casual wave to each other, and Sekisho and I had gone to that music convention together. Speaking of Sekisho, I could see he was covertly wearing a Nyamun-chan key

chain.

"Hello, Yuto. Everyone's here," Kokuten said.

"Hey. I know almost everyone here."

All the players who would be participating in our first attempt against the raid boss were gathered in the guild's room chatting excitedly with one another. Some looked to be exchanging friend codes.

"Silver-Haired! Thanks for inviting us!"

"Heh heh... Many thanks."

"We really appreciate it!"

The first people I turned to talk to were Kurumi, Rikyu, and Filma.

Kurumi, the short cow-human hybrid, was wearing her oversized metal armor and carrying a giant hammer slung on her back. Rikyu, the purple-haired snake-human hybrid who was also known as Pyro, was wearing her courtesan-style kimono. And finally there was Filma, the sea nymph with ears shaped like fish fins. I found myself seeing these three a lot. In fact, they often stopped by my farm to play with my monsters.

"Actually, it was Kokuten who decided to invite you guys."

"Well, still!"

The girls bowed their heads to me, which started a chain reaction of other players thanking me too. I guessed that even though Kokuten had invited them all, they still wanted to express their appreciation to the ones who had actually discovered the boss.

"I will exert every effort in this fight so I can return to my wife with a good tale to share!"

"Wassup, dude?! I can't wait to show you my beefed-up yoga skills!"

Murakage, the ninja role-player, and Sakkyun, the outgoing Summoner who knew martial arts, also greeted me. Olto even returned Sakkyun's salute. For some reason, my monsters liked Sakkyun a lot. And next to him sat two other familiar people.

"We're also thankful to be invited. We promise we'll do whatever it takes to defeat the boss."

"Holland and I won't let you down. You can count on that."

I was surprised to see that Murakage, Sakkyun, Holland, and

Huey were all friends with one another. They must have known one another from fighting on the front lines together.

In stark contrast with the Murakage and Sakkyun, Holland and Huey sounded a bit overly serious about the fight. They were acting as if they were real inhabitants of this fantasy world, who would actually die if we lost this battle. Though they were probably just being serious about role-playing heroes heading towards the jaws of death.

Their contrast with one another looked really cool too. Holland was wearing silver armor and Huey black mage robes. They looked just like a hero and a sage.

"Aaah! Silver-Haired, meow! We're going to be fighting together, meow!"

"Nice kitty... Meow."

Nyamun-chan and KTK were sitting side by side. So they knew each other too, huh? Nyamun-chan was acting her boisterous self, and KTK's face was deadpan as per usual.

Nyamun-chan and KTK both had *Super Dimension Fortress*-inspired nicknames, and their playstyle was similar in the way they agilely sidestepped enemy attacks, so maybe they actually found they had a lot in common.

Nyamun was wearing a frilly, gothic lolita idol outfit. I questioned whether that gave her enough defense, but apparently it offered plenty as well as giving a boost to her speed, making it the ideal armor for buffing evasion. KTK wore a black thief outfit that was also made of lightweight material, but someone who could evade as well as she could didn't need heavy armor.

They were definitely an interesting pair. KTK especially. There seemed to be a subtle intensity in her gaze as she stared at Nyamun-chan. Was she a big fan of cats?

"Hello again, Yuto."

"Bear Bear's so cute..."

"Silver-Haired! We have a problem! The poisoned meals were put up for sale at your farm stand!"

"We'll show everyone what crafters can do!"

The crafters—Sawyer, Ashihana, Fuka, and Sukegawa—were

chatting in a corner of the room. They probably found it hard to mingle with the hardcore fighters.

Sawyer was wearing his usual robes, and Ashihana and Sukegawa were clad in light armor. Meanwhile, Fuka's outfit choice was certainly interesting. She was just wearing the same chef's coat she wore while we'd been cooking together. Was she seriously going to go onto the battlefield like that? I guess she could get away with that in a game.

Wait...what did Fuka just say?

"Huh? What was that about the poisoned meals?"

"Yes! The poisoned meals we made this morning! I ate one and almost died!"

"You would've seen if it was poisoned if you'd appraised it... And we made it together!"

"Well, it just looked so good, I couldn't help myself..."

Was it her nature as a chef that drove her to do that, or simple gluttony?

"But wait, I didn't put the poisoned meals up for sale..." I murmured.

"There are a whole bunch at your farm stand!"

"A whole bunch? That can't be—"

Ahhh! Oh no! I screwed up!

By habit, I had put the poisoned meals away in my storage. At least I had put the finished products I intended to use for the boss fight in my inventory, so those were fine.

Whenever I randomly stashed items I had made while practicing any sort of crafting, Mamori put them up for sale at my unmanned farm stand. Since I couldn't always tell what items would sell well, I had recently started just putting away as many crafted items I could in my storage that weren't items I used myself or items I needed to deliver for quests. As a result, I had built up a routine of putting crafted items away in my storage without thinking much about it. Which meant now, my unmanned stand was stocked full with the poisoned meals that we'd made for practice or hadn't turned out well.

"Wasn't the meal expensive?" I asked.

"Yeah, but I couldn't *not* try one of your new products."

A new product? It was a meal we cooked together!

"And even though it was poisoned, it tasted very good. I'm sure the boss won't be able to resist it either!"

"That's good to know," I said. *I'll take her word for it.*

Siegfried called out to me next. "Yuto, thank you for the invitation."

"Thank *you* for coming. You'll be a big help. So, is this the knight you recommended?"

Standing next to Siegfried was a player who couldn't have been more different from him. If Siegfried was a paladin or a white knight, then the other guy was a dark knight.

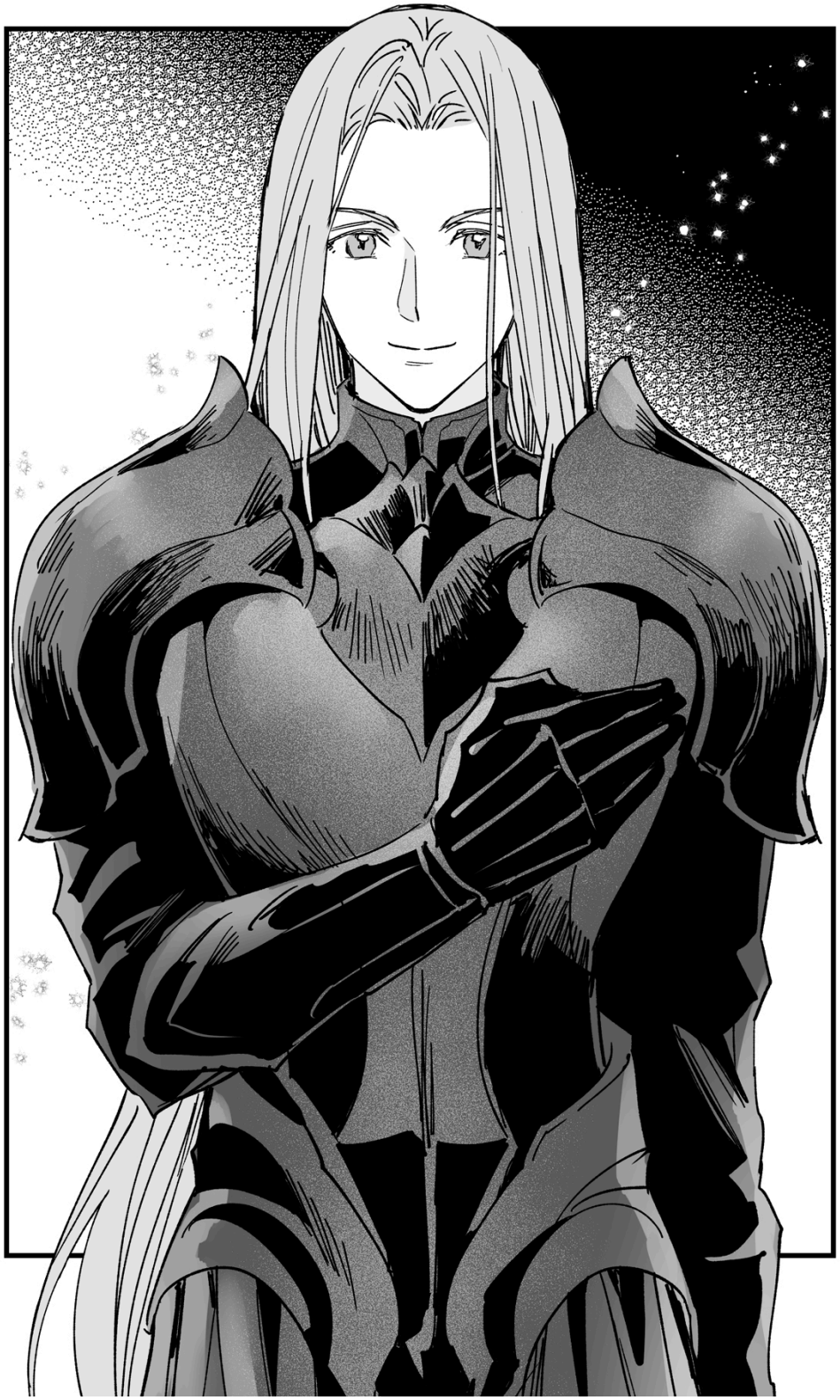
It wasn't unusual for people to look attractive in this game, but this knight was exceptionally good-looking. He almost looked a little feminine with his long, light purple hair tied back in a loose ponytail. It was the same hairstyle that a female character from the sixth installment of a certain franchise involving dragons and quests had. With his pale skin and red eyes, he came across as trying a little too hard to pull off the reference, but he looked cool, so whatever.

Equipment-wise, he wore pitch-black metal armor. But instead of making him look bulky, the elegant curves of the armor softened his overall impression. Instead of a burly, powerful dark knight, he looked more like a dark knight who could also wield magic.

"Hee hee hee. I am the knight known as Rais. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"O-Oh, yeah. Nice to meet you. I'm Yuto."

Rais brought a hand exaggeratedly to his chest and bowed gracefully at the waist. He seemed like a dedicated role-player. Role-playing a dark knight? He wasn't going to betray us, was he? And hold up, a dark knight named Rais... Did he get his name from Gilles de Rais? If he was role-playing close to the origin of his name, it suddenly seemed that we might have a real problem on our hands.



"Not only did you invite us here today, but you were also the one who discovered how to make a horse stronger. For that, I am very grateful."

"Oh right, that happened."

"Yes. And it's not only me. All knights are thankful for your efforts. If you ever find yourself in any predicament whatsoever, do not hesitate to ask us for help. We will hasten to your aid."

Rais smiled, but could I believe him? His smile looked super suspicious. That could just be part of his role-playing, but maybe he was actually plotting something behind the scenes.

"Yuto, I know he's a little odd, but he's not a bad guy. I hope you can get along," Siegfried said.

"Huh? Oh, right. I understand."

"Yes, I very much look forward to working with you, Silver-Haired."

Rais matched Siegfried's upbeat energy, but it came across as shady coming from him. But Siegfried *had* vouched for him...

"S-Same here," I said.

"Hee hee hee."

I knew it! I can't trust him!

Once we were done with greetings and introductions, it was time to get moving. However, in order to get to the raid boss, we first had to get to the Beast Hybrid Village. And since we couldn't teleport there, we had no choice but to walk.

With Akari and I taking the lead, the entire group marched towards our destination, moving as a pack through the Great Wilderness. Kokuten and the others easily handled the monsters that we encountered on the way. Everyone was just that good. Maybe *too* good.

"We've got company," Siegfried observed.

"Looks like it," Sakkyun said. The two of them frowned as they looked behind our group. A large crowd of players was following us. They must have suspected that a group of famous players gathered together meant that something was going down.

Personally, I knew it was inevitable that someone at some point would notice me going in and out of the hidden village. It wasn't as

if I could stop people from looking.

As for Kokuten, he wanted to keep this information confidential for a little while longer. Since it was too difficult to beat the boss in the first try, we would probably be working on fighting it for a few days. We might even be here for a while. Ideally, he wanted us to be the only ones who knew about the village until we beat the boss. I could understand his feelings. If we kept failing and other players started challenging it too, that would put a lot of pressure on us.

Just then, Sawyer pulled out an item that looked like a glowing orb.

"Let's use this," he said.

Kokuten must have known what it was. He looked happy to see it. "Well done, Sawyer. So you finally got your hands on the recipe?"

"All in a day's work."

"What is that?" I asked.

"It's a new item that makes you disappear from view," Sawyer explained.

Amazingly enough, his item could turn a group of players invisible for a time, hiding them from view from other players. However, the invisible players could only talk to one another, and they wouldn't be able to see other players around them, which limited the situations in which the item could be used in considerably. While the item was active, players would completely pass you by without being able to touch or make contact with you. That made it a useful item for hiding information.

"I have enough for all of us, so we should make use of them."

"Thanks, Sawyer."

"Yuto, I think you should buy the recipe for this. I'm sure you'll get a lot of use out of it."

Sawyer told me that the Quick-Eared Cats were currently selling the recipe, but it was super expensive. Also, since only high-leveled alchemists could make it, the recipe wasn't selling very well and hadn't been made known to the general public yet. Most players must have come to the conclusion that it was easier to buy the item from an alchemist, like Sawyer, instead of obtaining the recipe and attempting to make it themselves.

I figured I might just wait until the recipe was made public instead of buying it. If it helped me avoid monsters, I might have been more interested, but it would just hide me from other players. I didn't really have much information I wanted to hide in the first place.

"I think I'll wait a bit."

"R-Really? I'm impressed."

"Huh? Well, anyway, how should we split up our group?"

The concealment orb could be used on two parties at once. We had five parties, so we would have to split into two groups of two and one lone party. However, it would make leading everyone to the village difficult if our groups couldn't see one another. We decided to split Akari, Sukegawa, and me into separate teams, since we knew the location of the village.

My monsters and I made up an entire team, so I figured we could just be the solo team, but...

"I'm going with Bear Bear!"

"Oh, I wanna go with the penguin!"

I ended up forming a team at the strong request of some players —that is, Ashihana's and Filma's. Well, these teams didn't really mean anything, so I didn't mind. In fact, their enthusiasm made the decision easier.

For some reason, KTK, Rais, and Rikyu joined my team too. Kurumi decided to join Kokuten's team so the tanks could discuss a game plan, leaving Rikyu and Filma with me. She must have decided it best for Rikyu not to join Kokuten's team, since he found it difficult to be around her. As for KTK and Rais, they just happened to join our group before I even knew it.

I hadn't had a chance to talk much with either of them, so hopefully we could get to know one another better on the way to the village. Although I wasn't sure how to connect with KTK. She was a top solo player and she was hard to read, so I needed to work up the nerve to talk to her. Rais, on the other hand, was always smiling, and he had a gentle way about him. Though I also couldn't help but think he was scheming something or other, so he was also hard to talk to. Still, he was more approachable than KTK.

With that thought, I took a step towards him, when the unthinkable happened.

"Silver-Haired."

"Hwha?!"

KTK started talking to me first! Wait, but I heard she rarely talked to people outside of her small circle of real-world friends?

"Thank you."

And now she's thanking me! But for what? For inviting her to the raid?

"U-Um, Kokuten was the one who invited you, so you should be thanking him."

"That's not what I'm thanking you for."

Then what *was* she thanking me for? I was pretty sure we hadn't interacted much at all...

"Thank you for discovering how to get a Japanese-style house."

"Huh?"

"Thanks to you, I am now surrounded with cats that I can play with every day."

I had found out how to get a Japanese home a long time ago. I guess it counted as recent news if we were going by real-world time, but why thank me at this point?

"If I had just been invited by Kokuten, I would've said no. But I thought this would be a good chance to repay you the favor. I won't fail you."

"O-Oh, yeah. We're in this together."

"You can count on me."

Good thing I discovered Japanese homes! But KTK was a top frontline player. She still found time to play with her cats every day...? I guess that was what she did during breaks from fighting on the front lines. In any case, now I knew why KTK had decided to join. *Just goes to show, you never know what brings people together.*

"Well, bye."

"O-Oh, okay. Bye."

Satisfied with getting the chance to thank me, KTK ambled away. As someone who lived with a lot of cats, she seemed to take after

them. She did her own thing. And she was just the opposite of someone like Akari, whose friendly demeanor was more like a dog's.

"KTK is a bit like a cat, don't you think?" someone suddenly said from behind me.

"Whoa?!" I yelped in surprise. I turned around and saw Rais standing behind me. "R-Rais?"

"Hee hee hee."

Can Rais read minds? No, that had to be a coincidence...right?

"Rais the knight, at your service."

"R-Right."

"And this is my steed, Redbud."

Redbud whinnied. Of course a dark knight would have a jet-black horse. Even the horse's gear was black.

"I originally wanted to be a typical knight, but I pulled Redbud here as my horse, so I decided I would aim to become a dark knight. Though it was difficult to abandon my plan to be a paladin who seemed like he could betray you at any moment."

So he decided to be a dark knight because of his horse! But his job class was still a Knight. He wasn't actually a Dark Knight or Black Knight yet. When I asked him about that, Rais nodded in acknowledgment.

"Indeed! You see, a Dark Knight or similar job class has yet to be discovered. In fact, no other job classes that align clearly with the 'dark side' have been discovered outside of a Dark Tamer."

"Oh, really?" I asked. As I remembered, Tamers could become a Dark Tamer if they treated their monsters badly. "I wonder, would knights have to...abuse their horses? But who could do that to their poor horse?!"

Although, I could see someone who was so avid about being a dark knight like Rais doing that. What if my careless comment led to Redbud being mistreated? How would I sleep at night?!

"I love my horse, so I would rather not use that method."

Maybe he is *a good guy!*

Rais continued. "In other games, a dark knight job can be unlocked by killing a certain number of other players or betraying one's comrades. If that were possible in LJO, I would certainly do

that and more."

Nope, I was wrong! I need to watch out for him!

"Oh, but I thought I heard there were other ways to become a Dark Tamer?" I asked.

"Yes, other methods have been brought to light recently. Apparently, a Tamer can become a Dark Tamer if they only tame zombies and ghosts."

"Then there's probably a similar method for knights to unlock the Dark Knight option."

"Perhaps it has something to do with what skills one has? Such as having Dark Magic?"

"Hmm, maybe."

Lilith could use Dark Magic, but it wasn't known yet how it was acquired. Currently, it was only possible to obtain it at random from a skill scroll.

From what I'd heard, it was possible to unlock dark-or light-type job classes by acquiring the rare magic skills Dark Magic or Light Magic. Huey, for example, was a Dark Magician. He had been keeping that a secret, but had decided to disclose that to me for this raid fight. Holland's special move, Shining Saber, gave off a hero of light vibe, and if his companion, Huey, was a dark magician... They were a pair after my own edgy, middle schooler heart.

However, Dark Tamers had a terrible image, so if I was going to go for anything, it would be a Light Tamer. Or maybe a Shining Tamer? A Tamer of Light... That sounded like a title for a book or something.

However, none of my monsters seemed to have any relation to light, except for maybe Sakura and Fau. If anything, most of my monsters were connected to earth and trees. An Earth Tamer? Or a Tree Tamer? Eh. Even if those job classes became available, they would definitely be support roles. Although, those might be just the job class that I would be best suited for.

"You'll tell me if you find out anything, won't you, Silver-Haired?"

"Will do."

"Well, it's also very possible that those job classes will be easily unlocked when one reaches a fourth-level class change."

"Oh, hmm."

Could dark job classes really become available when upgrading to a fourth-level advanced job without fulfilling any special conditions?

"If that happens, then you wouldn't need information from me," I pointed out.

"I just want to increase my chances as much as I can."

"Ah, I see."

"Neeeigh."

Even Rais's horse whinnied a plea. Redbud really was cute. Until now, I had only interacted with horses that had a unique look, like Siegfried's Silver and my Carro, but a typical horse like Redbud wasn't bad either. Redbud was soft to the touch, and the way the horse nuzzled against me was also very adorable.

"Redbud is the name of a flower, right? It's a really classy name."

"Don't you think? I was drawn to what redbuds represent in the language of flowers."

"Neigh." Redbud nodded cutely.

"Really? So, what do redbuds mean?" I asked.

"Happiness, nobility, and a lifetime of wealth," Rais replied.

"Cool, I like the sound of that too!"

"Neigh!"

"They also signify distrust and betrayal. Redbuds are also called Judas trees. Hee hee."

Hold on, what?! He said he liked what redbuds represented, but which meaning?! Which meaning did he like?! Could we really trust this guy? What if he turned against us in the middle of the raid? There was no PK or friendly fire in this game, so it was really unlikely someone would be able to suddenly betray their teammates in the middle of battle. But he was still acting fishy!

"Anyway, that's not important," he said dismissively.

"I think it is!"

An hour passed since we had set out, but Rais was such a good conversationalist that the time flew by. Maybe he really was a good guy! He acted a little strangely sometimes, but...surely that was just part of his role-playing. *Please let that be it!*

We eventually made it to the Beast Hybrid Village, and thankfully,

the other groups did too. Some people wanted to tour the village, but that would have to wait for later. We had to go to the Adventurers' Guild, and accept the raid quest all together. That was how we would form our raid party.

We had already settled on our basic strategy, so the only thing left to do was head to the boss. At least, we had formed as much of a strategy as we could against a boss no one had fought yet. Our only plan, more or less, was that we would split into an advance and rear guard and coordinate as best we could.

Since we wanted to glean some information first, we decided to stick to a pretty typical fighting style at first. The advance guard would tank, the rear guard would attack, and supporters would cast buffs and debuffs. Also, we would refrain from using the traps we prepared until after we had seen a good amount of the boss's abilities.

The path to the raid boss was super easy. Since we had formed a raid party, we didn't encounter any monsters in the cave. At the guild, the receptionist told us that the monsters ran away when they sensed a lot of people around, but in actuality this was just a way to give players heading in to challenge the raid boss a little bit of a break.

I was really thankful for it. Kokuten and his party were disappointed at first, but they perked right back up when they remembered it wouldn't be long before we fought the raid boss.

"Are those the doors that lead into the room?" Kokuten asked.

"Yeah. The boss is just past these doors," I said.

"Okay then, let's get in formation. Tanks, to the front."

"Right!"

"Got it!"

Our tanks were Byden, Kurumi, and Holland. I had the thought that Olto could go with them too, but my party was asked to stay in the back and give support. Not that I was complaining. I did think it would be a little demanding for him to tank alongside top players.

Siegfried, Rais, KTK, and Murakage's role was to keep circling the room and attacking and supporting when needed. I was looking forward to seeing their moves.

"All right, let's go!" Kokuten called out.

Everyone responded with a resounding, "Yeah!"

We opened the doors and stepped inside. The room was the same as the last time I was here. Stalactites and stalagmites were protruding from the ceiling and ground, and it was so dark that I could barely see. There was some luminous moss growing above us, but the light it gave off was very faint.

"Let's keep going," Kokuten, our leader, said.

"You heard him, guys," Holland, who was acting as a sort of subleader, called out.

As they directed, we moved forward. Once we walked a few dozen meters, I gradually started to make out the silhouette of the creature we were here to fight. The giant, golden beast sat imposingly in the center of the dark room. It looked like it was still asleep—each of the lion's three heads were snoring.

"I see its health bar."

"And I've got its name. That's the Cerberus Lion, all right."

Cerberus, as in the three-headed dog. But instead of a dog, it was a lion.

"Ready?" Kokuten asked.

Everyone nodded without saying a word. All of us already had our weapons at the ready.

The battle would begin once we shortened our distance a little more, set up a trap, or attacked the lion. I was grateful that we were offered the chance to do a preemptive strike, but that meant everyone was really tense before the fight.

"I will make the first strike. Once the battle starts, Sekisho, Huey, and Sawyer will attack first."

"Roger that, boss!"

"I'm ready whenever."

"Yes, sir!"

Sekisho, who was weirdly hyped up since he was standing in front of Nyamun-chan, and Huey, holding the staff he'd bought at the auction, began chanting spells. Sawyer took out a green spellbook and opened it. I was surprised to see that he had made a spellbook that specialized in wind magic for this fight. It hadn't

crossed my mind that spellbooks could be used that way to exploit an enemy's weakness.

"Now, let the battle begin!"

Kokuten picked up a rock at his feet and threw it at the Cerberus Lion. It dealt zero damage, but the lion still recognized it as an attack.

"Grrr... ROOOOAAAR!"

The Cerberus Lion's six eyes opened simultaneously and the beast unleashed a roar that resounded all through the cave room as if it were yelling, "Come at me!" At the same time, a large, red marker appeared above the lion's head.

The raid boss battle had begun.

Sekisho and Huey finished their incantations at exactly the moment that a red marker appeared over the boss's head. The Cerberus Lion braced itself as it watched the small tornados launched by their spells drawing closer on both sides, but it made no move to evade. Was it going to try to block them?

The entire raid party watched in breathless anticipation as the left and right heads of the lion opened their mouths and sent out a rush of flames. When the long tongues of the flames collided with the tornadoes, there was an explosion.

After the blast had passed, I managed to open my eyes and saw that the tornadoes were gone, the lion's flames having nullified the magic. The lion's left and right heads must have been positioned primarily to intercept any attacks coming from its flanks.

Sawyer sent a wind bullet flying directly forward, which successfully made impact and took out some HP. It didn't deal a lot of damage, but it confirmed that wind was effective against the lion.

"Just as we suspected, this will be no walk in the park! Support, start buffing!" Kokuten ordered.

"Roger, meow! Listen to my song, meow!"

"Aye-aye!"

Nyamun began playing a song that boosted speed and critical attack rate. Fau's song boosted defense, and Sawyer and Fuka applied buffs using items.

"C'mon! Take this!"

"*Roooaaar!*"

"Come at me!"

Byden and Kurumi both used provocation skills to pull the boss's aggro towards them. Even though only one of them could be targeted by the boss at one time, their skills would still continue to accumulate aggro even when not targeted. So even if one of the tanks fell, the boss's target would shift to the other tank, who would have the next highest aggro. For now, Byden was the first one to be targeted. The Cerberus Lion sauntered forward, then swung one of its massive paws.

Claaang! A loud metallic sound rang out as the lion's claws struck against Byden's broad shield. With an impact like that, I thought Byden would be sent flying to his doom. But I should have expected more from the main tank of a top clan of monster-hunting experts. Byden blocked the boss's attack without falling back a single step. No one else besides me looked surprised, so they must have known Byden was capable of stopping an attack like that. There must have been some serious bloodshed going on at the very front lines.

"Holland! Siegfried!"

"Right! Let's go!"

"You got it!"

Aiming for the brief moment in which the boss was stunned after attacking, the players in the vanguard made their move, with Holland going for a frontal assault. He leaped up and aimed right for the boss's head. *I thought we were going to start off cautiously and look for the boss's weak points...? Is that what Holland considers cautious?* Top players were terrifying.

Meanwhile, Kokuten and Sakkyun were attacking the lion's front legs, and Siegfried and his team went around the boss to aim for its back. Unfortunately, they were obstructed by the flames that the boss's right and left heads were spewing out, once again demonstrating that guarding the flanks was their main purpose.

The attacking players looked like they were having trouble landing so much as a hit from the side. But as long as Siegfried's team kept those side heads occupied, there was less of a chance that they would spit fire at the group attacking from the front. They

were providing a crucial diversion.

As for KTK, the attacker I was most looking forward to watching...

"Where is she?"

"Something wrong, Silver-Haired?"

As I glanced around, Nanzan, the healer from Kokuten's party, called out to me. Was I looking too distracted on the battlefield?

"Where's KTK? And Murakage, for that matter?"

"Oh, those two should be hiding somewhere around here. They're planning on launching stealth attacks. We'd have hard luck finding them."

"Gotcha..."

So they were concealing themselves to ambush the boss? Whoops, I needed to be attacking, not looking for my teammates!

"Lilith, Perca! Let's attack with magic! We need to do our part too!"

"Kee-hee!"

"Honk honk!"

With Olto and Bear Bear defending and Reflet healing, the rest of us needed to attack as much as we could. At the very least, we had to make sure we weren't deadweights! Even a peashooter was capable of dealing heavy damage! Definitely! ...Maybe?

"Roooaaar!"

Gah! That thing's scary as hell! But I won't back down!

"Hyaaah!"

"Kee-hee-hee!"

"Honk hooonk!"

Despite our fear, we kept our spirits up and fought for ten minutes.

The battle against the Cerberus Lion proceeded better than I had expected. I had thought that the boss would use more crazy moves and attacks to keep us under its thumb, but it hardly moved from its spot, which allowed us to keep attacking as we had planned.

At this point, it was safe to say we had taken virtually no damage. It wasn't that we hadn't taken any hits at all, but since the healers were able to keep up with the damage dealt, everyone was

basically at full HP. Still, no one had relaxed their guard. Even me, known by all as a laid-back player, knew without a doubt that this wasn't all there was to the fight.

In fact, it was eerie how long we managed to hold the advantage. Surely we were due for major retaliation. Everyone kept fighting, knowing that was bound to happen.

"We're almost there," Fuka muttered seriously. She was next to me throwing buffing and healing items at other players.

"What do you mean?" I asked. I followed her gaze to the Cerberus Lion's health bar.

"Raid bosses usually change their patterns three or five times. If it's five, then they undergo changes at eighty, sixty, forty, and twenty percent health, and one more time right before they die. If it's three times, they change at fifty and ten percent, and then again when they're on the verge of death..."

"And it's almost down to eighty percent."

"Right. Since the fight has been easy so far, I'm pretty sure there will be a change at eighty percent. Stay on your toes."

"Got it."

I watched the fighting continue while I cast magic spells, when I saw KTK launch an explosive surprise attack at the boss's backside, taking out a chunk of its HP. The Cerberus Lion even jumped at the attack, so the impact must have been significant.

"Grrrraaawr!"

"Whoa..."

Oof. That looked painful. I clenched my butt reflexively at the sight of that. The Cerberus Lion's roar almost sounded like a shriek, but despite how comical the boss looked, what happened next was nothing to laugh at.

Unfortunately, Fuka's prediction had been dead-on. After groaning in pain, the Cerberus Lion changed its behavior pattern.

"Grrr...!"

From the stationary spot where it had been fighting from, the boss made a giant leap forward.

"I-It moved!"

I couldn't help but be alarmed, but yeah, obviously it was going

to move at some point. Seeing as how it had this entire huge arena prepared for it, there was no way the boss would be staying put the entire time. It was weird actually how it had been fighting without moving from that spot until now. Did this mark the boss's shift from observing the situation to fighting for real?

"Roaaar!"

The Cerberus Lion didn't come at us right away with an attack, but instead started to run around the vast room. As it ran, it began spitting out balls of fire from its mouth.

As was common for bosses in action games, it went from a statue-like position to unleashing curtain fire in a second! Just wait, after this, it would become invincible except for its weak points! Or it might even become invincible for a certain amount of time! The boss's change had been so abrupt that it was bringing up all sorts of trauma from other games I'd played.

A completely different battle began to unfold. We now had to sidestep the numerous balls of fire as we shot off long-range attacks. However, the need to chant in order to cast magic spells slowed down movement, and it was difficult for people wielding bows to hit their target while moving, which all made it all the harder to fight a boss moving as swiftly as it was.

The ones whose attacks worked well in this situation were Sawyer and Sukegawa. Sawyer didn't need to chant since he used spellbooks, so he was able to hit the boss with a spell whenever he saw an opening. While his attacks weren't powerful, they were dealing steady damage. He even occasionally stunned the Cerberus Lion, likely because he was attacking with the element the boss was weak to. If not for that, we all would have taken even more damage.

Sukegawa had clearly been leveling up his throwing skills. As he ran, dodging the balls of fire, he threw balls of iron at the boss with perfect form. And thanks to his skill's course correction, nearly none of them missed. It was a lot of fun to watch the iron balls curve in midair and target the boss like a homing missile. Sukegawa must have been throwing some sort of special projectiles; each time they hit, they knocked back the boss and stopped it from moving momentarily.

Even more outstanding was what Fuka and Filma were accomplishing.

"Take this and this and this and this!"

"F-Fuka, that was awesome!"

Fuka's weapon was a giant frying pan. Swinging around that pan—which might as well be called a bludgeon at this point—and dealing heavy damage with it was exactly Fuka's style. They didn't call her the Iron Chef for nothing.

Fuka repelled the fireballs by whacking them with her frying pan. Not only was she defending, but attacking too—the fireballs she sent back struck the Cerberus Lion. Although they didn't deal much damage, she was doing the work of a tank and more.

Naturally, she wasn't able to block every single one, so she still took some damage. But each time she did, she ate food to heal herself. With her Speed Eating and Gluttony skills, she could eat without limit. Also, her Chef skills included one that raised her fire resistance, making her an elite fire-resistant tank.

Filma was also doing some outstanding work as a defender.

"Aaaahhh!"

"You got this, Filma!"

"Heh heh, Filma can do anything she puts her mind to."

"You two can help out a little too, you know!"

Filma was spinning her lance around to ward off the fireballs. I was pretty sure the move she was using was an art meant for repelling long-range attacks. She had also created a dome of water that was protecting Kurumi and Rikyu. That wasn't the work of a water magic spell, but a Nereid-specific skill.

Filma normally gave off the impression of a serious and mature businesswoman, but right now she looked totally different. The way she was swinging her spear around while wearing a skintight, wet suit-type armor that showed off her curves, she was the portrait of an attractive warrior.

It was thanks to Filma's spear and her water dome blocking the fire that Kurumi and Rikyu, who were behind her, took zero damage. Still, I couldn't help but notice how relaxed they were while Filma was doing all the work to protect them. I could understand if Kurumi

was deliberately doing nothing for aggro control purposes, but Rikyu could at least use a healing item or something!

No sooner did I have that thought than Rikyu finally made a move. But it wasn't a healing item she was holding.

"Heh heh... Boom!"

True to her nickname, "Bomber," she used a bomb. She must've been waiting for the moment that the Cerberus Lion wasn't looking at them.

I felt the force of the blast as the powerful bomb exploded above the Cerberus Lion.

"Hey, Rikyu! I thought you said you'd use a weak bomb!" Kurumi complained.

"That *was* my weakest bomb."

"Oh, come on!"

Rikyu's bombs were as gnarly as ever. The one she used now caused some stalactites to fall and nearly hit Kurumi. I wondered, would that have counted as friendly fire? I was kind of curious, but with stalactites that big, not curious enough to try.

Kurumi was soon helped back to her feet by Fuka and Sukegawa.

Contrary to my expectations, the crafters were contributing a lot. *And I should do the same!* But what exactly should I do? We had decided to use the traps and poisoned bait when the boss's HP was at half or if we had lost half our members. They were meant to be used as our ace in the hole, so it was too early to use them now.

"I know, I'll use this!"

I took out a perfume bottle. I had privately made some to use as a secret weapon once I heard that the boss had a good sense of smell. Well, there was no way to know if it would work, but I figured it wasn't a bad idea to try. Kokuten had given his go-ahead to the crafters that we could test various items as we saw fit.

Instead of throwing it directly at the boss, my plan was to let the perfume permeate a wide area to override its sense of smell. Since the lion had a strong nose, then the perfume would most likely irritate it.

However, I wasn't confident that my throwing ability would be enough to get the perfume to land where I wanted it to. Even

though the bottle didn't need to hit the Cerberus Lion directly, I still needed it to land close to it. *Should I summon Rick? I don't want to waste a tamed monster's orb, though...*

While I was trying to figure out what to do, Sukegawa came over to me.

"Silver-Haired, you keep pacing back and forth holding that bottle. Are you gonna use it or what?"

Pacing back and forth? Uh-oh, did I look like a space cadet?

"I need to throw this item to use it," I explained.

"Oh, yeah? Let me handle it, then!"

"That would be helpful. Okay, so—"

"Hraaah!"

Before I could explain what I wanted Sukegawa to do with the perfume bottle, he swiped it from my outstretched hand, and in one fluid movement, flung it away.

"Ah!" I said in shock.

"Huh?"

I didn't even have a chance to stop him!

"The lid was still on!"

"O-Oh, for real?"

The bottle spun as it flew through the air, but the perfume stayed sealed inside. Just as I was thinking this was a failure, the trajectory of the perfume bottle curved like a boomerang and hit Cerberus Lion square on the nose of its center head. I heard the sound of the bottle breaking and then its contents spilled all over its face. Sukegawa's impulsiveness might actually have an effective outcome. Call it a disaster-turned-advantage?

"Graaawr!"

The Cerberus Lion, its face now drenched in perfume, was pawing at its face like a cat. It clearly looked negatively affected by it.

"That was not what I was expecting, but I think the perfume is doing something?"

"R-Really?"

"Hmm. Maybe."

"Okay, cool! So it turned out all right in the end!"

Sukegawa gave me a thumbs-up and started laughing as if to brush aside his mistake. He wasn't sorry at all, was he? However, his sense of relief only lasted for a short moment.

"Grrrrr!"

"Huh? Silver-Haired. Is the lion...looking at *me*?"

"Sure is."

"I knew it!"

All three of the Cerberus Lion's heads were staring in our direction, its eyes contorted with anger. It was mad all right.

"Roooaaarrr!"

"It's running for us! Silver-Haired! What do we do?!"

"How should I know?!"

Clearly, splashing perfume directly on the lion drew a tremendous amount of its aggro. All I'd meant to do was mess with its sense of smell and annoy it a little...

The Cerberus Lion rushed straight for us—that is, straight for Sukegawa. As soon as we ran in different directions, the boss followed after Sukegawa.

"Aaahhh! No fair, Silver-Haired!"

"Damn it! This is bad! Sukegawa's in trouble! What should we do?!" I shouted, but I couldn't keep the relief out of my voice. *Sorry, Sukegawa!*

"You could say it with a little more urgency! You don't sound too concerned!"

Hey, if you have time to complain, then maybe you're not actually in that much danger after all!

"Just keep running!" I yelled.

Still, the fact of the matter was that I couldn't let Sukegawa die here. I was already barely contributing. How could I look everyone in the eye if I were to blame for reducing our fighting power?!

"Olto! Help!"

"Mm-mmm!"

Olto boldly leaped into the Cerberus Lion's path.

"Roaaar!"

"Mm-mmm!"

"O-Oltooo!"

Three minutes later, and we had successfully yet narrowly evaded death.

"Sukegawa and I both survived..." I sighed in relief.

Byden used his quick thinking and pulled the boss's attention to him with a technique that boosted aggro. If it hadn't been for him, Sukegawa would probably have died. He was a lifesaver.

As for Olto's attempt to save Sukegawa...

"Mmm..."

"Don't sweat it, bud. There was nothing you could do. Okay?"

"Mm."

The Cerberus Lion snapped all three of its heads forward in what looked like a superpowered bite attack, easily getting past Olto by sending him flying back. I was amazed the attack didn't kill him, but Olto was disappointed about it.

"You'll save him next time," I said encouragingly.

"Mm-mm!"

"I'll die if there's a next time!" Sukegawa shouted.

In any case, I needed to put more thought into using items from now on. Although it was on Sukegawa for not listening to me explain anything before he threw the perfume bottle.

I only had one other item that I had prepared on my own. And it was...a bomb! Not a crazy bomb like one of Rikyu's—it didn't deal much physical damage, but it was a type of bomb that burst and spread its contents around. It might be more accurate to call it a bang snap or a firecracker.

I had made a wooden tube and stuffed it full of powdered gale plants and chili pepper. I then used Engraving (Wind) to ensure that the chili pepper was spread over as wide an area as possible. I got the idea from bear spray. A stimulant was a great way to attack all five of an animal's sharp senses. This bomb was sure to do the trick and harass the Cerberus Lion! *I can't wait to see what it does!*

"Mm?"

"..."

Olto was staring at me in full anticipation, as if he were saying, "Ooh, what are you gonna do next?" Seeing him like that actually calmed me down. I had gotten a little overexcited there.

I caught sight of the Cerberus Lion chasing Murakage in an area further away from me. Murakage had tried to approach the Cerberus Lion from behind, but the lion quickly discovered him. From that, I guessed that the perfume's effect lasted about three minutes, and the boss's sense of smell had returned.

"Alas, I failed to emulate KTK!" Murakage lamented.

I could see how frantic he was even from far away. What if he got chased by the boss again? He might really die.

"This might cause some unexpected results...so I won't use it just yet."

"Mm?"

Olto watched me quietly put the chili pepper bomb back in my inventory and tilted his head. *Sorry, Olto. I'm too scared to use it right now.*

While that was going on, Siegfried and Rais had hit upon an effective strategy. They kept a fifteen-meter distance from the Cerberus Lion and were circling around the boss like there was no tomorrow. I assumed the two of them were using an aggro-accumulating skill to keep its attention on them; the Cerberus Lion was locked right onto them. They had been trying to do that this whole time, and only now succeeded.

As they narrowly dodged the balls of fire flying at them at high speeds, they used Provoke and attacked the Cerberus Lion with bows and arrows to keep it targeting them, reducing the number of attacks aimed at the rest of the party. I would think that shooting a bow on horseback would be difficult, but their target was huge. Even arrows shot haphazardly were bound to hit.

I was particularly impressed with Siegfried's and Rais's horses, Silver and Redbud. At no point did they appear to be frightened at all. Just because this was a game didn't mean that monsters and animals acted like robots; that much was clear just by looking at my own monsters. There were times when they became scared or overconfident and messed up. And yet, these two knights' horses didn't flinch even when flames shot right past them. They had undeniably survived some pretty violent battles. I supposed it was only natural that the horses of top knights would be just as

remarkable as their riders.

Thanks to the knights' efforts, the rest of the party was now able to fight from a more advantageous position. As we fought, we learned that getting hit by the fireballs didn't deal serious damage. I myself had gotten hit several times, but my HP was only down twenty percent. And if I had only lost that much, then the other party members must have taken even less damage.

Even though each individual fireball wasn't that powerful, since there were so many of them, they were difficult to dodge. It seemed like the boss was aiming to slowly and surely exhaust our reserves. Although I didn't need to switch out any monsters yet, I had used up a lot of healing items.

"Just a little more..." I muttered.

"Mm?"

"Look at the boss's HP."

The boss's HP was nearly down to sixty percent. If things went as Fuka said, then we should expect the boss to change things up again soon. The first stage was monitoring the situation. The second stage was curtain fire to wear us down. What would come next?

As I observed the Cerberus Lion, it came to a halt. Then, it let out a roar.

"ROOOAAAR!"

The roar had a paralysis effect, but we had equipped earplugs before starting the battle, so we were all well protected. We had decided to use them out of caution since the boss was a beast-type monster, and it was a good thing we had.

As if the roar had been a signal, the Cerberus Lion's behavior changed dramatically. It shifted from only running around spitting out fireballs to also coming at us with close-range attacks. The boss ran up to nearby players and attacked with its forelegs as it simultaneously continued to spit out fireballs around. This situation would have been really bad if even just a few players had been paralyzed by that roar. If our tanks fell, we'd definitely be headed for defeat.

While the lion had ramped up its attacks, it had also become easier for us to hit it. We were now chipping away at each other's HP

even more fiercely than before.

"Take this!"

"Graaawr?"

"Nice! Kurumi managed to push it back! This is our chance!"

"Let's go!"

The players on the vanguard were fighting a lengthy, fierce battle against the lion, while those of us in the rearguard were still putting all our effort into evading the bullet hell. It was like we were playing two different games.

I kept an eye on Kokuten as I continued to heal and buff, when he suddenly signaled to me with a wave. I looked at the boss's HP—it was down to fifty percent, which meant it was time to use the items we had prepared ahead of time.

"All right! It's finally our time to shine! I hope!"

First, I needed to see if these would actually work.

"Voilà, poisoned seafood, odorless version!"

"Humm..."

"Stop looking at it like you want to eat it! You really can't resist food, can you? If we survive this fight, I'll feed you as much seafood as you want!"

"Hum?"

"Yeah, I mean it! A man never goes back on his word!"

"Humm!"



She was happy to hear that—but I said *if* we survived. It was impossible for us to beat the boss on our first try anyway, so it was unlikely that I'd have to fulfill that promise. Was that devious? *Mwa ha ha ha ha! Reflet! That's how adults operate!*

"Hum?"

"Oh, um, nothing. Anyway, let's get this poisoned food set up."

The traps would come later. If I set them both up at the same time, it might have disastrous results.

The first step was checking the effectiveness of the poison. I moved to the center of the room, where the Cerberus Lion had been lying down at the start, and placed three poisoned dishes there.

The boss's behavior remained unchanged. Since we were told it had a keen sense of smell, I thought that meant it would notice the food right away and go for it. And the perfume shouldn't be affecting it anymore...

"Sukegawa!" I called out. "Can you ask Kokuten and his group to lure the boss this way?"

"Can do!"

As soon as Sukegawa ran off and delivered the message to Kokuten and the others, they got to work. I was glad they caught on so quickly. They retreated in a V formation, drawing the boss towards the bait.

Now that the boss was close enough, it caught a whiff of the food's scent. It was looking all around, its nose twitching excitedly. Kokuten's group made their retreat while avoiding running over the poisoned food, skillfully guiding the Cerberus Lion until it had a view of the source of the smell.

"Grrr?"

Nice! It found it! The boss's eyes are clearly locked on the food! If I had to name the dish, I'd call it "Sea Bream and White Tomato Acqua Pazza, with a Side of Magic Poison"! *Heh heh, sounds tasty, right? I assure you it's a fine dish that even Reflet would hesitate to eat without the proper utensils! Go on, have a bite!*

"Grrr... *Chomp.*"

"It ate it!"

"Whoa. Well done, Silver-Haired."

“Big kitty. Cute kitty.”

The vanguard players cheered as the Cerberus Lion polished off the poisoned dish in one bite. It gulped down the entire thing without chewing, even the plate. *Talk about a hearty appetite!*

“Grrr... Graaawr!”

A few seconds later, purple bubbles appeared above the Cerberus Lion’s heads, indicating that it was poisoned.

“It’s poisoned! And it’s writhing in pain! Now’s our chance!”

“Let’s gooo!”

“Silver, onward!”

“Heh heh... Explosion time.”

“Redbud! Let us stab this spear right into that brute’s rump!”

Seeing their chance, the top players rushed forward to attack. I heard a few disturbing remarks from a few of them, though.

Anyway, it looked like the poison had worked well against the boss. At first I thought the boss wasn’t losing any HP from the poison, but then I saw that its health meter was gradually dropping. Plus, the poison would continue to deal damage over time for a little longer. Could the poison actually be super strong?

“Oops, I can’t just stand around and watch. Guys, let’s attack too!”

“Growl growl!”

“Kee-hee!”

My monsters and I joined everyone else in attacking the boss.

That poisoned bait was a lot more brutal than I imagined. The effect lasted for one minute, and during that time, it reduced the boss’s health by three percent. Three percent for a raid boss was several times the full health of some lesser monsters. Moreover, it even fell for two more poisoned meals. Though after that, it seemed to have learned its lesson. It crushed the fourth poisoned meal flat with its foot.

In just a few short minutes, we had taken out almost ten percent of the boss’s HP. Also, while the boss was poisoned, its movements became sluggish and its attacks became slightly weaker. Thanks to that, our party barely sustained any damage at all.

Hey, I made a pretty significant contribution, didn’t I? No one

could call me a useless weakling anymore!

"Silver-Haired! Look out!"

"Wha?"

"Mm-mm!"

I heard Murakage's warning at the same time Olto pushed me down. As I lay face up on the ground, I saw something bright and reddish-orange pass speedily over my head. It was the flame-covered tip of the Cerberus Lion's tail.

The Cerberus Lion had gone through another change. This time, even its appearance had transformed: its mane and the tip of its tail had turned into flames. Apparently, the boss could now attack with that tail tip. I had dropped my guard since the boss had been pretty far away with its back facing me. Also, I was pretty sure its tail had grown longer.

"Are you all right?" Murakage asked me.

"Y-Yeah, I am. Thanks for the warning."

Murakage had pulled off a spectacular jump to avoid the flames, something that I wouldn't have been able to do in a million years. *That's a ninja for you!*

"I think it would be in your best interest to move farther away," Murakage advised.

"Good idea."

I kept an eye on the Cerberus Lion the entire time as I jogged away from it. The fighting had become more intense. I had let my guard down since no one had died yet, but this was the point where things became serious.

"Aah! Byden!"

I saw Byden get forcefully sent flying back right before my eyes. All at once, our formation collapsed, the rearguard scattering in all directions.

"We need to be even more cautious now!" Kokuten shouted.

"Right!"

"Got it!"

"Here it comes!"

"ROOOAAAR!"

Yikes. The lion was spewing out a furious blast of flames while

swinging its paws and tail. I'd probably get burnt to ash if I dared to get any closer to it.

Meanwhile, Kokuten's party was facing the boss head-on. They really were awesome. In addition to them, I saw Kurumi, Filma, Murakage, Holland, and Sakkyun going all out too. But it was undeniably clear that everyone was now taking more damage. The sparks that flew out from the lion's mane were chipping away at our health, the vanguard members' HP declining at an abnormally rapid rate. Things were not looking good.

As I thought anxiously about what I should do, someone rushed over to me.

"Silver-Haired!" Sukegawa called out, clutching a rolled-up piece of paper that I assumed contained a trap. "Let's set up the traps! If they work, it'll ease the pressure on the vanguard!"

"Y-Yeah, let's do it!"

Sukegawa was right. Even hindering the boss's movements a little bit would be a huge help. Especially the giant trap I possessed that Yadan had repaired. If the information we'd been given was correct, the trap should be able to stop the boss for ten seconds. That was just enough time for us to heal up and recover our battle formation.

"Where are you going to place yours?" Sukegawa asked.

"In the center of the room, since it'll be easy to lure the boss there. What about you?"

Sukegawa had made about ten of his own traps.

"I'm thinking I'll put them wherever the boss has passed by at least once. That way, odds are it'll run into them on its own."

"That makes sense."

After our quick briefing session to make sure we didn't set up our traps in the same spots, Sukegawa and I dispersed.

The Cerberus Lion let out a roar in the distance. Murakage had used some sort of fire jutsu and had knocked the boss back. Well, what I called "fire jutsu" was really just a bomb. Fire wasn't very strong against this boss, but evidently the bomb blast had had a Blow Away effect. Incidentally, Murakage had almost all ninja techniques covered through similar creative means. Ninja might not have been unlocked as a job class yet, but he was definitely playing

as one.

"Growl!"

"Oops, sorry. Did you finish setting up the trap? All right, let's get Sukegawa's traps set up too."

"Growl!"

Sukegawa had given me half of his trap scrolls so we could set them up more quickly. However...

"Bear Beaaar! Watch ouuut!"

Ashihana's urgent shout reached our ears as we were crouching down to unroll one of the trap scrolls. I whipped around and saw the reason for her shout.

"Oh, shit! Run!"

"G-Grooowl!"

The Cerberus Lion was rushing towards us poor, defenseless creatures. *Why?! It was fighting on the complete opposite side of the room!*

I stood up to run, but the lion was already right in front of me, leaving me no hope of escaping. If this was how it was going to be, then I would act as bait to lure the boss to the trap!

"Aaahhh! Bear Bear, run!"

"Groooowl!"

The boss was too fast for us. At this rate, it was going to catch us way before we made it to the trap. Olto came running over to help us, but I knew he wouldn't make it in time.

But someone else *did* make it in time to leap between us and the boss.

"A-Ashihana?!"

"G-Growl?!"

"Yaaaaah!"

Ashihana forcefully swung her giant ax over her head and then swung it down at the oncoming Cerberus Lion. Her ax was gleaming super brightly. *I-Is that her special move?!*

But before she could tell us if it was or not, the massive beast hurled Ashihana away, and her body dissolving into pieces and then vanishing. But not before smiling and making a peace sign at Bear Bear! *Is this really the time for that?!*

"A-Ashihana's dead!" I cried.

"Grooowl!"

I used the revive potion that I had thought to add to my shortcuts as fast as I could. Thank God I had done so ahead of time! Ashihana was already gone, but if this worked, then—

"I'm alive!" Ashihana cheered.

"Get away from the boss *before* you strike a victory pose!" I yelled.

"Eep! Good point!"

Having revived right in front of the Cerberus Lion, Ashihana ran away in a panic. Despite how convenient revive potions were, the fact that they revived a player in the spot they died, it could be pretty impractical in a boss fight. The potions also revived players at ten percent HP, which meant that sometimes there was a chance someone could go from revived to dead again in an instant.

Luckily for Ashihana, the boss was still stunned from getting hit by her powerful ax attack. Though if she had goofed around for even one more second, then she really *would* have wasted that revive.

"Thanks, Bear Bear! I knew even in my ghost state that you would revive me!"

"Hey, *I* was the one who revived you!"

I deserved some thanks too! And first of all, that was a super reckless thing to do! Though she did save me!

"I'll pay you back for the potion later!"

"I count it as a necessary expense, so don't worry about it! More importantly, do something about that thing behind us!"

"Grrrrr!"

Since I had been so freaked out by the Cerberus Lion, I accidentally started running in the opposite direction of where we had placed the trap. If I had just run ten more meters, I would have lured it right to the trap!

"That big move you just did, do it again! Now!"

"I can't! It was a special move!"

"Grooowl!"

Ugh, I knew it! Of course Ashihana would use up her secret

weapon to save Bear Bear! Should I be happy about that as Bear Bear's tamer, or be mortified at her hopeless obsession?

"I'm gonna die again...!" Ashihana whimpered.

"Don't say that!"

That'll mean I wasted a revive potion!

Suddenly, something hit the Cerberus Lion the moment it was right at our heels, and I smelled a soft, floral scent.

"Over here, big guy!"

"S-Sukegawa!"

Sukegawa the lewd blacksmith had used the other perfume I'd given him to save us. The effect was immediate—I watched as the Cerberus Lion changed course towards Sukegawa.

"We're safe...!"

But now Sukegawa is in danger! Or perhaps not. The boss stopped in its tracks right in front of Sukegawa. Its foot was caught tightly in a giant bear trap. Sukegawa had successfully lured it.

"Nice!" Sukegawa whooped. "Now it's time to atta—"

"Roaaar!"

The moment Sukegawa went in for a counterattack, the Cerberus Lion easily freed itself from the trap. The trap had only worked for about two seconds. As we had expected, the traps Sukegawa made were inferior to Yadan's.

"Roaaar!"

"Gaaaaah!"

Sukegawa turned and ran away, but the lion caught up with him and doused his back with flames. He managed to stay alive thanks to his fire resistance, but the attack had taken out half of his health.

One more attack on the lion's part and Sukegawa was done for. At that moment, the two knights rode in to save him. But they weren't there to attack.

"Sukegawa!" Siegfried cried.

"I suppose I'm here to help as well," Rais said offhandedly.

I watched in amazement as the knights grabbed Sukegawa's arms on either side, lifted him up, and then rode away. The pose Sukegawa was in made him look like he was being abducted by aliens.

"Hey, you're dragging me on the ground!" Sukegawa protested.

"Cross your legs!" Siegfried commanded.

Rais laughed. "Hee hee, how amusing! Yes! This is wonderful!"

"What's wonderful about this?! If I was going to link arms with anyone, I'd want it to be with a girl!" Sukegawa shot back.

"There aren't very many female knights," Siegfried informed him.

"I wasn't looking for a serious answer! I was just saying stuff! Damn it!"

"Aha ha ha! You truly are entertaining! There there, both Siegfried and I are androgynous and attractive knights, don't you think?"

"Get out of here!"

They sure were chatty for being actively chased by a boss. Though their conversation did work as a way to distract and help Sukegawa regain his cool. He began telling Siegfried and Rais where to go to lead the boss into the other traps.

Even if they didn't work for long, it was helpful to the party to know where the boss could be momentarily stopped. Kokuten and the others secured positions near the traps so they were ready to attack when needed.

The plan worked smoothly. The Cerberus Lion, led to the traps by Siegfried and Rais, got stuck in a trap. As soon as the knights rode past, everyone else rained down the powerful attacks they were saving on the lion.

Everyone except Holland and Huey, who were still holding back their most powerful moves, that is, probably because their special attacks took a while to charge. They were passing up this opportunity to use them since they couldn't be guaranteed to have more than a few short seconds of safety as they stood immobile.

Then, I had an idea.

"Holland, Huey!"

"What is it, Silver-Haired?"

"I set up a trap over there. Could you charge your finishing moves in front of it?"

My thought was to have Holland and Huey charge their special attacks next to Yadan's trap so they could use them against the

Cerberus Lion once it got stuck. The trap would be effective for ten seconds, which should give them plenty of time.

Once I explained everything, the pair got going immediately. I was glad they agreed with my plan so readily.

"Sieg! Rais! Lure the boss so it gets stuck in the trap in the center of the room in exactly forty-five seconds!"

"Understood!"

"A time limit, huh? A challenging mission! But also a thrilling one!"

After I told the knights what to do, I saw Holland reach the trap, brandish his sword, and begin charging his special attack. There was just something too cool about seeing a dashing knight holding a shining sword high above his head. He was giving major main character vibes.

Huey started charging his move ten seconds later. His special attack took less time to charge, so he had to start later in order for them to use their attacks simultaneously. And he looked just as cool. If Holland was a hero, Huey was a sage or dark wizard. Dark light was gathering around the staff he had thrust out in front of him, making it look as though he were going to cast some extremely powerful magic.

"Come on! This way, Lion!"

"Catch me if you can! Follow the sound of my clapping hands! Even though I can't clap my hands right now!"

"You seem to have gotten accustomed to being carried like this, eh, Sukegawa?" Rais said teasingly.

All right! The boss is coming this way!

"Roooaaar!"

The Cerberus Lion was still in hot pursuit of Sukegawa, who was being carried by Siegfried and Rais.

"Ahhh! My ass is on fire!" Sukegawa roared.

"You're fine! That attack doesn't deal much damage!" Siegfried assured him.

Rais chuckled. "Hee hee. A burnt bottom? Now that is what I call a unique experience!"

"What are you talking about?! You scare me, dude!" Sukegawa wailed.

In contrast with the trio's silly back-and-forth, Silver and Redbud were galloping at top speed, a look of pure focus on both their faces. They were a pair of outstanding horses.

The Cerberus Lion continued chasing after the knights and Sukegawa, until oddly enough, it veered to the side. Its eyes were staring straight at...*me?!*

The poison! Had I accumulated aggro with those poisoned meals? Sukegawa had temporarily drawn the boss's aggro to himself with the perfume bottle, but the second I was in its line of sight, I became its target again.

I should've known better! Aggro control was crucial in battle!

I rushed as fast as I could to a spot that would line the boss up with the trap. Thankfully, I had made it in time, and the boss sprinted full force towards the location of the trap. *That was a close one!*

And soon enough, the Cerberus Lion stepped right into the trap.

"GRAAAWRRR!"

"Woo-hoo! It worked!"

"Once Holland and Huey use their specials, the rest of us will go in for an all-out assault!"

At Kokuten's command, everyone circled around the Cerberus Lion to wait for their moment to attack. Soon after they were in position, Holland and Huey unleashed their moves.

"Ahhh! Shining Saber!"

"Darkness, burst forth! Dark Inferno Circle!"

Holland's shining sword was undeniably cool, but Huey's attack hit the edgy aesthetic perfectly! A magic circle appeared under the boss's feet, out of which shot up a blast of pitch-black flames.

Rais looked at Huey's special attack with envy in his eyes. "Hee hee. I hope I can use such a blatantly wicked spell myself someday. I wonder if spell names can be changed."

"Never mind that! Attack!" Huey shouted.

"He's right! Silver, charge!"

"Neeeigh!"

"Hey! Put me down first!" Sukegawa protested.

Uh-oh, I need to attack too. My monsters and I fought as hard as

we could. As I watched the rest of the raid party members' attacks, I saw that there were a lot of people who possessed powerful attacks that needed to be charged, even if they weren't special attacks like Holland's and Huey's. I bet that they were high-leveled arts that prioritized power over being able to move hitting targets.

Kokuten, Sakkyun, and Kurumi's skills looked especially strong, but even theirs didn't deal as much damage as Holland's and Huey's attacks. I wondered if the best way to utilize the trap was to gather a bunch of players who could use superpowered special attacks so they could rain them down on the boss all at once while it was immobilized.

When at last the Cerberus Lion freed itself from the trap, it got hit with an explosion from Rikyu's bomb, and then our opportunity for attack was over. Our collective efforts had taken out over ten percent of the boss's HP gauge.

Of course, the boss rewarded us by powering up yet again.

"GRRROOOAR!"

Now that the Cerberus Lion was down to twenty percent health, it transitioned into its fifth state. This time, it underwent an even more drastic change in appearance. It doubled in size and all the fur covering its body turned into flames. It was also much faster now. The lion was running around with more intensity than ever as it relentlessly spit out giant fireballs.

And those weren't even the worst changes.

"The traps aren't working!" Sukegawa bellowed.

As he said, the traps were no longer effective against the boss. It was as if the boss had some sort of ability to disable them. Was this the part where we were supposed to abandon our cheap tricks and fight it head-on?

"Holland! Kurumi! Byden! It'll be rough, but we're counting on you!"

The tanks followed Kokuten's order and moved to the front. Now that the traps weren't working, Kokuten's plan was to have the tanks stop the boss so everyone else could attack all together again.

However, things did not go according to that plan. The Cerberus Lion kept its distance from us and relied solely on attacking with

long-range attacks. It also started mixing in some violent explosions among the fireballs.

In addition to that, it occasionally threw in some vicious charge attacks. Those charge attacks had a good chance of sending someone flying, allowing the lion to collapse the front line and even charge into the rear guard. A direct hit from the charge attack dealt heavy damage, and even just getting hit by the sparks scattering off of the lion chipped away at our HP.

After only three minutes of enduring the Cerberus Lion's fifth state, everyone was at half health and we had used five revive potions.

I decided now was a good time to swap out some monsters. Tanks were pointless in the face of the boss's charge attacks.

"Olto, return! I summon Carro!"

"Neigh neigh!"

"Lilith, return! I summon the Tea Kettle Tanuki!"

"Poko pom!"

I summoned in Carro, who could help me evade, and Kettle, who was capable of area heals. There was also one more task I had for Kettle.

"Kettle! Use Calling Blessing!"

"Pom!"

I wanted the tanuki to use Calling Blessing, which would impact my post-battle drops. I had purposely not used Calling Blessing until now since I assumed we had no hope of winning this battle on our first try. That way, I could get accurate data about what the pity rewards were for losing.

However, considering how close we were to beating it, I started to think we might actually have a chance, and since we were in desperate need of healing, I had no reason not to use Kettle's moves.

"Carro! Keep running away from the boss!"

"Neigh!"

"Kettle, heal with Tea Tricks!"

"Poko!"

Whether we won or lost, the end of the battle was drawing near.

We had to keep fighting!

However, determination alone wasn't enough to deal with the Cerberus Lion's merciless attacks. The raid party alternated between attacking and defending, and ultimately, we suffered some casualties.

We lost Todo and Gio, the scout and lancer from Kokuten's party. They had been bolstering the front line this entire time, but at one point the Cerberus Lion used a super powerful move that killed multiple players, and we weren't able to use revive potions on them in time.

The lion's charge attack was immensely terrifying. Its body of flames blazed intensely, and each time it took a step, a tremendous explosion burst somewhere around it. I felt like I was being given a glimpse of the devs' bloodlust.

I continued to swap out monsters from my party. Bear Bear had gotten taken out by a fireball—though it was partly their fault for getting overconfident and getting too close to the boss. I shouted for them to retreat, but it was too late.

"G-Grooowl!"

"Bear bear! I told you not to go too far forward!"

I didn't feel too sad, though I wasn't sure if that was because Bear Bear had died as a result of their own behavior, or because they gave me a thumbs-up as they faded away. Either way, I summoned Himka to fill in for them.

Ashihana absolutely lost her mind when Bear Bear died. She recklessly charged at the boss and ended up getting killed herself.

"You rotten cat! How dare youuu?!"

She rushed forward all on her own, moving out of range of my revive potion. Why was she even more upset than *I* was?

In any case, the undeniable fact was that we were losing fighting power bit by bit. And yet, not a single one of us was losing hope. If we just held out a little longer, we might be able to win this. At the pace we were going, the lion would run out of HP before we all got wiped out.

In raid battles, if the party succeeded, then that counted as a win for the players that had died as well and they would also receive

rewards. It didn't matter how many of us died, as long as at least one player made it to the end.

I really hadn't thought we could win on our first try, but having revive potions really made a difference. Resurrection items were unsurprisingly essential items. However, after hope came despair. At a certain point, as we faced the boss, smiles on our faces, the worst thing that could happen, happened.

"Grrroooaaar!"

"Huh? Did it just change forms again?"

"Now? But it's not on the verge of death yet. It transformed with ten percent HP left?!"

"I-It has a sixth form!" Akari exclaimed.

"Seriously? This is unheard of!"

Akari stared dumbfoundedly at the Cerberus Lion. And she wasn't the only one—everyone looked flabbergasted. No one could believe that this raid boss had a *sixth* state. This was something that had never been witnessed before.

The flames coiling around the lion's body vanished, then its four limbs rapidly began glowing red. It was as if the lion was concentrating its flames on its legs. It almost looked like it was wearing red boots.

"Now that's a stylin' lion!" Sukegawa rhymed lamely.

"This is no time for jokes!" Sawyer shot back. *Good job, Sawyer!*

"Grrr... ROOOAAAR!"

"It's so fast!" I cried out in shock when I saw the Cerberus Lion suddenly move from a standstill.

"Gaaah!"

"Aah! Oh no, Murakage!" Kokuten hollered.

I watched as the ninja, dressed head to toe in black, was sent flying up towards the ceiling. He didn't die, but his HP plunged right into the red zone.

The boss was too fast for even an evasion pro like Murakage to dodge it?! Also, even though he had been concealing himself, the boss was able to easily spot him. Though unlike KTK, Murakage didn't possess the Scent Elimination skill. Someone who could neutralize their scent like KTK had a much better advantage against

this super-smeller of a boss.

"At that speed, it can bowl through any battle formation we try to hold! Everyone, be careful!"

It doesn't matter how careful I am! I don't think I can land any hits or avoid that beast!

"Rooaaaargh!"

"Meow meow! Stay away from me, meow!"

"I will protect you, kitty."

KTK is a rock star! She stood in front of Nyamun to cover her, and just when I thought she would fall victim to the boss's combo attack, she evaded! She kicked into the air and pulled off some impressive maneuvers.

Wait, the attack did *graze her!* Nyamun was also unable to dodge the lion's whiplike tail. Both of them took damage. The two members with the highest evasion skills of the party weren't able to evade... If the boss targeted me, I'd be killed!

If that was how things were going to be, I had to do everything I possibly could before I died. First, items. I still hadn't used my chili pepper bomb.

"Carro, turn invisible."

"Neigh."

Carro used Moon Magic to conceal us, but I knew this wouldn't be enough to dupe the Cerberus Lion's nose. After all, when I had tamed Carro, Rick had discovered him with even his sense of smell.

So I devised a plan to work around that. I say plan, but it was nothing complicated. I was just going to cover up our scent by engulfing an area in strong-smelling perfume. Up until now, Sukegawa had been throwing the perfume bottles directly at the Cerberus Lion, but this was how I had originally been intending to use them.

Will it work? Carro and I were invisible, and the perfume smell was permeating the area...

"Carro, just keep still."

"Neigh."

Since we couldn't step out of the perfume's range, all we could do was wait for our chance where we were. And sure enough, that

chance came sooner than later.

The Cerberus Lion stopped right in front of us. It glanced around in all directions, but it couldn't tell where we were. It knew something was off because of the strange smell, but it hadn't picked up on me or Carro.

The lion stood fifteen meters away from us. My heart was thumping wildly as I held the firecracker at the ready, aimed at the Cerberus Lion, and then threw it as hard as I could.

"Hah!"

Please hit it! The firecracker arced in the air, flying in a completely different trajectory than I had meant to throw it. Since the firecracker was an irregular shape, it was actually harder to throw than I thought.

"Dang it!"

The firecracker whizzed right by the Cerberus Lion and exploded near the ceiling. I watched as a shower of red chili powder sprinkled down all over the boss.

"W-Wait...!"

Maybe that actually worked? Despite my wishful thinking, nothing happened. I didn't know if that was because the chili pepper itself was ineffective, or because the boss had now become immune to traps and status abnormalities. *I should've known things wouldn't be that easy!*

However, making it rain chili powder wasn't the only thing the firecracker did. I heard a deep, heavy cracking sound come from the ceiling. Even the Cerberus Lion joined me and the rest of the raid party in looking up at it.

I watched as a crack formed at the base of a large stalactite, which then dropped rapidly down. And right underneath it was—

"Grrraaawrrr!"

"Ouch, that's gotta hurt!"

With a loud crash, the stalactite landed right on one of the Cerberus Lion's heads. It took damage, and a star effect like you'd see in comic books showed up above its heads.

The true value of that hit was the effect it had on the lion's status. Shockingly enough, the Cerberus Lion had lost consciousness

and the flames that were scattering around it had weakened. The colorful star effect continued to spin around its heads.

Kokuten gave a rallying cry. "Th-This is our chance! Come on, everyone!"

"R-Right, let's go!"

"Here I come!"

Once they saw Kokuten rush over to the Cerberus Lion, Filma and Akari followed after him. We had all been so stunned by the sudden turn of events that we had momentarily frozen.

"I-I'm coming too! This chance is too good to miss! Fau! I need you to bring out the big guns! Earth Spirit Awakening!"

"Aye!"

Fau was enveloped in light, and then transformed into her larger size.

"Aye-aye! Aye!"

She's still the same old Fau, though. Fau stuck her hands out in front of her, drawing two magic circles in the midair, out of which shot two large boulders.

"Raaawr!"

"It dodged!"

The Cerberus Lion had regained consciousness a moment too soon and dodged the right boulder. The left boulder, however, nailed the lion right in the belly and forcefully knocked it back. The last time I'd had Fau use this attack against a predator boss, she was able to flip it on its back, but this time the lion just leaned back a little but managed to stay on its feet! Well, this *was* a raid boss, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised.

Rikyu followed up with a bomb that left the Cerberus Lion crying out in pain.

"Grrraaagh!"

"Another stalactite!"

Another stalactite fell down, though this one was smaller than the last. And it missed the boss. I found it hard to believe that the bomb had only made one stalactite fall and none of the others. Was it random? Or did stalactites only fall if they were near the Cerberus Lion? As I tried to think of a reason, Sawyer figured it out.

"I think the white stalactites fall when disturbed."

Fuka nodded in understanding. "So when Rikyu used her last bomb, there must not have been any white stalactites close to the boss?"

Th-Those are top crafters for you! Their powers of observation are a cut above the rest!

In short, if we used bombs to make the stalactites fall and hit the boss, we could deal damage, make the lion lose consciousness, and get a chance to launch an all-out attack all in one go. *All right! Let's test it out!*

"Fau! Can you take this string to tie this firecracker around that white stalactite? The stalactite is sensitive to touch, so be careful."

"Aye!"

Fau took the firecracker, gave me a salute, and then flew up to the stalactite. Now we had to guide the boss over there.

"Perca, can you circle behind the Cerberus Lion and hit it with this? Then, I want you to draw it back this way."

"Honk honk!"

I gave Perca my last perfume bottle. These actually turned out to be pretty handy.

"Himka! I need you to make sure the boss stops right underneath that stalactite. You're the only one for the job!"

"Hm!"

Not only was Himka resistant to fire and heat, but he also had the Counterattacker skill, which made him the best candidate to stop the boss's charge attack. While I was laying down the preparations for my plan, Fuka, Sawyer, and a few other players came over to me.

"We'll help too!"

"I can help stop the boss with Himka! I have fire resistance!"

"Thanks!"

As the rest of us got moving, Perca had made it in position and used Penguin Highway to fly.

"Hooonk hooonk!"

As he glided past the Cerberus Lion, he dropped the perfume bottle on its face. Now that he was the target of the boss's aggro, he continued flying in our direction, slapping his own butt as he did as

an added taunt. I had no idea if that taunt was effective or not, but regardless the Cerberus Lion started furiously chasing Perca.

"Yes! Nice work!"

"Honk honk!"

I caught Perca and praised him. He flapped his flippers, looking very proud of himself. Fuka and Sawyer interrupted our little interaction with a dose of reality.

"Silver-Haired! Play with your penguin later!"

"We've got incoming!"

"Hmm!"

Himka, don't give me that look!

"Grrraaawr!"

The massive Cerberus Lion was charging right towards us, but we had some reliable tanks in front of us. *I'm not scared of you, lion! Okay, I'm lying. I'm a little scared. Tanks, please hold out!*

"Hm-hmm!"

"Hyaaah!"

"Hah!"

Himka, Fuka, and Byden confronted the Cerberus Lion that had chased Perca our way. They weren't able to block it completely, though.

"Hmmm!"

"Eeek!"

"Aaargh!"

All three tanks were knocked back and took heavy damage. Nevertheless, they had still managed to hinder the boss enough to stop it in its tracks. *I knew you could do it, tanks!*

"Sawyer! Now!"

"Roger!"

At my signal, Sawyer used his spellbook to cast a wind magic spell. But instead of aiming his wind bullets at the Cerberus Lion, he aimed for the firecracker tied around the stalactite. The firecracker burst with a loud bang, and just like last time, the stalactite cracked at the base and then plummeted down.

CRASH!

"Graaagh!"

"Awesome! Bull's-eye! Everyone, go, go, go!"

"Squeak squeak!"

"...!"

"Triii!"

"Chirp chirp!"

With my new set of monsters already switched in, we all ran towards the Cerberus Lion at once. I had swapped out Reflet and Fau, who had nearly exhausted their MP, and Carro, who was still a weak attacker, for Drimo, Sakura, and Olea. I had also swapped out Himka, who had sustained a lot of damage, for Rick.

I was honestly worried about how Sakura and Olea would fare out here, since they were both weak to fire. There was even a risk that they'd be killed in one hit by one of the Cerberus Lion's fireballs. Still, both were among my strongest attackers, and we were in a now-or-never situation. Plus, I did give them items to boost their Flame Resistance. They were potent potions I had made using Lantern Pumpkins and Flarestarter Plants.

I had gotten the recipe from Sawyer. Unlike players, monsters didn't receive the fire resistance granted by Lantern Pumpkin Cookies, so Sawyer came up with this recipe that could work on monsters too. He was a genius!

Still, since Sakura and Olea were naturally weak to fire, I didn't know how much the potions would compensate for that. It was possible that they would just take major damage instead of dying instantly to fire.

"Drimo! Use Dragon Blood Awakening! Then Fortify, Tailwind, and Pierce!"

"Squeak squeak squeeeak!"

"Sakura and Olea, focus on attacking!"

Drimo transformed into a large dragon and sped over to the lion so fast it seemed like he was gliding. Then, he crashed into the unconscious Cerberus Lion with a loud *boom*, sending it back on its hind legs. Sakura and Olea attacked those back legs with their whip and scythe, making the boss lose balance. In just a few seconds, they had toppled over the giant beast.

"Get 'im!"

“Chirp chirp!”



"Use every last nut and fruit we have, Rick! It's time to go all out!"

"Chiiirp!"

Rick nodded, then took out a fruit and threw it at the Cerberus Lion.

"Wait, no! Rick! I lied! Not that one!"

"Chirp?"

He just threw a magic fruit! The precious fruit that I've only been able to grow a few of! I completely forgot I was holding that! I just gave that order without thinking! I stretched out a hand, but of course, the fruit was out of my reach.

Rick had thrown the magic fruit with a serious left-handed fastball that struck the Cerberus Lion right in the head, creating an explosion. *Dang, the magic fruit is powerful! It's basically a bomb!*

"Chirp chirp!"

"Ah! I need to focus!"

I need to attack too! Everyone else was already raining attacks on the boss. Rick took out a deep green fruit next and threw it, taking out another chunk of the boss's HP. Kokuten was using Drunken Boxing, and Akari was getting ready to use a chain attack. Murakage, Holland, and Huey were also using powerful arts to deal as much damage as they could.

Everyone was pushing themselves to the limit in these few precious seconds that would decide the battle.

However, the boss wasn't going to let us win that easily.

"GRRROOOAAAR!"

"Oh crap!"

The Cerberus Lion's mane blazed brightly, then morphed into a wave of flames that swept towards us. Since we were all so focused on attacking, evading the flames was impossible. Nearly everyone was engulfed in the flames and suffered massive damage.

"...!"

"Triii!"

"Sakura! Olea!"

I knew fire would be too much for them! Both Sakura and Olea died in an instant! Sakura didn't even have time to use Divine

Blessing!

And that wasn't all. Everyone who had gotten hit by the attack was still covered in flames. We should have been buffed with Blaze resistance, so why was this happening?!

"This status ailment is Scorch! It's the stronger version of Blaze!" Sawyer explained.

"You've gotta be kidding me!"

Like Sawyer said, we weren't inflicted with Blaze, but Scorch. Did the devs seriously add in a new status ailment at this point in the fight? *How heartless can you be?!*

To make matters worse, the Cerberus Lion pulled out another nasty move: it refused to come near us. *I see how it is, stay a safe distance away and wait for Scorch to slowly kill us? That's a low move for a boss!*

With flames blazing all around us, there was no telling if Scorch would go away on its own. Even if we tried to use potions to keep us alive, we couldn't keep that up for very long. Even Fuka and Filma were powerless surrounded by all this fire. Maybe we really wouldn't be able to beat the boss on our first try after all.

"And we were doing so well!" I groaned.

Scorch was gradually chipping away at my HP. I used magic to splash myself with water, but the flames kept burning. It seemed like the flames filling the room constantly kept inflicting me with Scorch. So even if I doused the flames with water to put them out, more flames came to take their place.

We'd gotten so close to beating it—is this really how it had to end?! *No, we can't give up yet! There has to be something we can do.*

Someone else seemed to share my feelings. I saw Kokuten using recovery items on Siegfried and Rais not far from where I was standing. He still hadn't called it quits.

"Rais! Sieg! Filma and Akari, you too! Bring it home for us!"

"Leave it to us!"

"Hee hee hee hee! Let us fight tooth and nail until our dying breaths to snuff out this foe!"

"Yeah, you go, freaky knight!"

Other players followed Kokuten's lead and used their recovery magic and items on Siegfried and Rais. Some people, including Fuka and Sukegawa, died shortly after doing so. It was only a matter of time before other players died too.

Meanwhile, Siegfried, Rais, and their horses were fully recovered. Filma and Akari used the stalactites that had fallen to the floor as shields to evade getting directly hit by the flames. At Siegfried and Rais's prompting, they hopped onto their horses.

By riding in tandem, they now had more manpower to go after the boss in a suicide mission. I wished there was something I could do, but I had run out of items I could use! I felt bad, since I had more health than most people thanks to Rick healing me.

"Oh yeah! Kettle, return! I summon the Demonic Ghost! And Eine!"

"Oooh!"

"Tra-la-laaa!"

"Demonic Ghost, Eine, over here! Demonic Ghost, once you're in position, use Wail!"

"Oo-aah!"

I moved us away from Siegfried's group so the Demonic Ghost could use Wail. Even if it couldn't inflict the boss with any status ailments, hopefully it could turn the boss's attention towards us!

"OOOOOAAAAAHHH!"

"Graaawr!"

The Cerberus Lion glared in our direction, as if irritated by the wail.

"Eine! Draw it over here!"

"Tra-la-la!"

"I'll help you, meow!"

As soon as Eine flew towards the boss, Nyamun joined her.

"I call this move Jumpin' Cat Flash, meow!"

Nyamun glowed brightly as she jumped up and started shredding on a red guitar. It looked like she was using a combination of the stage performance skills Shine and Amplify. Incidentally, electric guitars hadn't been discovered in game yet. Nyamun was playing a classical guitar that had been painted red.



“Nya ha ha ha! Keep going, everyone! I’m looking forward to my clear rewards!” Nyamun declared with a smile. A second later, her HP bar shattered. *But she got the job done!*

The Cerberus Lion, distracted by Nyamun, had made a disastrous slipup and opened itself to attack. With two out of its three heads looking in our direction, it neglected to watch where it was stepping and stumbled right over a stalactite, coming to an abrupt halt.

“Honk honk!”

That was when Perca stepped forward with a daring look on his face. Nothing could stop him now.

“Go, Perca!”

“Hooonk!”

Perca took off once again. This time, instead of hitting the lion with a perfume bottle, he rode on the rail of light and charged straight at the giant monster.

“Honk honk honk hooonk!”

“Grawwr?”

Three cheers for Penguin Highway, the super skill! Check out that stunning Blow Away effect! The Cerberus Lion’s right head was knocked sideways!

The technique had such unbelievably tremendous power behind it that it was hard to believe it came from little Perca. There was no way he hadn’t pulled the boss’s aggro towards us with that.

“Perca, come back!”

“Honk.”

“Huh? Perca?”

Once Perca landed on the ground, he glared defiantly back at the six piercing eyes that were staring him down. That wasn’t even the most surprising part—he then used his Foam skill to assail the Cerberus Lion with bubbles. The damage was minimal, but the lion looked super ticked off. Perca must have realized he wouldn’t be able to escape the boss, so instead he decided to attack. Or maybe he was afraid that the Cerberus Lion would look away from him if he made a wrong move.

“Roooaaar!”

“Percaaa!”

"Honk hooonk!"

Perca's dead! I watched as Perca was engulfed in a furious blast of flames that the Cerberus Lion spewed out from all three heads, then broke apart into polygons and disappeared. But he had pulled off this task perfectly! The boss focused too hard on the enemy in front of it.

"Wooooo! It's my turn now!"

"Sakkyun!"

Before Siegfried's group could attack, Sakkyun came running out from the flames and swooped down on the Cerberus Lion. A red aura surrounded his body, and the effect of the burning flames was reduced by half. Before the battle began, he told me about one of his Yoga skill arts that reduced the effect of status ailments. He had evidently used that and had been waiting for a moment to counterattack.

"I'm gonna go all out before I die! Instant Attack Summon, Tama!"

Instant Attack Summon was a Summoner-exclusive skill. In exchange for only being able to summon a monster out for a brief moment, the skill doubled the monster's abilities. It consumed a lot of MP and had a very long cooldown time, but the power it provided made it a fitting finishing move.

And sure enough, Tama, the White Tiger Sakkyun summoned exuded staggering power. It wasn't on the same level as the Cerberus Lion, but it had clearly grown larger and more ferocious since the last time I saw it. That must have been Instant Attack Summon's effect at play.

"Graaaaawr!"

"Roooarrr!"

The giant white tiger leaped towards the giant three-headed lion, swiping its claws at the side of the boss's neck. The Cerberus Lion let out a roar that sounded like a scream, shuddered violently, and lost balance. The power behind that move could even compete with Ashihana. A top Summoner, indeed! Plus he was one of the strongest attackers in the game.

And Sakkyun wasn't even done yet.

"Hraaah!"

"H-He flew!"

Right before Tama disappeared, Sakkyun used the tiger's back as a jump pad to leap high into the air.

"Giant Monster Bird Kiiick!"

Sakkyun spread his arms out wide like an eagle snapping open its wings and sped forward as if running on air. Then, shrouded in a pale-blue light, he struck the Cerberus Lion with a kick that looked just like one used by a certain masked rider.

"Graaagh?!"

The second Sakkyun's kick made impact with the lion's right head, there was an explosive effect and the Cerberus Lion's body was lifted up slightly. It looked like the main purpose of the move was its Knockback effect rather than power.

The Cerberus Lion was unable to stay standing after taking the white tiger's attack and Sakkyun's kick one right after another. It slowly fell on its side, slamming to the ground with a deafening thud.

"Heh! How d'you like that?!"

As Sakkyun raised a celebratory shout, his body broke apart into polygons. Even with Yoga reducing the effects of Scorch, the status ailment eventually finished its job. Sakkyun had really risked it all to land that attack. *And he looked really cool doing it! He even saluted until he vanished completely!*

The Cerberus Lion immediately tried to get up, but that small opening proved fatal.

"Charge, Silver!"

"Redbud, onward! It's time to put our lives on the line!"

Both Silver and Redbud neighed in response to their knights.

Siegfried and Rais rode right up to the boss. The horses charged at the Cerberus Lion head-on, as if planning to deal whatever damage they could with a body slam. The lion, who had been paying full attention to me and Sakkyun, didn't even have time to react.

The knights used their lances and the horses their bodies to tear into the giant, golden beast. And there was still more to come. Akari and Filma, riding in tandem with Siegfried and Rais, tossed

something right before being thrown from the horses.

"Eat this!"

"Try Rikyu's newest creation!"

Two silver spheres traced an arc in the air, and the second they landed on the Cerberus Lion—

BOOOOOM!

They caused a huge explosion.

"GROOOAAARRR...!"

"I-It worked! Its HP is depleted!"

"Squeak!"

Their desperate attacks shattered the Cerberus Lion's HP bar. In its last moments, the boss let out a roar as its massive body burst apart into polygons, almost like fireworks.

"Rawr..."

The Cerberus Lion disappeared along with the flames that had surrounded us and the effects of Scorch. We had really been down to the wire. We wouldn't have been able to hold on for even one more minute.

Once the dust from the explosion settled, I saw that the only one remaining was Akari, who was lying flat on her face. Siegfried, Rais, and their horses must have died when they collided with the Cerberus Lion, and Filma likely died from self-inflicted bomb damage.

"Akari! You're alive!"

"Yuto, would you mind healing me?"

"Dang, you only have one HP left?"

"True Grit saved me."

"Ah, I didn't know you had that skill."

True Grit was a skill that could keep a player alive with 1 HP when they would have otherwise faced a one-hit KO—assuming that they had over twenty percent HP before the blow. However, there was only a very low probability of it activating, so it wasn't that popular of a skill.

"I got it from a random skill scroll," Akari explained. "This is the first time it's actually worked."

Apparently, this was the first time it activated for Akari. Talk about

lucky.

"Anyway, we won!" she cheered. "I can't believe it!"

"We took down that crazy raid boss on our first try? No way..." I muttered in disbelief.

"We really did! We pulled it off!"

While Akari was celebrating our victory, I was more bewildered than anything else. I'd really thought we had no chance of winning.

Just then, everyone who had survived came running over to us. I was glad to see that some of the others who had been hanging on by a thread managed to make it to the end.

"We did it!"

"Victory is ours."

"We wooon!"

As I looked at everyone's beaming faces, the fact that we really *had* won finally started to sink in.

"Wow, we actually did it..."

"We did, Yuto! We beat the boss!"

"We won... Wooooo! Hell yeah, we won!"

"Yaaay!"

"Woo-hooo!"

I was so stoked, I even high-fived Sawyer. *Man.* That fight had been one close call after another, but we'd managed to pull off a miracle! Although our biggest MVPs were the revive potions. Without those, we would have been wiped out very early in the fight.

"Sawyer, it's all thanks to you!"

"What? Not at all, I only gave some support here and there... You contributed much more than I did, Yuto."

"We wouldn't have won without the revive potions. So we have you, the one who discovered revive potions, to thank! You're the best!"

"Hardly! Someone else would have made them even if I hadn't! Your trap and your firecracker played a much bigger role!"

"No, really—"

"Come now, don't be humble—"

Somehow, we got stuck in a loop of praising each other. Kokuten stepped in to break us out of it.

"Don't you think that's about enough? You *both* did a great job."

"Kokuten! You survived!"

"Yes, thanks to my Drunken Boxing art, Revitalization (Intoxicated). Good thing I leveled it up."

Kokuten explained that the art was a self-healing skill that could only be used when a player was Intoxicated. It activated when he stood still and performed a hand gesture.

Other members of our raid party had also stayed alive by using all the special items and skills they possessed. LJO had a huge array of skills and arts available to players, many of which were not very well-known.

"More importantly, we need to check the results of the fight and keep moving," Kokuten said.

"O-Oh, right you are."

"Sorry."

We checked our inventories as we walked across the boss room, which had returned to its original state. I was shocked by how many new items were now in my inventory.

"These drops are something else. I got some Three-Headed Flame Lion Hides and Three-Headed Flame Lion Claws."

I had received eight hides, four claws, two fangs, six furs, two Flame Manes, and one Flame Tail. I even had one item called a Flame Jewel, which sounded rare. And when I appraised it, I saw that it did in fact have a high rarity.

```
Name: Flame Jewel
Rarity: 6 / Quality: 10 ★
Effect: A jewel that holds the power of flames.
```

As far as materials went, they all seemed pretty versatile. Other than the boss-specific items, I also received a lot of ores, such as Silver Ores and Iron Ores. Did that have something to do with us being in a cave? In any case, this had definitely been a profitable battle.

Other members of the party had also received pelts, claws, fangs,

fur, and Flame Manes, but not a Flame Tail or Flame Jewel. Those two must have been rare drops. Others had received a Giant Fang, Flame Claw, Evil Eye, a Stuffed Head (Right) and Stuffed Head (Middle). Did those drop thanks to Kettle's Calling Blessing? There was no way for me to know, since this was the first time this boss had been defeated.

Other raid bosses also dropped two types of rare items, so that wasn't unique to the Cerberus Lion. I wondered if that meant that Calling Blessing wasn't effective in increasing the number of rare rewards that players might receive.

Holland and Kokuten were showing each other their drops and discussing what type of equipment could be made with them. Clearly, these materials could be used to make some really powerful equipment, even for players of their rank.

Once everyone was finished checking their drops, we started walking towards the back of the room. It didn't take long to figure out where we were meant to go.

"This must be the exit."

"It's just a regular set of doors."

"Yeah, but we have no idea what could lie beyond it."

The doors looked more or less the same as the doors of the entrance. Most likely, this exit would bring us to Zone Eleven.

"I'm kind of worried, since we lost so much of our fighting power. But we can't *not* go," Sekisho muttered, and he was right. We couldn't turn back now. After all, even though we were the only group to defeat the boss as of now, who knew when other players would arrive here next.

We couldn't discount the possibility that while we hesitated and retreated, other players would get the jump on us and be the first to enter Zone Eleven. In fact, that sort of thing had happened in previous zone-unlocking battles. With that in mind, the best course of action was to keep going until we made it through the cave and registered a safety zone.

Unfortunately, with so many of our party having died in battle, our fighting power was shaky at best. The members of our party who had survived were myself, Eine, Drimo, Rick, the Demonic

Ghost, Kokuten, Sekisho, Akari, Kurumi, KTK, Holland, Huey, and Sawyer.

"Our first step is leaving this room. After you, Silver-Haired."

"Huh? Me?"

For some reason, Holland nominated me for the honor of going through the doors first. I would have had no complaints if he wanted to be the one to open the door. He had been pivotal in the fight, and he was the most hero-like of the group. Heroes always led the way in grand adventures.

But everyone else was staring at me. Well, I guess it caused the least conflict to have the player who had initiated the raid be the first to open the door. I felt like Akari was a good choice too, but even she was gesturing at me to go ahead.

"All right...I'll open the door."

The doors automatically opened outwards as soon as I touched them. They led into more cave, but I could clearly see light streaming in from up ahead. *That must be the exit.*

Ding-dong.

"Players have cleared the trade route to the hidden beast hybrid village. The players who are first to arrive in Zone Eleven will be awarded the title, 'New World.'"

"You have arrived in Zone Eleven. You will be granted the title 'Groundbreaker.'"

I figured I would receive a title, but it was still cool! I checked their details, and they didn't look too shabby. They were largely cosmetic titles.

```
Title: New World
Effect: Receive four bonus points and increased
favorability from certain NPCs. Proof that you were
among the first to open the doors to a new world.

Title: Groundbreaker
Effect: Receive two bonus points and a slight increase
in favorability from certain NPCs.
```

New World was a unique title that only our raid party would receive. I heard everyone cheer as they checked out their new titles. I thought that by this point, titles weren't that rare anymore... Were they happy about the increased favorability from NPCs? Other titles also had that same effect, but I never really felt like it made that much of an impact. Though I guess since it was difficult to target increasing favorability, it made sense that a lot of people would be happy about that effect.

While I was at it, I went ahead and checked my stats too and saw that all my monsters had leveled up. Sadly though, no one was ready to evolve or had learned a new skill.

As we walked through the cave, Kokuten came up with a plan to reassemble our parties. Once we had left the boss room, our raid party was disbanded, so Kokuten wanted us to remake our team for the purpose of exploring Zone Eleven.

Currently, we had nine players. One party was made up of Holland, Huey, Kurumi, Kokuten, Sekisho, and Sawyer. They were a well-balanced group.

The other party was me, Akari, and KTK. It might have seemed like a weak party at first, but KTK's detection abilities combined with Akari's combat ability were enough to keep us afloat. I sent back the Demonic Ghost, leaving Drimo, Eine, and Rick with me. It might not have been the ideal lineup in terms of balance, but it would do for now.

With our party formations remade, we continued walking through the cave. Once we made it to the end and out of the darkness, we were welcomed with a view of a vast, verdant stretch of land. It looked like we had come out halfway up a small mountain. Below us was a forest with countless streams weaving through the greenery.

I looked over my shoulder to see a tall, snowcapped mountain range behind us, which must have been the mountain range that blocked players from getting to this side. Even if someone tried to climb to the summit, avalanches or other obstacles would keep them from going any further. We had been able to cut through the mountain range by going through the cave.

Akari, who was standing at the front of our group, suddenly called out, "Hey, isn't that a village over there?"

I turned towards where she was looking. "Huh? Oh, you're right!"

Indeed, at the base of the mountain was what clearly looked like a village. It was a straight shot from where we stood, and we would likely be able to replenish our items once there. It also wasn't too far away. While everyone looked relieved at the sight of it, KTK was focused in a different direction.

"Look over there," she said.

"Huh? What is it, KTK?"

"Something's there, in the woods."

I looked where KTK was pointing, and sure enough, I saw some sort of structure peeking out from a distant part of the forest. I could see what looked like a spire and walls, but the trees grew too densely around it for me to get a clear picture of it. It was also really far away. I had a feeling it was one of this zone's central areas, like the cities in Zone Ten.

"While I understand everyone would like to admire the scenery, we need to find a safety zone before doing anything else. Let's follow the path to the village. I'm sure our fallen comrades want to rejoin us as soon as possible as well."

As ever, Kokuten was our calm and collected leader. And he was right—we could always come back to this spot to survey the area. Our first goal was to register a teleportation circle.

Kokuten had already sent a message to the rest of our raid party to stand by at the Beast Hybrid Village. Their stats had taken a hit from respawning, so it was a good idea for them to hang back for now anyway. Then, once we, the survivors, found a safety zone, we could bring everyone else here.

Our respawned party members had also received the New World title. And based on what the Groundbreaker announcement said, they would probably receive that title too once they stepped foot in Zone Eleven. Since we had already beaten the boss once, we would be able to get through that cave without having to fight it again, so obtaining the title should be a piece of cake for them. I bet that right about then, the rest of our raiders were partying it up. I knew that

was what I would be doing in their shoes, at least.

"We don't know what sort of enemies we might encounter. Let's move cautiously," Kokuten said.

"Got it."

Even the small-fry monsters here were completely new to us. Plus, we were in Zone Eleven, the "New World." I wouldn't be surprised if the enemies here were much stronger than anything else we'd seen so far.

Our entire group huddled together and descended the mountain path with eyes peeled in every direction. The path itself offered a firm footing, so even if we did get pulled into battle, fighting wouldn't be a problem.

In the end, our caution was unwarranted. We made it down the mountain path without incident, and the entrance to the village was right there in front of us.

"Is this the devs' way of showing us mercy?" Akari wondered.

"Yeah, maybe. We just fought a raid boss, so monsters probably just don't spawn on the path between the cave exit and the village."

There was a very real possibility of getting killed before even reaching the village when you were already half dead from fighting a boss, after all. Though perhaps our caution *had* played a bigger role than I thought.

"I detected monsters not far from the mountain path," Kokuten remarked.

"Huh? Really?"

"Yeah. We probably would have ended up in battle if we'd strayed off the path a little."

"Oof! Talk about a close one!"

In truth, I had spotted a few gathering nodes just off the path. But since Kokuten had been so insistent about the forest being dangerous, I had just ignored them. *Kokuten! Your level head saved the team!*

It was also lucky that our remaining players were relatively all the type to follow instructions. I could imagine someone like Murakage or Sukegawa thinking it was safe enough to do a little gathering as we walked. They were the sort of characters who were the first to

die in horror movies. And look, I wasn't saying I was *happy* they weren't here, just that that scenario was likely to happen.

There was no gatekeeper in front of the village, so we were able to walk right in. The villagers didn't seem wary of us either. But after making our way a little farther into the village, someone came running up to us in a panic. He was an NPC, but he was wearing fairly fancy clothing.

"Pardon! Tell me, please, did you make it through the cave?"

The NPC was a bear-human hybrid. He had a towering, powerful physique, but he was also incredibly self-effacing. And for some reason, he wasn't looking at Kokuten, who was at the front of our group, but at me. Everyone else must have noticed too, because they quickly cleared the way between me and the NPC. The NPC came right up to me and brought his face close to mine.

"Oh, um, yeah. We just defeated the Cerberus Lion," I told him.

"Huzzah! At last, the beast has fallen! There's no time to waste! I must tell the others!"

"Huh? Wait!"

He was long gone. Oh well. There was a teleportation circle right in front of us, so at least we could go ahead and register that.

Online Forum [The Master Celebrity] Silver-Haired, Amazing as Always, Part 45

A discussion thread for the most famous of famous players.
We don't want to be deleted from the forums, so no dissing allowed.
Screenshots posted without consent are not permitted.
This thread will be deleted if we're asked to do so.

305: Takashima
Silver-Haired's reign of torturing people with food has reached new heights!

306: Cho
Is that what he does?

307: Tetsu
Well, there was an incident with his food.

308: Tundra
It was, in a sense, a bomb.

309: Tomato Mato
Huh? Did Silver-Haired do something bad this time?
A bomb? Like a *bomb* bomb?

310: Tarukus
I wouldn't say what he normally does is good *or* bad...
What, did Silver-Haired discover some way to make PK

possible or something?

311: Takashima
No PK, but players are dying.
I mean, he’s not killing them directly himself, and the players who have died sort of brought it on themselves.

312: Cherry
What do you mean?

313: Tundra
-New meals are put up for sale at Silver-Haired’s farm stand.
-“Delicious seafood! Woo-hoo!”
-Players fight over being the first in line to buy.
-“Huh? This dish has a weird marker over it...”
-“It’s poisoned!”
-“And it’s an unknown poison! Explosive new info!”
That about sums it up.

314: Tetsu
That sounds like he put poisoned meals he was testing out up for sale by mistake.

315: Cho
It might not be a mistake.

316: Tomato Mato
Huh? So you think he’s trying to poison people on purpose?

317: Cho
No, not that! I’m saying he was probably just trying to

get rid of them!

318: Tarukus
Hmm, that could be.
But if people have died, that means...

319: Cherry
People actually ate them?

320: Takashima
Some did.

321: Tsujido
Well, can you blame me?!
It looked too good to pass up!

322: Tomato Mato
S-Speak of the devil!

323: Tetsu
All you had to do was appraise it to see it was poisoned.

324: Cho
And wasn’t it super expensive?
You ate it without even appraising something like that?

325: Tsujido
I *did* appraise it! That didn’t stop me!

326: Tarukus
A daredevil!

327: Tsujido

I’ve always dreamed of enjoying one of Silver-Haired’s homemade meals. You think I even had a choice to eat it or not? Pah! Nay, I say!

328: Cho
Fine, I can understand you got excited in the moment and wanted to eat it. But willingly getting poisoned to eat it seems a bit extreme...
Oh, but how’d it taste?

329: Tsujido
It was delicious!
Also, I thought I’d be able to cure the poison right away.
I even made sure I had antidotes on hand.

330: Tomato Mato
But you couldn’t cure it?

331: Tsujido
I was about to, but then I didn’t use it.

332: Tarukus
Huh? So you let yourself die on purpose?

333: Takashima
The meals contained a never-before-seen poison.

334: Tundra
So you were afflicted with Magic Poison, right?

335: Tsujido
That’s right. I wanted to see how much damage it would

cause me...

336: Tetsu
But before the poison wore off on its own, you died from the chip damage.

337: Tsujido
Bingo!
Other players saved themselves by using antidotes.
The Magic Poison ailment turned into Deadly Poison and Paralysis, which went away naturally just in time before they died.

338: Tomato Mato
So what you’re saying is, Magic Poison is a composite poison made from Deadly Poison and Paralysis, and with an even stronger effect?

339: Tarukus
I like the sound of that! Imagine what a poison like that could do in battle.

340: Takashima
Hmm, I dunno.
Considering how expensive the poisoned meals were, the ingredients for the poison must be really valuable.

341: Cho
Yeah, it’s probably only worth it to use them against bosses.
Though depending on just how pricey they are, they might even break the budget for a boss fight.

342: Cherry
I’m more horrified by the fact that there were multiple people who ate the food even knowing that it was poisoned.

343: Tetsu
Yeah, well, you’ll always find people who want to test that sort of stuff. Some people just can’t help but satisfy their curiosity.

344: Tundra
Speaking of bosses, Silver-Haired was heading somewhere with an impressive group of players just recently, right?

345: Takashima
Yeah, I think he was with the Monster Hunting Division’s clan master and his party, as well as Purple-Haired, Ruby Red, and Pyro.

346: Cho
I’m pretty sure there were also the Hero and the Sage, Red Cow, and the Blue Mermaid. And a bunch of other people famous enough to have nicknames.

347: Tomato Mato
They’re all celebrities!
I bet they found a crazy quest.

348: Tarukus
A quest extreme enough to warrant that sort of party? If so, we’d for sure hear a server-wide announcement about it.

349: Takashima
It seemed like they used something to conceal themselves at one point, but the quest must be triggered around that giant mountain.
Silver-Haired doesn’t seem like the type to use a concealment item, so someone else must have...

350: Cho
I wonder if it’s a quest related to something that top players would want to keep to themselves.
Maybe they discovered the way to Zone Eleven?

351: Tundra
I bet you’re right! Maybe?
Wait, no. That can’t be. Everyone’s been looking high and low for that, with nothing to show for it.
Zone Eleven just hasn’t been implemented yet.

352: Tetsu
Silver-Haired has been seen in areas related to yokai, so some people think he’s discovered a new one.

353: Tomato Mato
Ah, now *that* I can believe.

354: Tarukus
A yokai, huh? That would be a pretty important discovery.
But is it big enough info for top players to want to monopolize it?

355: Cherry
I wish he would find a new fairy instead of a new

yokai.

356: Tsujido
Wait, did you all hear that announcement just now?!
You heard it, right? Right?! I’m not hallucinating?

357: Takashima
N-No way... Our joke became reality! Gaaah!

358: Cho
Did we just manifest that?
Yikes... The timing of it gives me chills.

359: Tundra
I-I can’t just sit around and do nothing! I’m going to the Quick-Eared Cats!

360: Tarukus
Huh? Now?

361: Tetsu
That announcement is obviously about Silver-Haired!
We’ve got a Silver-Haired phenomenon on our hands!
And it’s a surefire fact he’s gonna sell info to the Cats!

362: Takashima
I’m outta here!
I’m sure other people are running to line up too! The race is on!

363: Tsujido
I’m leaving too!

364: Tomato Mato
G-Good luck with that, guys.

365: Cherry
Wow, everyone’s so cool.

366: Tomato Mato
Huh? You think they’re cool?

367: Cherry
Yes, I do! Someday, I’ll also become someone so obsessed with the latest strategy that I run to the Quick-Eared Cats to get it!

368: Tomato Mato
R-Really? I think I’m good on that...

Chapter Five: A New World

Once we were done registering the teleportation circle by the entrance of the village, the bear-hybrid NPC came back. Behind him was a tiger-hybrid man with a large build. Just like the hidden village in the cave, this village was also entirely populated with beast hybrids.

The bear hybrid greeted us first. “Hello again! Could we have a moment of your time?”

“We’d like to discuss something with you,” the tiger hybrid followed up.

“Um, just me?” I asked.

Both NPCs were looking only at me, just like when we had first entered the village. Why was that?

“Hmm, yes, the others cannot help us right now.”

“What he said. They won’t be able to help.”

The NPCs looked at Kokuten and KTK and shook their heads. They were pretty blunt about it, but it didn’t seem like they were refusing the others’ help out of any feeling of dislike. However, they did have something to say to one person standing near me.

“Ah, that young lady is one of us!”

“Yes, she is. But she’s not ready yet.”

The bear and tiger hybrids stared at Kurumi as they muttered disappointedly to one another.

“M-Me?”

“Kin, come back to visit us once you are qualified. It won’t be much longer now.”

Based on what they said, it seemed that they accepted Kurumi as a fellow beast hybrid. But then why was I getting a warmer welcome than she was? And what did they mean by being qualified? I couldn’t puzzle it out.

“I wonder if this has something to do with your favorability score,

Silver-Haired," Kokuten said thoughtfully.

"Even if it does, I'm not sure why mine would be so much higher than everyone else's?"

"Well, I think that the requirements for being able to find the village in Zone Ten also had to do with favorability. It seems plausible that for some reason, you have a high favorability with beast-hybrid NPCs."

"Hmm..."

Honestly, I was stumped. I had no memory of befriending beast hybrids in particular. But it was clear that I had triggered some sort of event.

"Maybe I should listen to what they have to say before we go grab the rest of the group?"

"I couldn't agree more. In fact, I'm sure everyone else would want us to prioritize learning this new information as well."

"Okay then, I'll see what these villagers have to say."

Once I gave my consent to the NPCs, they guided me farther into the village. Even though they only addressed me, the rest of my party members were able to follow us too.

After a few minutes of walking, we came upon a narrow path surrounded by trees. When I saw what was obviously a path leading into the forest, I got a little worried that we'd encounter monsters, but apparently this area was considered part of the village too. The beast hybrids smiled and told me we were safe.

However, that didn't mean everything was smooth sailing.

"Silver-Haired! This is as far as we can go!"

"Huh?"

Kokuten and his party were blocked from moving any farther by an invisible wall. Although my party members were able to accompany me, the same courtesy wasn't extended to the rest of our team members.

"We'll go back for our respawned members! You guys find out what you can here!"

"Roger!"

Other than my monsters, the only other people in my party were Akari and KTK. But we weren't going to have to fight anything,

right? Or had I been right to be anxious?

The trail led to a small clearing which was obviously the site of some sort of abnormality. In the center of the ten-meter-wide clearing stood a giant, swaying dark shadow. I felt nothing but ominous energy from the shadow. *Is this what we came here to see? Wait,* is *this a boss fight?*

"Wh-What in the world is that?!" the tiger hybrid exclaimed. Apparently, this was a shock to him too.

Ah, now I understood what was happening. This was one of those missions where I had to solve a problem for the village, huh? And with a boss fight thrown in.

"Maybe we should turn back—"

"Blast it! What's the meaning of this?!"

"Ah!"

The tiger ran off! Do we have to chase after him now?

"Wh-What should we do?" I sputtered.

Akari was quick to decide. "We have to go after him."

"We can't abandon Mr. Kitty."

KTK! He's not a kitty, he's a tiger! But they were right. If we turned our back on him now, there was no telling what would happen with the event. Our only option was to pursue him, even if it meant dying.

We all stepped forward into the clearing, and as soon as we did, we were enclosed in a translucent barrier that was unmistakably a boss wall. Not only that, but our bodies became frozen in place, and only the tiger NPC was able to keep moving. We were in the middle of a cutscene.

"No... What's happened to our idol?"

"Mwa ha ha ha! It is I, the Curse Man. Your sacred ground now belongs to me!"

The giant shadow spoke in a high, piercing voice. Apparently, this place was originally the location of some sort of religious idol. And the Curse Man was trying to steal it away.

"I won't let you get away with that! You pawn of the devil!"

"You dare defy me? Very well! Woe be upon ye!"

Clearly, stepping into the clearing was the final trigger to start the

battle. So did that mean we could have turned back before walking in? Hmm, maybe we *should* have turned back. This boss looked super strong!

It looked similar to the Shadow Man monster that I had fought previously. Like the Shadow Man, this monster had a penetrating gaze and a closely packed row of abnormally white teeth set in a crescent-shaped mouth. But there were also some clear differences.

Multiple eyes and mouths floated within the Curse Man's amorphous, shadowy form. I'd even go so far as to say it was even creepier looking than the Shadow Man. I was certain this monster was an even stronger version of the Shadow Man. Did we really stand a chance of beating it on our own?

While I stood there quaking like a leaf, Akari and KTK were on top of things. The second we were able to move again, they got into position.

"A demon-related event? This is my first time seeing one."

"We can get some good information from this."

They were both completely composed. They couldn't be any more different from me. I was too panicked to do anything.

"We'll handle attacking, so please support us, Yuto," Akari said.

"G-Got it!"

Since I could no longer summon new monsters into my party after the raid boss fight, I actually *was* hoping that they wouldn't expect my monsters and me to do much attacking.

While we were working out our strategy, the tiger man sprang into action.

"Ahhh! Be gone, demon!"

The NPC leaped at the Curse Man, swiping at the shadow with his sharp claws. It was a perfect melee attack, and it even dealt some damage.

"Grrrr! How dare you!"

"You'll have to do better than that!"

No! Mr. Tiger, don't be reckless! Usually if NPCs die in events like these, it's counted as a failure! As the Curse Man raised an angry shout, black rays of light shot out from its many eyes and mouths. But despite my worry, the tiger NPC nimbly avoided the Curse Man's

attack. Evidently, he was here to support us in battle. I was glad we wouldn't have to protect him.

"Insolent vermin! Cease your rebellion or die!"

"As if we would ever relinquish our sanctuary to a demon like you!"

Although the tiger NPC was helping us out, that didn't guarantee that we would have the advantage in this fight. The Curse Man stood still in the center of the clearing, but it was launching attacks from its entire body—attacks which took up most of the area. If we were on the regular playing field, we could fall back to evade, but fighting in such a small clearing made dodging very difficult. It was only thanks to Drimo and Eine covering me from the attacks coming in all directions that I was able to avoid getting hit.

"Squeak squeak!"

"Tra-laaa!"

Although, that meant my monsters were getting hit fairly often, so I had to work hard to keep up with healing them.

The Curse Man's ray beams weren't just powerful; they could inflict a random status abnormality, including Poison, Burn, and Blind. Thankfully, I still had some healing items that I had prepared for the raid boss fight that should last through this battle. I was lucky that I had a way to heal.

"I should...summon Kettle!"

"Poko!"

"Heal everyone up! And if you get a chance, use Calling Blessing!"

"Poko pom!"



Kettle began its twirling dance behind me. If my party couldn't be counted on to attack, then we had to do what we could to support KTK and Akari through healing. Although that said, it wasn't as though my *entire* party was useless on the attacking front.

"Chirp chiiirp!"

Rick was picking up the rest of my party's slack with some fierce attacks. He was honestly in his element in a small arena like this. He was hopping all over the place—even jumping off the boss wall at times—as he threw nuts and fruits like crazy. He threw some valuable ones, but I couldn't do anything about that at the moment. And although he was taking some damage, he was able to heal himself.

While Rick transformed himself into a mobile artillery unit, Akari was unleashing an even more intense barrage of attacks. With her red pigtails fluttering in the wind, she struck the Curse Man with her sword over and over again. She used a defensive skill to put up a barrier around herself so she could focus on attacking while also reducing the amount of damage she sustained. If she couldn't dodge the boss's beams, then she wouldn't. It was a very offense-oriented strategy.

I wasn't expecting such a berserker way of fighting from Akari. Or maybe she was just confident in my ability to heal her? If so, then I had to do everything I could to keep up the healing!

"Drimo, Eine, take care of defense!"

"Squeak squeak!"

"Tra-la!"

You don't have to salute me in the middle of battle! Just do it!

I used items to heal Akari, even if it meant getting hit with several of the boss's attacks. I saw Akari glance my way and give me a thumbs-up. *Great. We should be able to keep things up this way.*

Actually, I was starting to doubt that my monsters and I were even needed. As a top player, Akari was certainly skilled, but KTK was on a whole other level. She dodged every one of the Curse Man's ray beam attacks with the same agility as Rick, attacking the boss every time she passed close by it.

I had witnessed her attack style during the Cerberus Lion battle,

but this was my first time getting a good view of it up close. All I could do was stand there with my mouth open. That was how mind-blowing her moves were. The only thing an amateur like me could even register was that she was moving superfast.

I suddenly understood why people might suspect her of cheating or using an illegal modding tool. Not that there were any cheating tools that could be brought into a VRMMO. Her moves were purely the work of a skilled player.

"Wh-Whoa..."

"Squeak..."

"Tra-la..."

Even Drimo and Eine were staring at her with open mouths. *KTK left even the AI speechless...*

Despite this enemy being a stronger version of the Shadow Man, the Curse Man's HP was dropping at a staggering rate.

"Why can't I hit you?! Curse it aaalll!"

KTK was dodging so well that she even made the boss complain. That line had been straight up directed at her. *That's KTK for you! She's the best of the best!* Yup, there was no way I could compete with her. The ambition I'd had when I first started playing LJO had been nothing but a pipe dream.

That said, we were fighting a *boss*. The battle would not be won that easily.

"Gaaaaah!"

Once it was down to fifty percent health, the Curse Man unleashed a scream that inflicted us with paralysis. And that wasn't all—the shadow creature's body swelled before forcefully spewing out a black mist. The mist engulfed the entire field, making it impossible to avoid. Even KTK took a lot of damage from it. It was a combo move that showed just how desperate the boss was to land a hit on her.

But KTK wasn't going to go down without a fight. In fact, it didn't even seem like this was a big deal at all for her. She used some sort of special skill to heal herself back to full health *plus* cure herself of paralysis and poison.

"That caught me a bit off guard," she said.

Okay, maybe it did throw her off a little bit. She wiped the sweat from her brow, her face expressionless. But that was all she needed to do before she began laying waste to the boss once again. In fact, I was pretty sure she was moving even faster now. She must have boosted her agility with a buff.

After three minutes, when the Curse Man was brought down to ten percent HP, it underwent another change.

"Why can't I hit you?!"

"It got smaller."

The dark shadow that made up the Curse Man's body began to shrink down to a more humanoid size, like the Shadow Man. It was switching from indiscriminate attacking to speedy, fencer-like moves. Under normal circumstances, the boss's speed alone would be enough to throw us into confusion and put us in a dangerous position.

But to KTK, this boss was simply a slower, weaker enemy who couldn't even land a hit on her. The Curse Man chased KTK around, swinging its arms to hit her. I almost felt sorry for it. With the speed the boss possessed, it would have wiped out my monsters and I had we been fighting it alone.

Since the Curse Man was focused solely on KTK, it left itself wide open to Akari. She finished the boss off with a single blow from behind, and it broke into polygons and disappeared. *Guess that wasn't so hard after all.*

"You've defeated the demon's minion! That was phenomenal!"

The tiger hybrid, whose presence had been barely felt in the second half of the battle, congratulated us on our victory. He was talking to me, the one who triggered this event, but he really should have been praising KTK and Akari. *I didn't do anything!*

I had a feeling that the tiger NPC was meant to jump in to help during the final, ultra-speedy stage of the boss, which would give a regular party too much trouble.

"Oh! Our idol has returned!"

"Your idol?"

In the center of the clearing, where the Curse Man had first been

standing, was a stone statue that hadn't been there during the battle. It looked like an animal-human hybrid, but even upon closer look, I couldn't tell what animal it was supposed to be. It had doglike ears and deer antlers protruding from the front of its head. It also had what looked like sheep horns on the sides of its head, and a tail like a tiger. It had four eyes, with two facing forward like a carnivore and two on either side like a herbivore. It was like a conglomeration of various beast features.

By defeating the Curse Man, we succeeded in having the idol that it had stolen returned to the village.

"This is a statue of the Beast Deity, the guardian deity of our village."

"Huh? There's a beast deity?"

"First time I've heard of it," KTK said.

"I didn't know about it either," Akari followed.

If neither KTK nor Akari knew about this, did that mean this was brand-new information?

"Those who have earned our trust are eligible to undergo the Beast Deity's trial. And those who successfully complete the trial can receive the beast-hybrid factor."

"Factor?"

"Yes. Those who are not beast hybrids can be reborn as such, and those who are already beast hybrids can take on the characteristics of a different animal."

Huh? We can be reborn? Players can change races here! It was standard in games that let you choose from various races to provide a system that allowed you to change your race. It was expected that LJO would have a similar system, but it still hadn't been discovered. But apparently, it could be unlocked here in this village.

KTK was hard to read, but I could tell Akari was excited. This was a crucial finding, regardless of whether we were actually going to use it on ourselves or not.

"What does the trial entail? Killing the enemy we just defeated wasn't the trial, was it?" Akari asked.

"Correct. I thank you for defeating the demon's underling, but that has nothing to do with the deity's trial. Also, I have no way to

know what the trial will entail. It changes based on the person who undertakes it. However, the challenger's unique specialties are often taken into account," the tiger man explained.

In summary, if you were a fighter-type class or possessed a lot of fighting skills, you'd probably be given a trial to slay a certain number of monsters, and if you were a crafter, you'd probably be given a trial to create something.

"Do we *have* to be reborn if we complete the trial?" I asked.

"No, it's not compulsory. If you don't wish for the beast factor, you will be given a means to strengthen yourself as you are."

Did that mean we would receive bonus points? In that case, it'd be a good idea to accept the trial.

"What happens if we fail?" Akari asked.

"There is no way to fail. The deity will always be waiting for you."

So there was no penalty for accepting and not finishing it.

"Can we choose what type of factor we receive?" I asked.

"Yes, but you may also leave it up to the will of the deity."

"Huh? Th-Then it can be randomized? D-Does that mean I could become a rare race?"

"No, that won't happen. The god looks at the actions the individual has taken so far and bestows the most fitting factor for them."

Dang, it would have been awesome if there were a rare species that you could only get by choosing to be assigned one randomly. Disappointingly enough, that wasn't the case.

"If you have the determination to undertake the trial, you may touch the idol."

"O-Okay."

I followed what the tiger man said and touched the statue of the Beast Deity.

"Do you wish to take on a trial?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Here is your trial."

Beast Deity Trial

Requirement: Offer three monster materials with a rarity of 6 or higher.
Reward: Beast factor, or five bonus points.
Time Limit: None.

"Huh? Hey, this is a combat quest!"

"Well, Yuto, you *are* a Tamer," Akari pointed out.

"Technically, you're a fighter class," KTK said in agreement.

Oh yeah, that's true! I am a fighter, even if just barely!

"Silver-Haired? Will you choose to be reborn? As a cat human, maybe?" KTK asked.

"Nah, I don't think so."

"I don't plan on doing it either, but those five bonus points sound pretty nice," Akari said.

"Yeah, you said it. But completing this trial is gonna be difficult."

My Flame Jewel had a rarity of six, but I didn't want to let go of that. Though I could probably find more in Zone Eleven, so maybe it was fine to offer it.

"Well anyway," I continued, "we can't leave the village until everyone comes back, so why don't we take a look around?"

"Great idea!" Akari said excitedly. "We're in a new area! Let's explore!"

"I wonder if they have any cat merch?" KTK said.

And so, we walked around the Beast Hybrid Village of Zone Eleven, buying up all kinds of items as we did.

After I was finished looking around, I killed time by making Reflet a bunch of different types of seafood, as I had promised, then hanging out and having tea with my monsters. Although, Reflet wasn't satisfied with the ingredients I had on hand, so I would have to make her more food sometime soon.

Oh, and the Curse Man had given basically the same reward as the Shadow Man had. No items, but a lot of money. That must be the norm with the demon's underlings.

"So I'm assuming the Curse Man was the 'higher-ranked minion' that was mentioned in the second video?" Akari said.

"Oh yeah, you're probably right."

The second cryptic cutscene of the demon and his subordinate put out by the devs had implied that even stronger minions would start to appear. That must have meant that we had entered the second phase of the event. Did that imply that there were more Curse Man enemies popping up in other areas too? Well, I was glad we had defeated it in any case.

A raid battle against the main demon himself was probably awaiting us at the end of this event. Nearly all of the strong demon enemies that had appeared so far had been raid bosses, after all.

Once we were ready, we joined back up with Kokuten and made our way back to Yellow City. But when we got there...

"Whoa. What's going on...?"

The entrance to the city was like a madhouse. The area was crowded with players. Thankfully, the space expanded to account for the number of players, so at least it wasn't so crowded that it was impossible to move. The only possible explanation was that people had rushed here after hearing the server-wide announcement about the new zone being unlocked.

Although, I seemed to remember that announcement only mentioning that Zone Eleven had been unlocked... How did people find out it had to do with Yellow City?

After we walked a few steps, players swiftly moved aside to open a path for us. They were *really* staring at us! Wait, did they find out that we were among the ones to unlock the zone? No, never mind. I remembered how much people had been staring at us when we first set out together too. I knew I would think something was up if I saw Holland, Kokuten, and KTK going somewhere together.

As we walked forward, enduring the pressure of the gazes around us, we saw the person we were here to meet.

"Yuto! Over here!" shouted Alyssa.

"Ah, thanks. What a crowd, huh?"

"It sure is. Heh heh heh."

She's beaming! She was ever the portrait of a greedy merchant.

"Let's keep moving! This way!"

"Alyssa, wait! Slow down!"

"Come on, pick up the pace!"

The reason we had returned to Yellow City was to sell what we had found out to the Quick-Eared Cats. I had contacted Alyssa ahead of time, but her energy right now was off the charts. With how quickly she was jogging, I felt like she was going to leave us in the dust. Wasn't she a little *too* excited? We still hadn't told her what kind of information we were here to sell. Though considering who was in our party, I guess she was expecting big things from us.

Right now, I was with Akari, Kokuten, Sawyer, Holland, and KTK. And although I had thought they wouldn't even need me here, for some reason, I was in the front. I didn't really consider myself at the bottom of the barrel anymore. After all, I had helped unlock a new zone! Plus with the second-wave players joining, there were certainly those who were ranked below me.

Was I a top player? No, that would be going too far. After having witnessed how Holland, Kokuten, Siegfried, and everyone else fought, I could never call myself a top player. An advanced player? That still sounded too good for me. I couldn't imagine myself being among the advanced players. But maybe I had risen to the middle ranks? I had at least progressed to the point where I could get a pass for lecturing a newbie Tamer about the game like a glorified know-it-all, right?

Even if that were true, it was still odd for me to be acting as the representative of a group filled with all these all-star players... Well, I guess I was the one who triggered the quest, so maybe it wasn't all that weird. But then why wasn't Akari leading our group? Why was she all the way in the back?!

Alyssa led us to a reception room and had only me sit down on the sofa. *I* am *being treated as the leader!*

"All right, let's hear what you have to tell me."

"Right, where to begin?"

"Tell me everything! From start to finish!"

"U-Um, okay."

I looked to the rest of my group, and they nodded. We had already discussed things beforehand, so I wasn't asking if it was okay to tell Alyssa everything. I was checking to see if someone else

wanted to take over in my stead. But as I had expected by this point, I would have to be the one to explain everything to Alyssa.

"Okay, I'll start from when Akari and I were searching for a yokai and met Weris."

"Weris?"

"She's a wolf-human NPC."

"Really? Do you have a screenshot? Tell me you have a screenshot."

"Y-Yeah, I do."

Alyssa, don't bring your face so close to mine! I can practically feel your breath!

"Here it is."

"She's so cute! So, did she lead you to some sort of event?"

"Yeah, pretty much. She brought us to the beast hybrids' hidden village."

"A hidden village! Really? Y-You mean you discovered a whole new village?"

"Y-Yes."

Alyssa was being even more pushy than usual. It was a little unsettling.

"Oh, sorry. This'll take forever if I keep interrupting you. Continue."

"Okay, so this village..."

I explained how all the inhabitants were animal-human hybrids, how they claimed it wasn't a hidden village but it was hidden behind a barrier, how the cave continued beyond the village and led to a raid boss, and how we were able to gather information right there in the village that we needed to defeat the boss.

I then disclosed what happened during the boss fight in detail. Man, it had really been a difficult fight. We had miraculously beat it on our first try, but we would have all died had it not been for our revive potions and our all-star party.

I also told Alyssa about the things that needed to be prepared ahead of time, like knowing how to make the traps and poison, and how to make use of the stalactites.

It took a while, but I explained everything from beginning to end

while showing her everyone's videos of the fight. I had asked Holland and Ashihana if they were really okay with me exposing their ultimate moves, but they said that they had already sold that information to the Cats.

Also, since everyone in the raid party had filmed the raid boss fight, I let Alyssa know that we were prepared to hand over all the footage as well. We were originally going to use them to analyze the fight, but they had unexpectedly turned into informational videos instead.

"That's everything that happened before we unlocked Zone Eleven."

"..."

Alyssa had her arms thrust up wide and was looking up at the ceiling, posing like she was on the cover of a certain Vietnam war movie. When I first started talking, she'd been in the Gendo pose, with her elbows on the table and her hands folded in front of her face. It was a pose I had seen her take before. But as I spoke, she gradually leaned back until she ended up in her current pose. And she was shaking.

"Huh? Alyssa?"

"Alyssa?"

"Um, are you all right, Alyssa?"

"Kitty, are you okay?"

"Wh-What's wrong with her?"

Kokuten, Akari, Sawyer, KTK, and Holland were bewildered by Alyssa's behavior. *Ha! This is exactly how she wants you to react!*

I thought she was going a little overboard charging up for her usual scream, but maybe she was doing this for the benefit of everyone else, not me. I could see how someone who didn't usually make use of the Cats' services would be caught off guard by this display. Even I, who was used to this sort of thing, was a bit startled.

"Wuh."

Oh! She's gonna do it!

"Wuhhh..."

"A-Alyssa, what's the matter?"

"Miss Informant? Is there a problem with your connection?"

Akari and Holland tried to approach Alyssa, when...

"WAAAAAH! I never saw this coming!"

"Eeep!"

"Whoa!"

"Jeez!"

"...!"

"Ack!"

Another stellar act! Akari and Holland, who were on both sides of her, exclaimed in shock and fell on their backsides. Kokuten jumped, KTK's attached tail puffed up, and Sawyer let out a yelp. *Classic Alyssa. She can even throw top players for a loop!*

"*Pant pant pant...* Sorry, I lost myself for a second."

"I-It's okay. I mean, are *you* okay, Alyssa?" Kokuten asked.

"H-Heh. Yeah, this always happens."

"I-It does?"

"Yep. I always scream like that when Yuto is involved... Hee hee, you can laugh if you want."

"No, that's all right. Just, um, thanks for all the hard work that you do."

"Yeah, thanks."

"Your efforts are appreciated."

"You've done great, Alyssa."

"We have a lot to thank you for."

Everyone expressed their appreciation for Alyssa. Mm-hmm, that role-play act *was* really well done! But we still had information to share with her. *Heh heh heh, you've gotten ahead of yourself, Alyssa!*

"Um, I still have more to tell you... And in a way, this next part is the biggest news."

"...?"

"After we made it to the village in Zone Eleven, an event triggered."

"...!"

Alyssa's face was going through all sorts of emotions. *Nice, I got a new reaction out of her! Some of the faces she's making are*

hilarious!

"And you'd never guess, it led to a quest to change races. Pretty neat, huh?"

"WAAAAAH! HE GOT ME AGAAAAIN!"

Whoa! Two screams in one day!

Online Forum [New Discoveries Galore!] A Discussion Thread for New Discoveries Made in LJO, Part 62

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.

788: Heartman
Aaahhh!
What the heck was that video?!

789: Formaggio
It's too much! I've got goose bumps! Everyone was going all out!
The part at the end when the knights on horseback went in for that suicide mission brought me to tears!
Dark Knight! I'll be a little nicer to you from now on!

790: Hendrickson
The part where the penguin gave a thumbs-up hit me hard!
With the sea being discovered, I bet more people will start looking for penguins.
Jeez, that video was so good.

791: Hiruma
That video even got *me* a little choked up! Those special attacks were amazing.
I used to think Holland was like a “hero (lol),” but maybe I’ll start treating him as a “hero (of light).”

792: Hamakaze
Yokai also had their moment in that fight!
BTW, I was a big fan of the part where Nyamun-chan died. I can’t believe I was so moved by that... It’s not fair! Singing is cheating!

793: Heartman
It looks like the Quick-Eared Cats mashed up a bunch of different videos to make that one video, but is it true they didn’t hide *anything*?

794: Hendrickson
Based on what the Cats said, yeah. In fact, not only did the video reveal a bunch of new information, but it pretty much showed everything you need to do to beat the raid boss.

795: Hiruma
The importance of revive potions, special attacks, traps, poison, the boss’s attack patterns, and how to finish it off.
That information alone is plenty valuable.

796: Formaggio
There were even some things that aren’t normally in the spotlight that got a lot of attention, like spellbooks, horses, and music.

797: Hamakaze
And yokai! Yokai played a huge part too!
Thank you, Silver-Haired!

798: Hiruma
Aren’t you Silver-Haired’s self-proclaimed rival? Are you really okay with the attention he’s getting? Do you not have the guts to find another way to unlock the new zone yourself?

799: Hamakaze
That’s irrelevant!
I can’t find something that can’t be found anyway! Do you have any idea how hard I’ve searched for one?!

800: Formaggio
Ah, so you already tried...

801: Hiruma
So not even you can find it?
Dang, I had high hopes for you...
Players have started doing errand quests all over the place. Everyone’s got the same idea.

802: Heartman
But aren’t those kind of impractical at this point? I know they’re steady, but still.
I guess the ideal situation is finding the hidden village myself, but I just don’t see that happening.

803: Hendrickson
I can’t sit around pulling weeds at this point in the game.

Isn’t there another way to earn kudos with NPCs?

804: Hiruma
I’ve heard that spontaneous quests related to NPCs give a decent boost to favorability.

805: Hendrickson
Like I could find that sort of quest! I’m not Silver-Haired!
And the fact that we can’t access that sort of data, meaning I don’t even know how high my favorability currently is, makes things even harder.

806: Hiruma
Pretty sure the fastest way would be to walk around with Silver-Haired so he could find it for you...

807: Heartman
Maybe if we all get on our hands and knees and beg?

808: Hiruma
Out of the question.
Not only could we get reported for breaking etiquette, the Defenders will punish us.

809: Formaggio
I’ve been doing a fair number of events and quests as I play, but I guess my favorability just isn’t high enough.
I must be overlooking something...

810: Hendrickson
The Verification Clan is taking the human wave tactic

approach and has recruited people to touch as many objects as they can.
They’re trying to find the illusion concealing the entrance to the secret village, but who knows if it’ll work...

811: Hamakaze
It isn’t working at all! It’s a huge area, and there are monsters!

812: Hiruma
Yeah, you’re right. And not having any hints or anything doesn’t help.

813: Fuka
Don’t expect any hints from me...

814: Hendrickson
One of the heroes has appeared among us!
Bow down!
bows

815: Heartman
You have my thanks.
bows

816: Formaggio
bows

817: Hiruma
bows

818: Hamakaze

bows

819: Fuka
Please stop!
I’m not Silver-Haired! I can’t answer your prayers!

820: Heartman
Does Silver-Haired answer prayers?
No, you’re right, he probably could!
I have complete trust in Lord Silver-Haired lololol

821: Hiruma
Is it trust, or piety?

822: Hamakaze
You really don’t have any clues, Fuka? Not even the tiniest little thing?

823: Fuka
If I knew, I would have triggered the event myself.
I’ve tried walking around everywhere too, but I just couldn’t trigger the event.
Touching objects didn’t do anything either.

824: Hendrickson
I knew it wouldn’t be that easy.

825: Fuka
Silver-Haired! Thank you for bringing me with you!
bows

826: Hiruma
I knew it, it’s piety.

827: Hamakaze
I'll pray if it means my prayers will be answered.

828: Fuka
Maybe instead of using our time to pray, we should be trying to increase our favorability with NPCs instead? I expect there's a good chance future events will be triggered based on favorability too.

829: Hijikata
This might have been answered already, but do I need a high favorability with NPCs for the event to unlock Zone Eleven?

830: Formaggio
Huh? Do you not look at the forums much?

831: Hijikata
No. I only started playing three days ago as part of my school club, so I still have a while to go until I reach Zone Eleven...
But I wondered if I should be actively befriending NPCs in case it turns out to be useful in the future.

832: Heartman
Gotcha.
Well, to get straight to the point: yes, you should definitely befriend them.

833: Hiruma
Honestly, first-wave players neglected doing that too much in favor of progressing the game.

834: Hendrickson
Though on looking back, management was subtly pointing us in that direction...

835: Heartman
Yeah, like the village event.
Those who interacted with NPCs had a clear advantage.

836: Formaggio
In conclusion! Be nice to NPCs!

837: Hijikata
Understood!
Should I be pulling weeds like everyone else seems to be doing?

838: Fuka
Yeah, you should do errand quests in the early game.
Then, once you've leveled up some, you can accept requests that correspond to your job class and skills.

839: Hijikata
So should I accept quests from the Tamers' Guild?
And maybe from the Farming Guild too?

840: Hamakaze
You're a Tamer *and* you farm?!
Wh-What's your starting monster?

841: Hijikata
An undine.

842: Fuka

Aw, bad luck!
I mean, you got an elemental monster, which is cool, but that’s still too bad!

843: Hamakaze
A gnome would have been the jackpot for you!

844: Hijikata
Huh? Are undines a bad pull?
She can heal and she’s cute, so I was happy about it...

845: Hendrickson
Ignore them. There’s no bad pull when it comes to starting monsters.
She’ll grow stronger as you level her up.

846: Hijikata
Oh, good.
I’ve decided that she and I are going to aim for the top!

847: Hiruma
S-So dazzling!
The innocent hope of a young man... It’s blinding!

848: Formaggio
The rest of us have been corrupted.
KTK is the top player in my job class. I’m pretty sure I don’t have any hope of ever surpassing her.

849: Hendrickson
I think it’s Holland for me.
Not happening!

850: Heartman
And for Tamers, that’d be Silver-Haired.

851: Hiruma
Impossible! End of discussion!

852: Formaggio
Well, wait.
Let’s not crush this newbie’s spirit.
I agree it’s probably not gonna happen, but we should be giving advice instead!

853: Hiruma
But...it’s Silver-Haired.

854: Hamakaze
In that case, I, as the top Onmyoji, shall give advice!

855: Fuka
Yeah, that’s the top Onmyoji for you!
You’re actually helpful, unlike these other guys!

856: Heartman
We just got dissed by the top Chef.

857: Fuka
Oh no, I’m not the top by a long shot. My cooking itself is pretty basic.
The reason I’ve gotten some more attention than the others is because I’m relatively better at fighting than the other Chefs.

858: Hendrickson

And that’s why people call you the Iron Chef.
But considering you’re balanced in fighting and crafting, wouldn’t you say that puts you among the top players?

859: Hiruma
Also, there are still fewer than ten Onmyoji. Aren’t there like eight or something?

860: Formaggio
The best of eight...

861: Hamakaze
Oh, hush!
The top is the top!
Also, there doesn’t have to only be one top player.

862: Heartman
The top crafter, top fighter, top in name recognition, and most liked.
You can be the top player in all sorts of categories.

863: Hamakaze
Yeah!
It might be hard to follow in Silver-Haired’s footsteps.
Walking such a tough road requires mental fortitude!

864: Hiruma
S-Spoken like someone who knows what she’s talking about!
I wouldn’t exactly call it a tough road, though.

865: Fuka
But you know, there’s always the option of aiming to be the top Tamer by using a different approach from Silver-Haired.
Let’s think of ideas!

866: Hijikata
Um, is this Silver-Haired person the top Tamer?

867: Formaggio
What, do you live under a rock?

868: Hijikata
I-I’m sorry.
I just wanted to enjoy playing the game, so I didn’t learn anything about it beforehand.
But then I wondered if that was a bad idea, so I started reading through the forums today.

869: Hendrickson
Hmm. Now you’re talking like Silver-Haired.

870: Heartman
Well, let’s go ahead and brainstorm together.
I’m sure we can think of something that Silver-Haired and Amimin haven’t explored yet.

871: Formaggio
Oh right, I forgot about Amimin!

872: Hiruma
So it really is hopeless for the newbie, huh?

873: Fuka
No, it’s not!
The only true failure is giving up.
So, the first step is...

874: Hamakaze
...Is what?

875: Fuka
Praying to Silver-Haired.
Silver MVP!

876: Hiruma
Turning to god, I see!

877: Heartman
He’s not a god!

878: Fuka
He is to some people!
And this prayer gives you an amazing blessing!

879: Formaggio
A blessing?
You don’t just say it because you think it gives you good luck?

880: Hamakaze
W-Well, that’s pretty amazing too.
Wait, does it actually have an effect?

881: Fuka
It does more than boost luck.

By chanting this prayer, the Defenders will become a little nicer to us.

882: Hiruma
That is amazing!
Silver MVP.

883: Hamakaze
I’ll pray too!
Silver MVP.

884: Heartman
You don’t think they’ll get mad about this? It’s kind of overboard.
Oh well, I’ll join in anyway.
Silver MVP.

885: Hendrickson
Silver MVP.

886: Formaggio
Silver MVP.

887: Hijikata
Huh? Umm, Silver MVP?

[Assemble, Fans of Silver-Haired] All Things Silver-Haired-Related, Part 20

This thread is for people who are interested in Silver-Haired, the famously eccentric pioneer, and his monsters. Feel free to exchange information about them here.
Slander or abuse will not be tolerated.
Please treat sensitive information with care.
This thread may be deleted without warning should we receive a complaint from Silver-Haired himself.

288: Yang Yang
Another impressive feat.

289: visitorfromanotherplanet
You sound like a commentator.

290: Yodel-Ay-Hee
I get what you mean, though. Everyone who’s seen that video has been more or less saying the same thing.

291: visitorfromanotherplanet
Well yeah, you’re right. You can count me as one of those people.

292: Willow
Me too.

293: Yang Yang
So in other words, every player has become a Silver-Haired commentator!

294: Yodel-Ay-Hee
Everyone is both a Defender and a commentator.

295: visitorfromanotherplanet
I don’t think you’re entirely wrong, scarily enough LOL

296: Yang Yang
I haven’t seen that enormous of an explosion since the dinosaur event.
A video showing the strategy for a zone-unlocking battle...
That’s just too crazy.

297: Willow
But this feat wasn’t *solely* Silver-Haired’s.

298: visitorfromanotherplanet
Yeah, all those superelite players had a hand in it too.
We’re talking the Hero, the Monster Hunting Division, and KTK...
That lineup of players made me want to shout, “Run for it, raid boss!”

299: visitorfromanotherplanet
Those three always come up in discussions about who’s the strongest player in the game.

300: Willow

KTK hadn’t been seen around much recently, so there were rumors that maybe she had stopped playing.
But there she was, same as ever.

301: Yodel-Ay-Hee
The other members basically all had nicknames too. What a crazy team.
How’d they all end up together?

302: Yang Yang
Because of Silver-Haired.

303: Yodel-Ay-Hee
I almost agreed with you on reflex!

304: visitorfromanotherplanet
Annoyingly enough, you’re probably not entirely wrong.

305: Willow
I can’t see someone being able to turn down a request from Silver-Haired. He might really have been the one that assembled them all.

306: Yang Yang
See?! I told you Silver-Haired made this all happen!

307: Yodel-Ay-Hee
Why are you so happy about it?

308: visitorfromanotherplanet
You just want to say that this was Silver-Haired’s accomplishment.

309: Yang Yang
Yeah, so what?

310: visitorfromanotherplanet
Whoa there.

311: Yang Yang
Check the title of this thread!
This place is for *fans* of Silver-Haired, isn’t it?
Everyone here should want to sing his praises!

312: Willow
You’ve got a point!

313: Yodel-Ay-Hee
Ugh! I have no comeback!

314: visitorfromanotherplanet
I mean, if everyone thinks so, I don’t really have a problem with it...
More importantly, there was no black shadow in this video.

315: Yodel-Ay-Hee
I noticed that too.
With Silver-Haired’s luck and that superelite party, I wouldn’t have been surprised if they crushed a demon that showed up mid-raid.
Actually, maybe they just kept that part out?

316: Yang Yang
I can’t imagine Silver-Haired hiding information.

317: Willow
I couldn’t agree more.
Besides, a demon crashing in on an area-unlocking raid boss fight would have made the fight impossibly hard.

318: visitorfromanotherplanet
Everyone would’ve gone bonkers over that.

319: Yang Yang
Yeah, people would lose their minds if Silver-Haired and the All Stars couldn’t beat it.

320: visitorfromanotherplanet
Silver-Haired and the All Stars? Sounds like that could be the name of some old music group!

321: Yodel-Ay-Hee
Speaking of all stars, there’s a party of strong Tamers and Summoners who have teamed up to fight the shadow monsters.
There were quite a few famous players among them too.

322: Willow
They’re probably trying to progress the event to gain the rewards.
There are rumors it will lead to being able to get a demon as a monster.

323: visitorfromanotherplanet
Right, command classes should have a chance.
Either way, more players putting effort into that event is a good thing.

324: Yodel-Ay-Hee
Silver-Haired’s demon is a cutie.
I’d try if it meant getting one!

325: Yang Yang
And who do we have to thank for people being interested enough to progress that event? That’s right, Silver-Haired!

326: visitorfromanotherplanet
I knew you’d say that.

327: Willow
But I can’t say that’s wrong.
At the very least, he’s not completely uninvolved.

328: Yodel-Ay-Hee
The event itself has been pretty stagnant so far.

329: visitorfromanotherplanet
The cutscene made people pretty excited about it at first.
But the shadow monsters don’t drop any items when you kill them, and we already know they can’t be tamed.
So yeah, interest in it has been dropping.

330: Yang Yang
Fighting the shadows on the playing field is kind of annoying, I can’t deny that.
I’ve started ignoring them.

331: Yodel-Ay-Hee
But if it *is* possible to get a cute little demon at

some point during the event, then maybe there's a chance for us? I know Tame.

332: visitorfromanotherplanet
You mean it might be possible as long as you have the Tame skill?

333: Yang Yang
I acquired Tame too.
You make a good point... Maybe I'll get back out there and fight them?

334: Willow
It'd be pretty rad to have the same monster as Silver-Haired.

335: Yang Yang
Yeah! Based on how other events went, the more of these mob monsters we defeat, the more points we should get!

336: Yodel-Ay-Hee
Th-That makes sense!
I'm getting back out there too! It's demon-hunting tiiime!

337: Willow
Huh? I guess I'll go too...
A demon monster sounds like a powerful asset.
And there's no harm in racking up points!

338: Yang Yang
A cute, rare demon, just like Silver-Haired's!
I'm getting fired up!

339: visitorfromanotherplanet
If more people get that same idea, won’t that make the demons not rare anymore?

340: Yang Yang
Don’t talk like that!
C’mon! Let’s go get ’em!

341: Willow
Yeah!

342: Yodel-Ay-Hee
Wooooo!

343: visitorfromanotherplanet
Wait, I’m coming too!

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing the thirteenth volume of *A Late-Start Tamer.*

Look, there's an afterword again!

There were no misunderstandings this time! You see, my editors asked me outright to write an afterword. How cruel! They know I don't like writing afterwords!

And so, once again, I would like to bring in a special guest!

Please help poor me, trapped here in this Afterword Room hell!

"Chirp?"

That's right! It's Rick! Yuto's mascot-slash-guerrilla unit-slash-prank master! Though many of his monsters could be called pranksters!

He's the squirrel with the sparkly white incisors and bushy tail!

"Chirp chiiirp!"

Wow! Showing off your cuteness, are you? Yeah, wag that tail! You look right at home already! Amazing!

"Chirp chirp chirp!"

Now you're juggling nuts! Nice trick! Hey, Mr. President, check him out! He's the best in Japan!

"Chirp chiiirp!"

Whoa! Now you're juggling *five* nuts! Great technique! You could earn money doing this! You're awesome, Rick!

"Chiiirp."

That was some fine juggling.

"Chirp chirp."

Huh? What is it? Yes, your tiny hands are very cute.

"Chiiirp!"

Huh? Do you want me to read your palm? No? Don't tell me, are you asking for payment? You want me to give you something?

"Chirp."

Oh no! I wasn't expecting you to be so greedy! But you're cute, so you can get away with it!

But, you'll have to forgive me. This is Afterword Room hell. There's nothing here except my manuscript and my pen. I don't have a single thing to give you.

"Chiiirp!"

You want me to bring something in from outside of the room? Sorry. I can't leave here until I finish writing the afterword. If you'll just stay with me here a little longer—

"Chirp chiiirp!"

Whoa! Hey, don't throw nuts around inside here!

An acorn ricocheted off the wall and hit me in the butt! Oh no, my glasses are gonna get smashed!

"Chirp chirp!"

It's useless! These walls are indestructible! They were reinforced after Sakura destroyed them last time!

"Chirp chirp chiiirp!"

Uh-oh, a glowing walnut! We're screwed if that explodes in this tiny room!

"Chiiiirp!"

Gaaaaah! My clothes! My clothes are singed!

Oh, but now there's a hole in the wall! We can escape through there! Wooooo! Freedooom!

"Chirp."

Ah, right. I have to give you something now. How about some boiled peanuts? I can't get enough of them.

Aaand scene. Thanks to Rick for being the special guest this time.

Did you already figure out that I can only write as many afterwords as there are monsters? Yeah, my editors did too. I know what they're thinking. *We can let this guy stop writing afterwords after he's used all the monsters...*

It'd be nice if I didn't have to write one next time!

Now for a word of thanks.

To my editors, W-san and I-san. Thank you once again for all your help in the completion of this volume!

To Nardack-sama, your color illustrations were so gorgeous, they

moved me to tears!

To my friends and family, everyone involved in the publication of this volume, and the readers—it's thanks to your support that I can continue to write. I truly thank you.


A LATE-START
TAMER'S
LAID-BACK LIFE
13


Bear Bear
Nyamun
Yuto
Olto
Redbud
Rais


"Honk honk hooonk!"
"Hum-hummm!"
"Wait, I really don't wanna jump into that murky water!"







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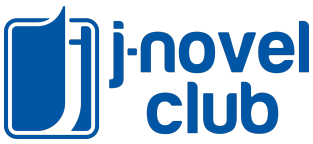
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A Late-Start Tamer's Laid-Back Life: Volume 13
by Yuu Tanaka

Translated by A.M. Cola Edited by Diana Taylor

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