YUUMIKAN

Illustration by KOIN

16



Bofuri

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

Welcome to New World Online.


Bofuri
I Don't Want to Get Hurt, so I'll Max Out My Defense.
MISERY
Misery's STATS
Lv90
HP 335/335
MP 485/485
[STR 10]
[VIT 55]
[AGI 50]
[DEX 30]
[INT 150]
MARX
Marx's STATS
Lv90
HP 560/560
MP 620/620
[STR 20]
[VIT 50]
[AGI 30]
[DEX 150]
[INT 70]




In a new hidden area...
"I wouldn't be surprised if there are unique items we can only find here."
"All right, I'm pumped!"


“Toxic Fission!”
Testing a new skill...





Equipment

God's Blessing / Sign of a Saint / Saint's Robe
Steps for Salvation / Doctrine of Salvation
Overflowing Life / Bonding Bridge

MISERY'S STATS

Misery

Lv90 HP 335/335
MP 485/485
[STR 10] [VIT 55]
[AGI 50] [DEX 30]
[INT 150]

MARX'S STATS

Marx

Lv90 HP 560/560
MP 620/620
[STR 20] [VIT 50]
[AGI 30] [DEX 150]
[INT 70]

Equipment

Crafting Tool / Trapper's Cloak
Magician's Tome
Bracelets / Bonding Bridge

Bofuri

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Illustration by KOIN

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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NewWorld Online.

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Bofuri I Don’t Want to Get Hurt, so I’ll Max Out My Defense., Vol. 16
YUUMIKAN

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Afterword



NewWorld Online Status

GUILD **Maple Tree**

NAME **Maple** LV **76**

HP 200/200 MP 22/22



PROFILE

The Tankiest Great Shielder

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

STATUS

STR 000 VIT 20730 AGI 000

DEX 000 INT 000

EQUIPMENT

- New Moon: Hydra
- Bonding Bridge
- Night's Facsimile: Devour/Lure of the Deep
- Black Rose Armor: Saturating Chaos
- Toughness Ring
- Life Ring

SKILLS

Shield Attack, Sidestep, Deflect, Meditation, Taunt, Inspire, HP Boost (S), MP Boost (S), Heavy Body, Green's Grace, Great Shield Mastery X, Cover Move V, Cover, Pierce Guard, Counter, Quick Change, Absolute Defense, Moral Turpitude, Sheep Eater, Hydra Eater, Bomb Eater, Indomitable Guardian, Giant Killing, Psychokinesis, Fortress, Martyr's Devotion, Machine God, Bug Urn Curse, Zone Freeze, Pandemonium I, Heaven's Throne, Nether Nexus, Crystallization, Cataclysmic Eruption, Unbreakable Shield, Twisted Resurrection, Earth Wielding II, Apex of Authority, Glow of Deliverance, Dark Rebirth, Ancient Ocean

TAMED MONSTER

Name **Syrup** — A turtle with high defense

Giganticize, Spirit Cannon, Mother Nature, etc.

Welcome to *NewWorld Online.*

6892 1179 0606 0847

NewWorld Online Status

GUILD **Maple Tree**

NAME **Sally** LV **80**

HP 32/32 MP 130/130



PROFILE

The Unhittable Assassin

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

STATUS

STR 155 VIT 000 AGI 200
DEX 045 INT 060

EQUIPMENT

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

SKILLS

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

TAMED MONSTER

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

Fleeting Shadow, Shadow Clone, Binding Barrier, etc.

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Welcome to *NewWorld Online*.

NewWorld Online Status

GUILD **Maple Tree**

NAME **Chrome** LV **94**

HP 940/940 MP 52/52



PROFILE

The Unstoppable, Unyielding Zombie Tank

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

STATUS

STR 150 VIT 200 AGI 040

DEX 030 INT 020

EQUIPMENT

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

SKILLS

Thrust, Elemental Blade, Shield Attack, Sidestep, Deflect, Great Defense, Taunt, Bulwark, Impregnable Stance, Iron Body, Guardian, Heavy Body, HP Boost (L), HP Recovery Speed Boost (L), Cover, MP Boost (L), Green's Grace, Great Shield Mastery X, Defense Mastery X, Cover Move X, Multi-Cover, Pierce Guard, Counter, Guard Aura, Defensive Formation, Guardian Power, Great Shield Secrets X, Defense Secrets X, Burn Nullification, Stun Nullification, Paralyze Nullification, Poison Nullification, Sleep Nullification, Freeze Nullification, Mining IV, Gathering VII, Shearing, Swimming V, Diving V, Spirit Light, Indomitable Guardian, Battle Healing, Reaper's Mire, Crystallization, Stimulation

TAMED MONSTER

Name **Necro** An armor monster that really shines when worn

Polterguard, Impact Reflection, etc.

Welcome to *NewWorld Online.*

NewWorld Online Status

GUILD **Maple Tree**

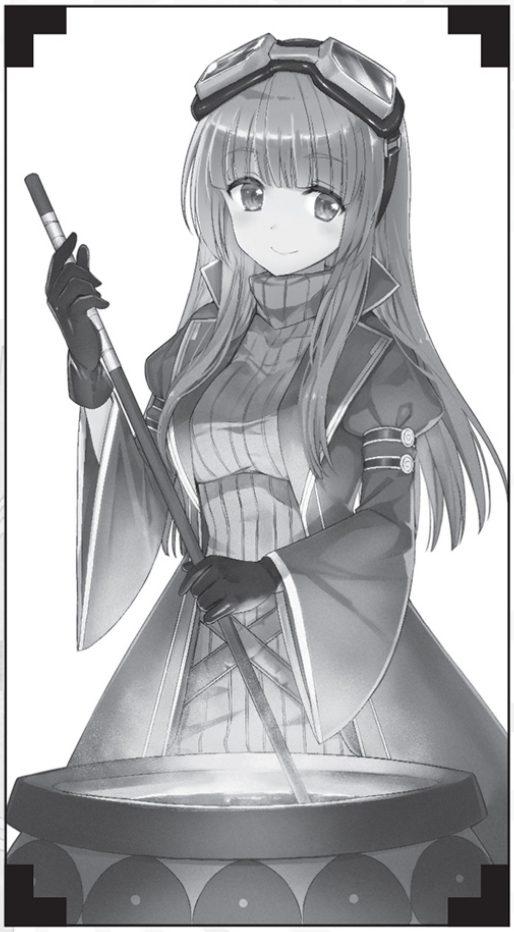
NAME **Iz** LV **78**

HP 100/100 MP 100/100

PROFILE

The Ultimate Crafter

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



STATUS

STR 045 VIT 025 AGI 105
DEX 210 INT 085

EQUIPMENT

- Blacksmith Hammer X
- Alchemist Goggles: Faustian Alchemy
- Alchemist Long Coat: Magic Workshop
- Blacksmith Leggings X
- Alchemist Boots: New Frontier
- Potion Pouch
- Item Pouch
- Bonding Bridge

SKILLS

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

TAMED MONSTER

Name **Fey** — A spirit that helps with item creation

Item Boost, Recycle, etc.

Welcome to NewWorld Online.

NewWorld Online Status

GUILD **Maple Tree**

NAME **Kasumi** LV **90**

HP 435/435 MP 70/70



PROFILE

The Solitary Sword Dancer

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

STATUS

STR 210 VIT 080 AGI 130

DEX 030 INT 030

EQUIPMENT

- Yukari, the All-Consuming Blight
- Cherry Blossom Barrette
- Cherry Blossom Vestments
- Edo Purple Hakama
- Samurai Greaves
- Samurai Gauntlets
- Gold Obi Fastener
- Cherry Blossom Crest
- Bonding Bridge

SKILLS

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

TAMED MONSTER

Name **Haku** — A white snake that ambushes foes from the mist

Supergiant · Paralytoxin · etc.

Welcome to *NewWorld Online.*

NewWorld Online Status

GUILD **Maple Tree**

NAME **Kanade** LV **68**

HP 335/335 MP 250/250



PROFILE

The Whimsical Genius Mage

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

STATUS

STR 015 VIT 010 AGI 125
DEX 080 INT 205

EQUIPMENT

- Divine Wisdom: Akashic Records
- Diamond Newsboy Cap X
- Smart Coat X
- Smart Leggings X
- Smart Boots X
- Spade Earrings
- Mage Gloves
- Bonding Bridge

SKILLS

Magic Mastery VIII, Fast Chant, MP Boost (L), MP Cost Down (L), MP Recovery Speed Boost (L), Magic Boost (L), Green's Grace, Fire Magic VIII, Water Magic VIII, Wind Magic X, Earth Magic V, Dark Magic III, Light Magic VIII, Swimming V, Diving V, Sorcerer's Stacks, Technical Archive, Reaper's Mire, Magic Meld

TAMED MONSTER

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

Mimic, Divide, etc.

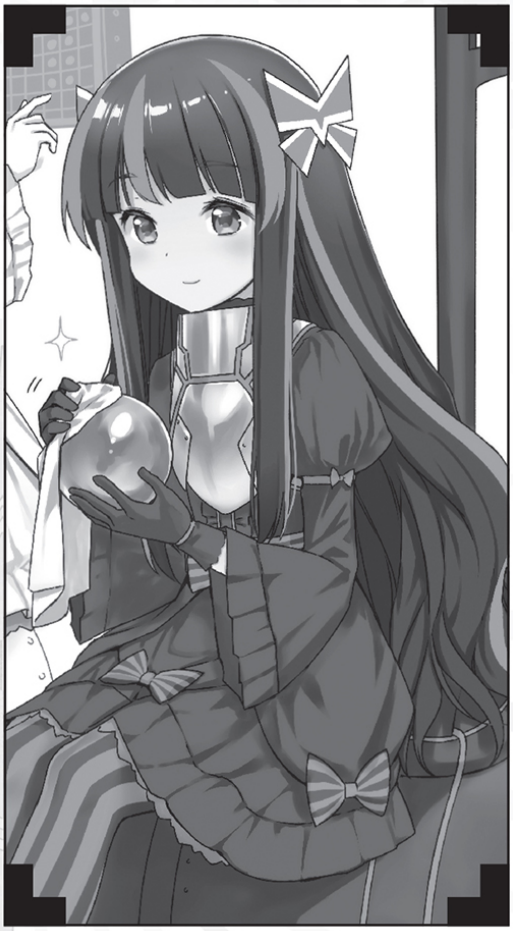
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NewWorld Online Status

GUILD **Maple Tree**

NAME **Mai** LV **62**

HP 35/35 MP 20/20



PROFILE

Conquerer Twin

A beginner player with an extreme attack build, she and her younger twin sister, Yui, were scouted by Maple. She does her best to help everyone out. The twins have the highest DPS in the game and crush nearby enemies with a unique style of wielding eight hammers.

STATUS

STR 535 VIT 000 AGI 000

DEX 000 INT 000

EQUIPMENT

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

SKILLS

Double Stamp, Double Impact, Double Strike, Attack Boost (L), Hammer Mastery X, Hammer Secrets III, Throw, Farshot, Weapon Hurl, Conqueror, Annihilator, Giant Killing, Destroy Mode, Titan's Lot

TAMED MONSTER

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

Power Share, Bright Star, etc.

Welcome to *NewWorld Online.*

5272 0557 2241 2738

NewWorld Online Status

GUILD **Maple Tree**

NAME **Yui** LV **62**

HP 35/35 MP 20/20

PROFILE

Annihilator Twin

A beginner player with an extreme attack build, she and her older twin sister, Mai, were scouted by Maple. She's more positive than Mai and quicker to recover. The twins have the highest DPS in the game and take out distant enemies by sending specially made iron balls flying with a swing of their hammers.



STATUS

STR 535 VIT 000 AGI 000

DEX 000 INT 000

EQUIPMENT

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

SKILLS

Double Stamp, Double Impact, Double Strike, Attack Boost (L), Hammer Mastery X, Hammer Secrets III, Throw, Farshot, Weapon Hurl, Conqueror, Annihilator, Giant Killing, Destroy Mode, Titan's Lot

TAMED MONSTER

Name **Yukimi** — A bear monster with distinctive white fur

Power Share, Bright Star, etc.

Welcome to *NewWorld Online.*



Prologue

The tenth event had compressed time to allow for a massive war between two opposing factions. Maple Tree teamed up with Pain's guild, the Order of the Holy Sword, for an intense fight against the allied forces of Flame Empire, Thunder Storm, and Rapid Fire.

For a long while they flexed at each other, picked off opponents here and there, stared each other down—and when the fighting finally started, both sides lost a lot of players. Shin, Misery, Dread, and Drag were all eliminated. These losses forced both sides to rework their plans as the first day drew to a close.

Everyone wanted time to rest and recover that night—which made it the perfect opportunity for sneak attacks.

Thunder Storm and Rapid Fire led a blitz attack, laying a trap to take Maple out while her skill Indomitable Guardian was still on cooldown. They were one step away from success—but Sally had sworn to keep Maple safe no matter what, and she stood in their way. The events of that night may well have decided the outcome of the war. Maple's side decided to use her lack of Indomitable Guardian as bait, luring out their enemy. This cost Maple's side dearly, but it paid off—they got rid of Marx, a key figure in their foe's defenses. Meanwhile, Maple and Sally's flawless combo play proved a match for Velvet and her partner, Hinata, when they eliminated the pair.

Advantages began to stack up, bringing the victory closer, yet the outcome never appeared predictable. Mii and Velvet abandoned their defenses, turned the tables, and launched an assault on their opponent's castle. The match became a race—and it came down to the wire. Either side could have reached its opponent's throne room

first. But Maple Tree's members bought just enough time. Maple's Dark Rebirth transformed her allied players into monsters, helping her side break through the lines and reach the throne room first. The fighting was fierce—but the victory belonged to Maple and her allies.

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The tenth event had been a hard-fought battle, but a week after it ended, *NewWorld Online* had settled back into a relaxing routine.

Some players threw themselves back into ninth-stratum quests, while others kicked back, exploring like sightseers.

And there were those who were specifically chasing skills they'd found themselves lacking during the previous event.

In other words, normal play resumed.

At the Maple Tree Guild Home, Iz handed a mountain of white dishes over to Maple, who moved to set the table.

"Party time!"

"This took longer than I thought."

"Yeah…but that's understandable."

There were good reasons they hadn't thrown this party sooner.

As Maple Tree's members filed in, two of those reasons poked their heads in the door—Velvet and Hinata.

"Yo, what up?!"

"We're here."

"Oh, already?"

"Hmm? Are we, like, first?"

"Yep! I'm sure the others will be here soon!"

Maple escorted the arrivals to their chairs and waited for the other invited guests.

This was why they'd delayed the party. If they wanted Thunder Storm, Rapid Fire, Flame Empire, and the Order's members to attend—well, they'd had to find a date that worked for everyone.

It was a stroke of luck that scheduling had only taken a week.

The door opened again, and in came Rapid Fire's leaders.

"Hi, thanks for having us."

"That was one intense event. Well played, everyone."

"Have a seat anywhere you like!"

"Sounds good."

Lily and Will moved over toward Velvet, and they all got to talking. They'd been in opposite castles at the event's end, so they had plenty to share about those final moments.

Then eight more guests entered—the leaders of the Order and Flame Empire, respectively. The Order had been on Maple Tree's side. They would have loved to invite the whole guild to this party, but there was a limit to how many people could fit inside Maple Tree's Guild Home. They had limited themselves to the players on their friends lists.

Representing their guilds, Pain and Mii stepped forward.

"Maple, you made this victory possible. I'm glad we were allies."

"We'll win the next one! No matter what format it is."

"Everyone's motivated!"

Maple greeted them cheerfully, led them to their seats, and then Iz started bringing food to the table. The event was the main topic—everyone had thoughts and opinions they wanted to express.

"Still—this is quite a guest list."

"Yeah, though I do get why."

Chrome and Kasumi were looking around, murmuring to each other. Everyone there either led a key guild or was a core member of one.

Anyone seriously gunning for Maple would naturally be among the game's best players. And since she had a habit of making friends with those she'd fought, Maple's friends list was made up of heavy hitters.

"I really did think Mii and Velvet would power through."

"Ha-ha, Pain's every bit as bad," Drag said, as if boasting about himself.

Shin shook his head, like it was a lost cause. "Splinter Sword alone wasn't enough."

"That attack after Multi-Transfer is legitimately dangerous. If my Resurrect hadn't gone off in time, we'd have been finished there."

"Get caught anywhere in its path, and you're dust. Pure violence."

Shin winced at the memory. With everyone's buffs transferred to him, Pain had ignored all the Splinter Swords, unleashing the full might of his holy blade.

The light of that attack had been every bit as powerful as Mii's fires and Velvet's lightning; the damage was far greater than Flame Empire had believed possible. But there was a reason for that—the format of the event had allowed an unprecedented number of buff transfers. Normally, there was a much lower cap on a player's "allies." Multi-Transfer was Frederica's skill, but even she'd never seen it do anything like that much damage.

"If we'd just pulled off a win *somewhere*, it would have changed everything! So damn frustrating!"

"True. It was a very close call. If I could have held out a few minutes longer…"

"You held out long enough, Lily."

"Velvet's assault was formidable."

The daytime clash, the midnight surprise attack, and the final castle siege.

If any one thing had been changed, they might have crowned a different victor.

Maple's side had seized the advantage by the skin of their teeth and escaped by a hair's breadth. That's how narrow a victory it had been.

As they talked, an idea struck Velvet—she wheeled around to face Sally.

"Oh damn! I have, like, so many questions for you, Sally!"

"For me?"

"Your new moves! How do they work?"

Velvet was talking about Sally's tricky combat strategies—seeming to cancel her skills midaction, unleashing invisible attacks, altering the visible effects, and transforming the very weapons she wielded. It had been some pretty insane stuff.

"You got me good!" Shin said. "You don't…*really* have Kasumi's skill, right?"

These tricks had given Sally enough of an edge to take out Shin,

Hinata, *and* Wilbert—yet even seen up close, and observed from the viewing chamber afterward, they'd remained a mystery.

"Obviously, that's classified."

"We'll have to work it out in combat, then!"

"I've got first dibs!" Frederica yelled.

"What say you, Will? Think you can coax it out of her?"

"It's worth a try."

Sally wouldn't even resort to such deceptive techniques unless she was well and truly cornered.

Velvet, Frederica, and Wilbert each had skills that *should* put Sally at a distinct disadvantage. But turning the tables on *their countermeasures* was her whole thing.

"Sally…"

"Y-you're so popular!"

"Ah-ha-ha, maybe I should make a waiting list for duels."

"People might start sending official challenges."

"Yeah, that's pretty much what this is."

"I wouldn't want to go against her."

Watching from the observation room, Kasumi and Mai had said as much—Sally was now every bit as dangerous as Maple herself.

In practice, Maple tended to overshadow her friend with sheer spectacle, so Sally was only just starting to make a name for herself.

Everyone in Maple Tree was a threat. Especially Maple. That had been the standard evaluation, but now "especially" applied to Sally as well. Against human opponents, she had none of Maple's weaknesses and might actually be the more worrisome foe.

"The Order clearly have our work cut out for us. There are more and more guilds out there that are not to be trifled with."

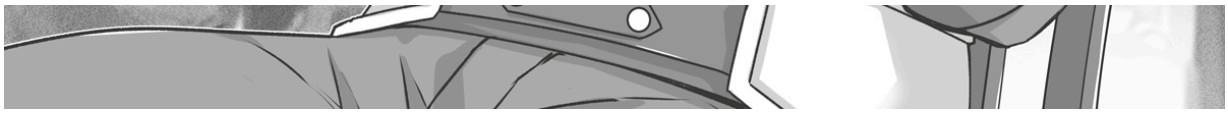
"Mm-hmm. Gotta scout them out."

"Same with Flame Empire. We cannot afford to rest on our laurels."

"True. We couldn't stave them off as we'd hoped. And there are other guilds worth looking into."

Pain and Mii were both guild masters, and this event had taught them both a lot. Their guilds' standings had shifted considerably since the fourth event, and actual PvP made that clearer than ever.





Maple Tree in particular—but guilds like Thunder Storm and Rapid Fire were catching up quickly as well. Neither Pain nor Mii planned to go down without a fight.

But that would have to wait for the next event. The information game was vital—but the goal was always to have *fun*.

The postmortem was still going strong. People asking themselves: If we'd done this there—if only that had gone better—what exactly did that skill do?

The event had been barely longer than a full day but absolutely packed with action, and the well of conversation about it would not soon run dry.

No one could be in every battle. Much was unknown about the smaller skirmishes—and finding out more details caught everyone's interest.

As the conversation between guilds raged on, Sally came over to Maple.

"Well? How'd you like PvP this time?"

"Everyone's so strong! It was really hard. But I'm glad I could help you and the rest of Maple Tree!"

Maple's expression and words were candid—she'd enjoyed herself, even the challenges.

"You're the one who bought us this victory. Dark Rebirth pushed us through."

"That only worked because everyone was on board!"

"And you met their expectations."

"Yeah!"

The victory itself was memorable, but no less than what they'd gone through to earn it.

All of that fun had left a smile on Maple's face that had Sally smiling back.

◆□◆□◆□◆□◆

Ultimately, Sally set up a duel rotation. Meanwhile, Maple decided to

look forward to the next event and the upcoming tenth stratum. If either needed help, they promised to be there for one another—and with that, the party wound to a close.

"Cleanup's easy—I just gotta dump stuff in my inventory!"

"A big advantage over the real world."

Maple was wiping the table clean, and Sally handled the decorations.

And thanks to the panel on the guild wall, the chairs were soon stowed away.

"It feels so quiet now!"

"We had *that* many guests. Four more than last time!"

With cleanup completed, Maple Tree turned their attention to the next map—the tenth stratum.

"It should come online before the next event."

"Yeah, and there are lots of ninth-stratum quests left untouched. I'd better look them over."

"They pretty much always give us a new stratum after a big event, so I bet there are undiscovered areas on previous maps, too."

"They're all so vast! And each new map is bigger than the last."

"Places like the eighth stratum are hard to really dig into."

"Tsukimi's made it a lot easier, but still…"

Hidden events. Rare dungeons. Undiscovered skills and items sleeping here and there.

Complex discovery conditions meant they'd never find anything special while playing normally. No one would be surprised if every stratum still had multiple secrets left behind.

"Gotta use our downtime to look around. We showed off every trick we'd been keeping hidden, after all."

"True. If we've got the same skills next time, they won't work as well against our opponents."

It had been a long time since the fourth event, and everyone had stockpiled new skills. However, they'd been forced to put them all in play.

Post-event, every player was looking for new ways to improve. And there was only one way to do that: explore.

Getting ready for the next event also meant grinding levels and

gathering materials.

Skills were critical, but basic stats could not be ignored.

Each player explored in their own way, hitting both untapped areas and familiar areas that seemed like they might have more. Even with no event looming, there was no shortage of things to do.

The guild members discussed plans, then headed out to the fields or towns, enjoying the game however they wanted.

"What are you doing next, Sally?"

"I could do with some leveling up. I'm happy with my skill set, so not trying to force anything else. And I did just get another medal."

"Right! That event gave us all one."

"That is technically what events are for."

But this one hadn't brought them straight to a medal exchange point.

Just as they were discussing this, a message from the developers arrived.

"Oh, a message!"

"The tenth stratum and an event? Both seem a little early. Let's see…"

"The new map will be a summary of what came before. Sections matching themes from each stratum, filled with hints to dungeons and hard-to-find spots. Nice."

"That's gotta be massive, then. And look here!"

Sally pointed at a line reading, "'Find and defeat the hidden super-boss!'"

"Not the usual boss we have to clear to reach the new map, then?"

"I don't think so. It says there are hints hidden in quests."

"A super-boss… That sounds hard…"

"We've gotta find it first. Not that it's been implemented yet…but knowing how this game works, we may not *ever* find it."

"We'll have to look hard!"

"Yeah, let's get all of Maple Tree on it."

"Um, as for the event…they're working on both PvP and PvE stuff."

"No real details here. I guess that's why we can't exchange

medals yet.”

The medal exchange would open when the tenth stratum came online. And exploring the new map would be like exploring all previous stratums at once. It would be a great way to figure out what their builds lacked and nab what they needed from the medal skill list.

“This could take a while.”

“True!”

It was a long way off but worth planning for. Their next goal was set in stone.

“I’m sure they’ll tell us more later, so I’m gonna go grind those levels. Wanna join me?”

“Sure!”

“Okay. Then let’s move out. I’ve already got a good grind spot picked out!”

“Nice! Sally delivers!”

“You bet I do.”

The pair headed out into the field.



CHAPTER 1

Defense Build and Routine

That night, after she and Kaede finished grinding, Risa logged out and stretched.

"Hmm…it's starting to get cold out."

It had only *just* been summer, yet here was winter, knocking on the door.

Would there be another Christmas event? Or a New Year's theme?

Risa spared no further thought for the future.

"Better get in the bath."

She wanted to warm herself up before bed. With that in mind, she went downstairs.

Time passed, and the days grew colder. Changes hit *NewWorld Online*, too.

"Snow!"

"That it is."

Maple and Sally were looking up, watching the flakes fall.

December had brought snow to each area.

This wasn't a big event—the developers hadn't numbered it—but it was common for the game to add seasonal monsters with drops that players could gather to trade for something better.

Snow was falling on *all* nine layers.

"It'll keep snowing until Christmas. Parts of the eighth stratum's water have frozen over."

"Does that make it easier to explore?"

"But that also means you can't dive in those places. Pros and

cons.”

“Makes sense.”

That aside, their goal was to chill out and grind for some drops. It was worth it. If they logged in daily and killed a few monsters, they’d easily have enough to exchange seasonal items for something good.

Naturally, no medals were available among the prizes. But there were potions and materials, gold, and limited costumes. Last but not least, guilds could obtain items that boosted the stats of *all* members. Playing was a must.

For that reason, Maple and Sally were heading out on the ninth stratum’s fields.

The snow event drops were on every floor, which meant the monsters weren’t especially tricky; they’d deemed it best to tackle them on the ninth stratum, where the fields were easily navigated and the XP was plentiful for leveling up.

They met up at the town exit and found the twins there waving at them.

“Maple!”

“Over here!”

“Mai, Yui! Ready to go?”

“Yep! Tsukimi!”

“Yukimi!”

“All aboard!”

The twins had their bears use Giganticize, and Sally and Maple climbed on. Then they raced out across the field.

“You know our destination, right?”

“We’re headed there now!”

The twins made sure the bears knew where to go. Their pets could only carry two players each, but this was still much faster than using Syrup—a pet that was never actually meant to fly. Running was intended bear behavior, so this was as it should be.

The four of them soon reached a dangerous zone. Unpredictable plumes of fire meant the ground and air could both hurt players.

“This place has high spawn rates…but is not without its drawbacks. If I use water magic, I can tame the fires momentarily, but…”

Everyone knew what Sally meant.

“This is a job for me!”

Maple activated Martyr’s Devotion, keeping everyone safe.

The ground might be on fire, and fire might fall from above, but Maple’s defense was stronger.

“Mm-hmm, we’re good!”

“Thank you!”

“Now we can plunge in!”

“If you take fixed damage, turn right back.”

Fires were one thing; lava was another. Molten rock had proven to be Maple’s Achilles’ heel in the past.

All three stepped forward—and the fires responded, popping up all around. Some fireballs had red eyes and were headed their way.

“We’ll bait them—you two do the rest.”

“”Okay!””

Mai and Yui put the bears back in their rings and equipped themselves with eight hammers each.

“Oceanic!”

“Taunt!”

Water spread out, dousing the fires, and all the monsters rushed toward Sally, trying to stop her.

Maple’s Taunt drew monsters from the other direction. They closed in, trying to take her out.

But they were all vaporized instantly by the twins’ hammers, which were glowing red and orbiting the party.

The glow came from Destroy Mode, which expanded the hammers’ hit boxes—they became an impenetrable death wall, preventing any monsters from drawing near.

Nothing even managed to land an attack. Where did the hammers hit? What type of monster? It didn’t matter! One hit meant death.

“Um, looks like we’re fine.”

“Keep them spinning as we advance!”

“We’ll draw in more monsters!”

“I’ve got more water skills, so you two continue clobbering. This zone’s not well known, and few people would come here without a defense like Maple, so we shouldn’t run into anyone—but keep an eye out.”

A tap from the spinning hammers might not count as friendly fire—and the knockback was prodigious.

There was no telling how far they’d fly, but it would not be a pleasant flight.

“Oh, there’s some drops!”

Items were hitting the ground beneath the pulverizing hammers.

Bright-red Santa hats.

The event-specific drop.

“We’ll grab those! You keep hammering!”

“Don’t worry about defense!”

“Okay!”

“Keep it going!”

Mai, Yui, and Maple—

Unless a monster could strike their weakness, these three were preternaturally powerful fighters. If they could make the monsters come to them, then they could chew through foes like nobody’s business. It was safe to say no players in the game could kill things faster than the twins. All they needed was defense, someone to bait the monsters into coming toward them, and nobody to get in their way.

With all those conditions met, they were in their element. Sally went around scooping up the drops, one eye on the swirling hammer vortex.

“I’m getting used to it.”

“To the hammers or the hands?”

“Both.”

Helping Hands had been a source of fear for Sally, but seeing them so often had made their presence routine. She would never venture back to the sixth layer, but these spectral hands no longer

bothered her at all.

"You want one, Sally? I bet you'd make great use of it!"

"Er, um…I'll bear it in mind."

"Ready to help anytime!"

"Heh-heh, thanks."

They were on track to gather all the needed drops in one day. A deluge of Santa hats was falling from these shattering monsters.

They watched the twins' slaughter, impressed again by what a force they were.

The swirling hammers pulverized the flame-spurting monsters awhile longer, and when they had enough drop items, the four girls left the flame-belching danger zone behind.

"Such a crazy attack! You made short work of them."

"Only because you two were with us!"

"You got all the monsters running our way!"

No trash mobs could survive the twins' DPS. The developers couldn't exactly craft monsters with HP built for *their* attack.

As a result, grinding was a breeze, and they'd all gained a level. The Maple/Mai/Yui combo play was merciless.

Nothing could stop their devastation—unless hell froze over, and they ran into a creature that could break through Maple's defense *and* withstand the twins' attack.

"Should we call it a day?"

"Yeah. We've been taking breaks, but I'm pretty worn out."

"We didn't have to move much, which made it easy…"

"But we were there awhile."

Sally's entire Water Wielding skill tree had lured monsters to them, so she'd kept that coming.

Halfway through, she and Maple had pulled out chairs and settled down, leaving the hammers spinning.

With Maple on their side, there could be no nasty surprises.

As they were wrapping up, Chrome and Kasumi came along.

"Oh, you're still here?"

"Well? How are things going?"

"Yep! Mai and Yui were insane!"

Maple told them how many drops they'd farmed—a number that made their eyes as big as saucers.

"I know I always say this…but having eight of those things is just ridiculous."

"We're still working on the fine control…"

"But moving them all together is easy-peasy!"

"That's more than enough."

Even a scratch made things explode. Fine control wasn't necessary. The hammers were *big*, and if they were all flung at an enemy—few things could dodge them.

"You grinding here? We were just about to take off."

"No, just passing by. Haku made it a short detour. And we found something neat, so we figured we'd let you know."

It was rare for Kasumi to report things like this. Finding neat things was all too often Maple's specialty.

But it wasn't like she actually *meant* to find them.

"You found Dark Rebirth past a portal, right? We found a similar transfer point."

"But the zone beyond it looked pretty lengthy, so we turned back."

"What was it like?"

Kasumi said it had been covered in gloomy vegetation. An ominous area, with murk a lot like Dark Rebirth's hanging around.

"That sounds promising!"

"Yeah, very."

A new area, bound to hold secrets, had the twins' eyes sparkling.

Chrome and Kasumi had just been following ninth-stratum quests while waiting for the new map when they stumbled across the portal. Since the hidden area looked pretty big, they'd decided it best to return with the whole guild.

"Well? Wanna have a big adventure before the tenth stratum gets here?"

"I'm in!"

"Let's send word to Iz and Kanade. If there's a trick to the place,

we may need their help.”

“Yeah. So first, we’ll need to align our schedules.”

“Mai, what kind of monsters do you suppose it’ll have?” Yui asked.

“I hope they’re not too speedy…,” Mai said worriedly in response.

“We’ll take care of that. You’re our main attackers! We’ll keep you busy.”

“”Great!””

They now had a goal beyond the new update. Mai and Yui had made it so they didn’t need to grind for drops anymore—so Maple Tree were free to focus on the hidden area they’d discovered.

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Later, all the Maple Tree members had gathered to explore the vast, dark forest before them.

“Really? Here?”

“We checked this area before the event and didn’t see any transfer circles.”

Maple and Sally looked baffled for a reason. The event map had been identical to the ninth stratum’s, so their guild had spent a lot of time scouting terrain, and they were quite familiar with it.

“Heh-heh-heh…for once, it isn’t Maple who stumbled across a secret.”

“There’s a specific path involved, and it was pure luck we discovered it.”

If even Sally had missed it, then this was not an area that typical play would get players to.

They’d need luck on their side.

“Kasumi and I triple-checked it, so we’re confident. Let’s get started. Maple—Martyr’s Devotion, please. There’s quite a few monsters here. Gonna be hard for me to protect all four of you at once.”

“You got it! Martyr’s Devotion!”

Light spread out around her, illuminating the forest gloom.

The skill doubled as a light source.

"No need for a lantern, huh?"

"And we don't have to worry about giving away our position."

Iz had taken out a lantern, but she put it back in her inventory.

She needed prep time to go on the offensive, while Kanade had burned through his stock of good grimoires in the event. They'd be on support duty on the way in.

This party had enough DPS to function without them.

Mai and Yui took the lead, with Kasumi and Sally right behind. Chrome could do solid damage while wearing Necro; and like always, they had Maple laying down cover fire.

One step, and they were inside the monsters' den. All sorts of mobs came flocking to stop their incursion.

"Armored Arms."

"Wind Cutter!"

""Double Stamp!""

Inbound wolves got sliced down; buzzing insects were cut in half. Anything else was crushed by hammers.

"Yeah, having you two makes it so much easier. This won't take any time at all."

There were no signs to speak of, but Chrome led them on a weaving path through the trees. Black murk was building up around him.

"Here we go! It worked!"

"This is proof we're on the right path. We've just gotta stay on it, not letting the murk dissipate."

"A lot like how Sally and I got Glow of Deliverance!"

"Like how we had to track the brightness? True, but I feel like this is way harder."

They were going in circles in a dimly lit forest—while fending off constant monster attacks—so it wasn't easy to stay on the right path.

With the full Maple Tree team, they had autodefenses, and safety was guaranteed. With twelve iron monster killers spinning around them, they didn't have to care about attacks.

Monsters were jumping at them even as they chatted.

“Then let’s press onward! Time does seem to be a factor.”

Time, party size, stats—rare events could be triggered by all sorts of things.

Chrome was speculating, but it didn’t feel off base.

He and Kasumi had tried several runs and mostly had come up empty; odds were high they had to be there at a certain time of day to find it.

And ever since the ninth stratum came online, all players had been primarily focused on PvP planning instead.

A while later, the murk around Chrome was so thick, he was like a big black ball.

“Y-you okay in there?” Maple asked.

“I can’t see much of anything.”

“So this run’s way easier.”

Since Martyr’s Devotion was active, blindness didn’t matter.

It was quite unlike their trial runs, in which Kasumi had been forced to solo everything.

“These trees all look the same; I’ve got no idea which way we’re going.”

“Yeah, if we’d had Kanade with us before, we might have worked it out faster.”

What looked the same to everyone else looked distinct to his eyes—he’d have made short work of this.

“But this way’s more fun for me.”

“Fair enough! Not much further.”

The black ball around Chrome began stretching out ahead. It became a thin membrane—then snapped, spreading outward in the air.

The center of the murk began to fade. Behind it stood more gloomy forest, yet it was clearly in a different location from where they currently stood. The murk had formed a gate to another region.

In the distance, they could see a castle, and there was a giant, ominous red moon overhead.

"It'll close in a few minutes, so get on through!"

"Roger that!"

"This is spooky…"

"Hang in there, Mai!"

"A castle… Let's hope they've got some books."

"I wouldn't be surprised if there are unique items we can only find here."

"Enemies within are entirely unknown. Keep your eyes peeled."

"All right, I'm pumped!"

Stepping into unknown areas, ready for anything, was always a thrill.

Hoping for new skills, items, or equipment, all eight players stepped through the gate to this portal dimension.

The moment they were all in, monsters attacked.

Humanoid figures all tanked up in murk-laced armor, carrying swords and shields, poured out of the darkness around, attempting to block the way forward.

""Hyahhh!""

Emphasis on *attempting*. One hit from Mai and Yui's swirling hammers, and all that armor was useless. Shields snapped, armor caved in, and they burst into light.

"Yup, still working."

"There are lots of them, but still a one-hit kill, so we're good to go."

The full Maple Tree crew conquered things in stages.

First—their main offense, the twins. The rest were buffing or backing them up.

The strategy was simple, and powerful. It was always their opening move. A test to see if monsters could withstand it.

Were the enemies one-shot or not? That was all that mattered.

"Heading for the castle, yeah?"

"Mm-hmm. Looks like we should be able to get there without a struggle."

"That's thanks to our all-attack builds!"

"And their very literal approach to landing more hits."

Their ability to remotely operate the hammers via Helping Hands perfectly compensated for their weaknesses in close-quarters combat.

"Normal monsters…"

"…are ours!"

Flattening all foes, they made steady progress toward the castle.

Still, this approach didn't work on *every* monster in the game. The hammers were circling a party of eight—that left gaps between them and plenty of openings from above.

Players could easily take advantage of that. Monsters weren't that smart, but some did make it through.

"Double Slash!"

"Necro, Burst Flame!"

"Blood Blade!"

But that only got them through Maple Tree's first stage.

Beyond the hammers of death lay a party that could only be harmed if the monsters had piercing attacks.

Anything that got through was hit by focused fire, everyone covering each other. Could anything get past that?

No, not at all.

It was too tall an order. Flying monsters could not be blamed for their failure.

It was a massacre. A slaughter. A merciless rampage that took them all the way to the castle entrance.

"Wow, it's huge!"

"If they went ham on the interior, this'll take a while. Watch out for traps."

"Got it!"

The road to the castle was just the appetizer. *Of course* they'd made short work of that.

"This is the real challenge! Not that it changes our approach."

"True. I have plenty of items, so let's keep you buffed."

"If anything weird shows up, me, Kasumi, and Sally'll step in. You two handle anything dumb enough to get hit."

"Exactly. We'll also take on anything speedy or ranged."

Swapping offense based on what they could handle—each player's fighting style had its strengths and weaknesses. Basing strategies on those was everything.

Covering those downsides was the whole point of party play.

A big, elaborately decorated door stood before them. Maple stepped up and then glanced back at her friends.

"Ready? I'm opening it up!"

Once everyone nodded, Maple put her hand on the door. Red light shot across the surface—and it began to move with a low grumble.

Well aware that *something* must be lurking in the castle depths, Maple Tree stepped in.

The moment the door was out of the way, Maple scanned the interior. There was a door on either side and one at the back, flanked by two curved staircases providing an elegant ascent to the second floor. That second floor also had one door dead ahead and a door on either side.

They'd have to choose one of these six options.

"Wow, that's big."

"The exterior told no lie."

"The castle was towering over us from the portal, so we've got a long road ahead of us."

"Where do we start?"

"Mai, Yui, Maple, thoughts?"

Martyr's Devotion and the floating hammers were what kept their progress steady.

Best to let those players pick a door. They had no way of telling which was the correct path—so no one objected.

"The doors at the back always lead to bosses."

"So do we start with the sides?"

"If we wanna cover every nook and cranny, yeah."

"I do!"

Here they'd found a hidden area—they didn't want to miss a thing.

So they started with the first-floor exit on the right.

They opened the door and scanned the room for traps. Three monsters were roaming, lit by a torch on the wall.

They were covered by the same black murk as the soldiers outside, but these had big hats and long staves, so they were clearly wizards.

"Expect magic attacks."

"Ranged, then. Think they're corporeal?"

"I can't see through them."

"Mai, Yui, can you take them?"

""Sure!""

Solid enemies were *theirs*. This was an unobstructed hall—since the twins lacked range and couldn't take a hit, they'd normally be in trouble. But not when Maple was around.

With their iron spheres, they didn't need to beat around the bush.

To up their mobility, they each put two hammers away and got on their bears. Maple mounted behind one twin to keep them under her protection, and they charged on in.

The wizards saw them coming and generated black magic circles. Equally black flames spurted out, hitting all three girls—but they paid no heed. Tsukimi and Yukimi plunged through the inferno.

"Yup, we're good! I'm tanking it!"

""Great!""

No damage, no worries. They closed in on the fire wizards and swung their hammers.

""Huh?!""

Their eyes went wide. They hadn't felt the enemies shatter.

The reason was that the wizards had simply vanished, reappearing not far away. They had a short-range warp that let them dodge the hammers.

And not just that—they followed it with a spell, swinging their staves up high.

"""What?!"""

Maple and the twins were all warped away—to different locations.

They could still see each other, but the surprise formation change *had* put the twins outside of Martyr's Devotion.

"Cover Move. Multi-Cover!"

""Chrome!""

He'd made it in time to block the fires. His skill let him cover multiple players at once, and no flames reached the twins.

"Blood Blade!"

Kasumi's whiplike liquid blade made the enemies flinch, stopping the fires—and Chrome's autoheal kicked in.

"These things aren't pushovers!"

"Kanade!"

"On it."

"Water Ball!"

"Tornado!"

If direct damage failed, they'd try magic.

Wind and water shot forward, caught the wizards…and took a chunk from their HP.

"They can't dodge everything! In which case…"

Iz took out some crystals and set up miniature cannons. With a boom, they fired several crystals that burst a few moments later, sending sparks across the darkened corridor.

This inflicted a powerful paralysis, preventing the wizards from moving. Now they couldn't warp away.

"Tidal Wave!"

Kanade used magic to counter their fires—a spell gained by leveling up basic magic skills. Though it was orthodox, it was very powerful, sweeping down the hall and swallowing up all the monsters.

The sound of the monsters shattering echoed over the roiling currents, and when the waters vanished, only Maple Tree remained.

"Yeah, that was strong enough."

"It's on the high end of water spells. Good AOE. Nice to have a mage around."

"I've got no grimoires at the moment, so for a while I'll be fighting with the core repertoire."

"That's plenty."

Kanade had gone all out in the event, so he was only just starting to fill his book stacks back up. He had a few genuinely powerful moves available, but that made him no different from a typical

mage.

And that was good enough. Plus, Sou could assist in a pinch.

"They dodge everything but magic, then? Kasumi's Blood Blade made them warp, too."

"We can test that theory as we go. But if you can handle them all, go for it, Kanade."

"Sorry! Mai, Yui, you all right?"

"We are!"

"Chrome kept us safe and sound."

"Well, if I can't handle these surprises, what good am I? I make a point of being ready to leap in when things go wrong."

"Nice, Chrome."

"An extra layer of defense makes it hard for anything to get through."

"Right. Okay, Kanade's our main on those foes; always good to have monsters that don't require the use of grimoires."

They'd save up where they could to win as efficiently as possible. There were eight of them, and each had a role to play. If they covered for each other, few things could topple them.

Confident they were up for the castle's challenges, they headed down the dark corridor.

Maple Tree swapped their offense around to match the foes they faced. Sally and Kasumi took the faster ones, Mai and Yui the tanky ones; Maple, Kanade, and Sally handled anything ranged. Iz kept everyone buffed, and Chrome covered for Maple if the enemies teleported them around.

Once they knew what the monsters could do, Maple Tree could handle anything.

Deep into the castle, they were opening one of many treasure chests they'd found.

"Taking the long way around is paying off!"

"Materials, equipment…we may find a skill scroll soon."

“Equipment is one thing, but skills will often work for any of us.”

The materials they’d found were rare, and the equipment was pretty quality—if not quite unique-series level.

Maple Tree wasn’t a party that often had to change gear, so scrolls that taught new skills were their main goal.

“Seems worth fully mapping the other side, too.”

“Yeah, now we know it’ll pay off, so we’ve gotta keep going.”

“I’ve got plenty of skills left!”

Maple had basically only used Martyr’s Devotion; she had all her limited-use skills and plenty of Machine God ammo.

Since Mai and Yui were at the front, taking foes down with regular attacks, there’d been no reason to resort to using anything valuable.

Naturally, normal attacks had no use limits. The twins’ DPS remained the same no matter how long they fought.

“There’s still more rooms to go, so let’s check them all out!”

“If this *is* a dead end, we can keep on fighting!”

“Sounds great. I’ll do my part!”

They’d likely not even struggle with a boss—given this party’s might, they rarely did.

Still, it was best to stay cautious. This was a ninth-stratum hidden area, so the enemies’ attacks were commensurate to the difficulty. Mai and Yui could easily be KO’d in one shot, and so could backline players like Iz and Kanade.

If something landed a piercing attack on Maple, it could really do some serious damage.

“If we see anything we don’t recognize, play it safe.”

“I don’t mind taking the lead in that case. I can probably withstand one blow, even a surprising one.”

“I can probably take a few. When we need to scout in force, I’m your man.”

With everyone on the same page, they checked the walls and furniture carefully, making sure they weren’t missing any chests.

That corridor was a dead end, so they had to find another path.

If they were just there to beat the boss, this was the wrong way to go, but in Maple's mind, that was how things should be. She was starting to figure that out.

"So treasure chests are more common on the side paths?"

"I think that's very likely. From the outside, we could see structures that hinted at a boss room farther back in the center."

Not many dungeons dropped a boss in a remote corner. With a castle this imposing, the developers would have made a suitably imposing battlefield.

"Maple, can you sniff out any treasures? The way you always come back with unusual skills?"

"Ah-ha-ha, I just get lucky."

"Hunches do seem to mesh well with weird events."

"Well…then when we get back to the entrance hall, do we wanna try the second floor?"

"Hmm, why not?"

Sally and the others were on board with Maple's suggestion.

They'd found no tracks or weird gimmicks. Perhaps there was a special item that would help with the boss. That was common enough.

None of them wanted to miss the key to the boss room, so they decided to see what all the doors had to offer.

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"Mwa-ha-ha, so much loot!"

"So worth the completionist approach."

Maple Tree had fought scores of monsters and explored every door but the central one on the second floor. Now they were back in the entry hall.

Opening every chest had not earned them any skill scrolls—but they had gotten a huge pile of materials, equipment, and items that could be sold for profit. It had been totally worth the trouble.

"And we found what we really needed."

“Glad we put the boss off.”

“It just happened to be the intended approach.”

The back door on the first floor had given them a key that opened a lock on the second floor.

The second floor’s left and right doors weren’t locked—so this key must be for the back door.

“Doesn’t seem like there’s anywhere left to explore…”

“”So let’s go!””

“Yeah, onward!”

Maple led the way, Martyr’s Devotion still glowing. They unlocked the door and peered inside.

A short corridor led into a round room with a door on the far side. Only ten yards across…and nothing like the halls and rooms they’d been exploring.

Pausing at the line between the room and hallway, they looked it over from floor to ceiling. Silence. No signs of anything.

“Well, it sure *looks* like a boss room.”

“There are doors at the back. So this may not be the last chamber.”

“But something’s gotta be here. Keep an eye out.”

“Especially as we step in.”

“Yeah, let me set up a big cannon. Might come in handy.”

If the enemy wasn’t waiting for them, then they had time to prep—piling all the buffs they could on the twins and filling the entrance with cannons.

And if nothing spawned, they could just collect those tools.

“Then on three!” Maple cried.

Together, they all jumped in.

Black fires belched from the air, spreading swiftly outward.

The flames burst, and limbs covered in black scales emerged from within. There stood a woman with wings and a tail covered with the same scales.

The ruler of the fiery wasteland.

“I hid this well… I’m impressed you made it this far,” the king said. Then she generated several fireballs, which grew in size. She grinned at the party. “Unexpected guests, I’ll allow you to amuse

me. Take care you do not turn to ash!”

“Maple, brace yourself!”

“Pierce Guard! Glow of Deliverance!”

“Rah!”

A powerful first blow.

Massive black fireballs filled the room. As they touched the floor, a pillar of fire enveloped everyone.

When the flames died down, Maple Tree leaped out—unharmed.

The fires sealed off the corridor behind them. Perhaps that was to be expected, but the room-wide AOE had not dealt any fixed damage.

“Flash Spout!”

Sally generated a torrent, sending the twins flying high—directly toward the king.

“”Destroy Mode! Double Stamp!””

Sixteen hammers swung at the king, but all were blocked by barriers of flame.

“”Whoa?!””

These attacks were so strong, they’d shatter any ordinary defenses. The twins had almost never seen their attacks blocked, so their jaws dropped.

“Waterway!”

The instant the twins’ blows failed, Sally darted past them into the dancing flames. With Maple’s defenses active, there was no risk of overextending herself.

“Water Cowl! Double Slash!”

Her daggers enhanced with extra water-element strikes, Sally slashed at the king’s body. Sparks flew—proof she’d done damage.

“It worked!”

“So she can’t block *everything*.”

“In which case…”

“We’ll just have to make openings!”

Bait her into using those barriers, then let the twins’ attacks through after. Getting their most damaging attack to land was far

more effective than engaging in a lengthy exchange.

"In that case…Full Deploy!"

Maple generated her artillery and began firing into the air. But the king nimbly darted through Maple's barrage—firing back several flaming spears.

"Can't let those in!"

If they looked pointy, Maple Tree couldn't let them hit. It was their guild's iron law. Chrome shifted Necro's form, enlarging his shield to cover Maple.

Maple's weapons *were* finite. Unlike the girl herself, they'd shatter on a hit and weren't covered by Martyr's Devotion. She had no way of protecting them herself.

"Thank you!"

"Sure thing!"

"Iz, let's fence her in."

"Yeah, I'll follow your lead."

"Tornado!"

"Fey, Item Boost."

Matching Maple's barrage, Kanade blocked the king's escape route with an AOE spell, and Iz used her cannons to further limit the king's options. That forced the boss to drop low enough that Kasumi could close in.

"Armored Arms! First Blade: Heat Haze!"

No matter how fast her foe was, if they were in range, this move let Kasumi teleport to them. It was nigh impossible to dodge, but those flame barriers appeared to block it.

"Now, Sally!"

"Ice Pillar!"

Ice rose up from the ground, fencing in the king, preventing her from countering Kasumi's attack or penetrating Maple's defenses.

"It's all yours!"

They'd set her up. Kasumi leaped to one side, and the twins tightened their grip on their hammers, eyes on the king.

""Weapon Hurl!""

Sixteen hammers shot through the gaps between the icy pillars. Eight players had worked together to ensure the king could not

escape this one attack. Every hammer hit home—and the king's HP bar hit zero.

Mai and Yui celebrated the success, and the heap of hammers fell aside as the king got back on her feet.

"A fine attack! Any more fighting here will bring the walls down—I'll be waiting in the final chamber. Come play with me again."

With that, she vanished in a plume of black fire.

"Oh, she was a mid-boss."

"Looks like."

"But now we know what the real boss is."

"Yes, that's what 'waiting' meant."

"We can do this! Just back the twins up like we did here!"

"Yep. We set the table so they can serve."

""We'll do our part!""

But first—more exploration. Only one door led farther in, and it likely wouldn't lead directly to the boss chamber.

It would never do to let the monsters on the way to the boss take them down.

They refocused on the task at hand and pushed the door open.

They'd planned for it, and they entered the fight with that plan in mind. Limit the boss's actions and let Mai and Yui go to town—that plan had made the king withdraw, but she'd been in mid-boss mode. That was hardly her real power.

With that fight behind them, they now faced more dungeon exploration.

"Multi-Cover!"

"Tidal Wave!"

Chrome kept the twins safe, and Kanade's spell swallowed up the monsters.

Once combat ended and the waters subsided, Maple came running over.

"Whew, thanks!"

"Sure. Even more monsters are teleporting us around. I'll cover you when that happens."

Martyr's Devotion had its downsides. Anything that took advantage of its limitations left Chrome as their last line of defense. He was a top-class great shielder—anything that got past Maple would still have to deal with him.

Maple was such a force, it was easy to forget, but taking Chrome down was itself a tall order.

"Keep it up! I've got tons of buff items!"

""Great!"" the twins cried.

Take out Maple, slip past Chrome, clear Kanade's barriers and Iz's barricades, dodge Kasumi and Sally's parries, make the twins use Titan's Lot and *then* hit them once again—only then could anyone take out Maple Tree's ultra-dangerous main attackers.

No matter how hard their enemies planned…

…that was a doomed prospect.

"Certainly no monsters can pull it off."

"But we'll have to be careful against *her*. We want to clear this with a full party."

"Yeah, fair enough. Stay sharp."

Sally had a point. The boss was that dragon king. She'd shown off some massive AOEs during the event, and she could fully transform into a black dragon.

An enemy that powerful—there was no telling what attacks she'd have.

Party battles often lost a few members on the way to victory.

But Maple Tree had come this far together, and it would be far better to win with everyone alive.

"She might even use the breath attacks from the event."

"In which case, my barriers won't be enough," Kanade said.

He'd used all his really powerful defensive skills during the PvP event. He did have a couple of grimoires back in stock, but hardly enough.

"Then leave it to me!"

Maple was a hard counter for AOE attacks. Unless the enemy's big moves did piercing or fixed damage, they'd be useless.

"We'll be on healing duty. Just in case, let's reduce fire damage, too."

Even if someone did take damage, if they were properly buffed and ready to heal quickly, the fight could go on.

Maple's damage nullification was downright bizarre—if they started taking damage, that just meant they'd have to play like other players.

Arguably, that was where the real fighting began. Maple *did* actually have powerful skills for damage reduction and healing over time—they just never really got a chance to shine.

Maple was more than *just* a high defense stat.

"I'd like to preempt any path to defeat. Chrome, let's review how you play when Maple's at a disadvantage."

"Sure. Best to assume anything's possible here. One really solid blow could crumple our party, after all."

Sally, Mai, and Yui had no defense—and Iz's and Kanade's specs were designed for the back line. Kasumi was a front-line player, but since Maple was so tanky, she'd focused on raising AGI and STR instead.

That made Maple Tree's lineup unusually brittle. If a decently heavy strike got through, everyone but Chrome would be in critical condition—or dead.

Maple negated that weakness, allowing everyone to raise their strengths even higher, which was what made Maple Tree so powerful.

"If the goal is to win with everyone, then we have to take risks to save each other. Let's make sure we have a plan to pick ourselves up afterward."

"A lot of that's on you, Chrome."

"Best if I don't *have* to step in—but I'm ready to do my bit if it comes to it."

Chrome rattled his shield, ready to demonstrate how good a party with two tanks was.

With the eight of them working together, even the trickiest of dungeon monsters posed no obstacle.

Once they knew what a monster could do, they could handle it.

They made smooth progress through the castle interior and soon found themselves before a huge, lavishly decorated door. They'd cleared every side passage on the way, so this *had* to be the final boss.

"Guess this is it."

"No monster spawns here."

"Then time for the usual."

"Yep, lemme just get us ready."

If there was time before a boss fight, it was best to take advantage of it.

Everyone surrounded the twins, giving them potions, cracking crystals, sprinkling them with powders, and burning incense. All the buffs they could possibly lay on Mai and Yui, steadily turning them into beasts that could dust any boss in a single blow.

Maple Tree had the utmost faith in the overlapping auras surrounding the twins. They had a sterling record of one-shotting bosses up and down the game.

"Is that all?"

"It's always so pretty! You're ready for anything!"

Now they merely needed to get them in range.

Not wanting to waste a second of the buffs' duration, Maple gave the signal.

Everyone raised their weapons, and Maple pushed the door open.

Ahead of them lay a long throne room. At the very back sat the king herself, wreathed in black flames.

"You've arrived. I'm sure we can dispense with the formalities."

Her black wings and tail spread out, and she snapped her fingers.

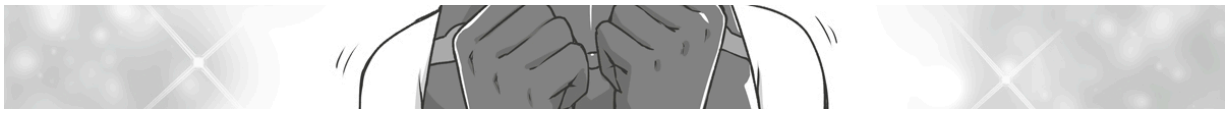
The sound echoed, and then the walls of the throne room collapsed. The space was suddenly far larger—the boundaries marked by walls of flame.

She'd reshaped the room with the same type of magic that had hidden the entrance to this zone.

And that gave the king all the space she needed.

"Try not to go down fast!"





The king took to the skies, and a black shock wave rolled toward them.

Naturally, Maple responded, firming up their defenses.

"Martyr's Devotion!"

Her defensive field covered them all before the shock wave hit.

The skill nullified all damage and soaked the incoming attack—

Then disappeared.

"Huh?!"

Not just Martyr's Devotion. Sally's Sword Dance aura, all the buffs on Mai and Yui—all of it was *gone*.

That attack had canceled out everything. By the time they caught on, the king was already hurling a massive fireball in their direction.

"Necro, Polterguard! Guardian!"

Chrome was first to act. Maple was not the only player with an area defense skill—he'd spent his medals wisely. Reducing damage, defending those around him. His own healing skills—plus Sally and Kanade's spells—let him weather the flames.

"Maple, follow my lead! Cover Move and Cover! I'll tell you what to defend!"

"Okay!"

Martyr's Devotion was on a cooldown. Machine God, Hydra, and Predators would not help them here. What they needed was her great shield—she'd have to play like a traditional tank.

So the rest of the party could do damage.

But that also meant that only Chrome and Maple could afford to soak an attack.

"Kasumi, let's step up!"

"Yeah, we'll have to ease the burden on them."

Sally and Kasumi darted toward the king. If they were all in range of an AOE, then their tanks couldn't cover everyone. Sally had Spirited Away and Shed Skin; Kasumi had her teleport move and Mind's Eye. Each could keep herself safe.

With Martyr's Devotion gone, grouping up would be a bigger risk.

Wreathed in fire, the king was flying fast. She threw fireballs at the two approaching girls, but they were agile enough to dodge.

Those flames on her body were clearly not just for show. Neither of them could afford to get too close. They'd need a plan.

"Blood Blade!"

"Let's show her what we practiced! Waterway!"

Kasumi liquified her sword, wielding it like a whip, and Sally swam through it like water, transforming her daggers into a bow.

"Ice Pillar!"

She used her webs to take to the air, bow in hand, bounding about the sky as freely as the king herself, firing arrow after arrow.

Turning upside down, letting herself fall, climbing again—never missing a shot. Anyone would think she was primarily an archer.

She and Kasumi got the boss to use those same defensive walls she'd used as a mid-boss, laying the groundwork for Mai and Yui to land an attack.

But the king wasn't just letting them hit her. She was fending off Sally and Kasumi while generating a lot of flaming spears and firing those at the others.

"We'll handle those, you cover them!"

"Maple, take Mai!"

"Got it!"

""Cover!""

Maple and Chrome guarded the twins. Aware that this could get much worse, Chrome avoided using Multi-Cover, protecting them with his iron-clad defenses.

"Water Wall! Spell Barrier!"

Kanade and Iz laid out walls to protect themselves, but without grimoires, these weren't quite strong enough. Several spears made it through.

"Iz, please!"

"Right! Fey, Item Boost."

Her pet's ability strengthened the barricades. Hefty walls from her inventory dropped right in front of them, shattering—but stopping the spears.

"Necro, Dead Weight!"

“Syrup, Awaken! Mother Nature!”

A skull appeared behind Chrome—a debuff that reduced the king’s mobility. Maple took advantage of that, borrowing her turtle’s skill to block the boss’s path with massive vines.

“Flash Spout! Subzero Domain!”

Sally generated a deluge and instantly froze it, crafting an ice bridge right to the king.

“Leap! First Blade: Heat Haze!”

In came Kasumi. She jumped, then warped to a spot right before the king’s eyes. She soaked damage from the flames but landed a strike, once more shattering the boss’s barriers.

At this range, the king was forced to focus all her attacks on Kasumi. Jagged claws, wreathed in flames, backed by the lethal might of a dragon’s arm, swiftly bore down to run Kasumi through.

But then—

“Third Blade: Blue Moon!”

A skill-based evacuation. Sally and Kasumi each had unique ways of maneuvering, and this allowed her to bound away.

And while Kasumi had blocked the king’s line of sight, Kanade and Iz had buffed their mightiest members’ speed. They advanced under the tanks’ protection.

Mai and Yui were running across the ice bridge, hammers high.

“Here goes!”

“Yeah!”

““Farshot!””

Sixteen shock waves. With the barriers just downed, mid-attack—no time to dodge—all shots hit home, slamming the boss into the far wall.

“We did it!”

“Direct hit!”

That was one of the combos they’d planned ahead of time. Everyone had done their part, and their attackers had nailed the finish.

Their blows were so strong, few things could withstand them…

And even fewer could survive sixteen hits in a row. As far as they could remember, only the raid bosses—built to fight while surrounded by multiple guilds—had ever managed it.

And yet…a black shape loomed behind the fiery walls. The king still lived, and with far less damage to her HP bar than they'd imagined.

""How…?!""

"Mai, Yui!"

"Pull back!"

Seeing that the twins were stunned, Kasumi and Sally grabbed them and got out of Dodge.

A moment later, flames scorched their vacated perch.

"That did hurt it… Does it cap the damage it can take?"

"Probably. Player DPS is going up everywhere; they might be building bosses that can avoid one-shots."

Only the twins could do so much damage with ordinary attacks and skills, but Velvet's Boom Fist after Hinata's debuffs, or Pain's Holy Condemnation after a Multi-Transfer—the other guilds' best offensive players were making good use of buffs and debuffs, doing considerable burst damage in their own right.

And the tenth stratum was coming. They needed to design monsters to withstand the snowball effect on player skills. Especially if this was a boss in a hidden area.

"So it won't let us win that easy!"

"But the damage is real. Let's just rinse and repeat."

The boss might be blocking some of the twins' damage, but they had still hit her really hard.

High burst damage from each strike meant they could afford to play it safe, attacking less often but without risk.

"Sally and I will make an opening."

"Just don't miss it."

""We won't!""

The speedy pair shot back out, and the king unleashed more fires.

"We already—"

"—saw that!"

Sally and Kasumi zigzagged through the raining fires. The king took to the skies, firing from one location after another. But true to their word, the girls avoided them all, closing in.

Players without shields had to rely on evasion. The more they could dodge without resorting to skills, the better they'd fare in a fight.

Sally might be infamous for it, but Kasumi was extremely dodgy herself.

"Wind Cutter! Fire Ball!"

"Blood Blade!"

Sally's spells peeled away the barriers, and Kasumi racked up some damage. Mai and Yui might be their big guns, but the speedy pair were down to do their part.

Every little bit of HP helped. The longer the fight went on, the more likely their focus would slip and they'd mess up.

The boss was hardly sitting there and taking it. She was already attacking again.

Fire spears aimed at the rear.

A big AOE, very powerful. But for all its strength, the rest of the party had the time to get themselves ready.

"Use the walls!"

"Maple, just in case, Cover."

"Got it!"

"Spell Barrier!"

While Sally and Kasumi had kept the boss busy, the back line had set up barricades. These were much studier than their emergency measures the first time, and Kanade's magic shored them up. Quite a few walls crumbled, but the players behind them stayed safe.

"That frees us up. Maple!"

"Sally, I'm joining in!"

"Got it!"

"Full Deploy! Commence Assault!"

It didn't matter if her bullets didn't hit home. Her barrage limited the boss's movements and helped shatter the barriers.

While Maple was focused on attacking, Iz added more barricades, then spent gold to craft more on the spot, shoring up their defenses.

If she had the materials, time, and respite, their walls had no cooldowns.

"Ancient Weapon!"

The black cube floating near Maple lit up and spread out, a blue laser net connecting the pieces.

"Maple, give me some footholds."

"Syrup, Mother Nature!"

"Eighth Blade: Gale!"

Maple made a path to the king, and Kasumi sped up, darting along the massive vines.

"Okay, Origin Blade: Void!"

As she got in range, her hair turned white. Her unique teleportation skill required no ground, and it moved her behind the king.

The downside was that she was less durable, but that proved to be no problem: She thrust her sword, destroying the barriers.

"Seventh Blade: Pulverize!"

Her blade swung down, hitting the king's back—the knockback effect sent the boss flying forward.

She'd teleported to behind their enemy so she could send the boss to where the others waited.

"Go!"

Chrome and Maple braced for a surprise attack, and Mai and Yui raised their weapons.

Waiting for the perfect moment.

""Weapon Hurl!""

The hammers pummeled the king, sending her hurtling right back the way she'd come.

Once again, the insane damage was heavily nerfed, but it still did far more than Kasumi's blow, taking a solid chunk off the health bar.

The twins used their inventories to collect and reequip the hammers, and the king spread her wings, taking off again.

"Nicely done. I'll have to take this seriously."

She spread her arms, and a truly massive fireball appeared overhead.

If the whole ground caught fire, Maple Tree's barriers wouldn't be

able to block it.

"Put away what you can; we'll handle the rest," Kanade called out, and everyone started retrieving barriers.

A pitch-black sun descended from above.

Soaking that was bound to hurt.

"Sou, Awaken."

Not even batting an eye, Kanade summoned his pet slime.

He had it use the Mimic skill to become Maple, and just as the sun landed—

"Sou, Martyr's Devotion."

The party was blanketed in a warm light protecting them from harm.

In Maple's guise, Sou soaked the raging black inferno.

A skill with a cooldown so long that it could never be used twice in the same fight—but even in a game this focused on skill, few were as powerful.

"We'll keep her busy while you back off."

"Thanks, Kanade!"

While Martyr's Devotion was still active, they escaped the damage dealt by the burning floor.

Kanade cast a flurry of spells while Sou used Machine God, Ancient Weapon, Hydra, and Saturating Chaos—everything it had on hand. Once Mimic ran out, the slime would lose access to all those skills. No use leaving them untapped.

Even with the boss's barriers, damage was mounting, and Sou wasn't letting her fire back. Sou's Mimic soon ran out, but it had sure played its part to the fullest.

"Don't really have any handy grimoires. Ideas on defenses?"

"Twins are our priority. Will damage reduction be enough?"

"Hmm, let's see."

Kasumi, Iz, and Kanade had a shot at enduring attacks if they upped their defenses and reduced damage taken.

If they couldn't avoid damage altogether, then they'd have to switch to a healing-based approach.

"First up, run through the other skills we had planned."

"Yup, yup."

That massive AOE was not something they could block via any normal means.

But any such means were inherently limited. It was best to be selective about when they used those moves.

"Let's go with Glow of Deliverance!"

Four white wings appeared on Maple's back. This was a damage-reduction move, so she hadn't led with it, and it had escaped that initial skill cancel.

Half their party was now fighting on the assumption they'd take damage. Any buffs that would make them more durable were very welcome.

They were now ready for round two. The king was holding long fire spears in both hands, rapidly dropping toward Maple Tree.

"Tenth Blade: Diamond!"

To protect the back line, Maple and Chrome had to back away.

That meant Kasumi had to stay out in front, stopping the boss's charge.

She fought the king head-on, Maple's buff bolstering her own damage reduction.

"Hahh!"

The king had two spears, and Kasumi had three katanas.

She was in control of the blighted blade, so she parried the spears with that, minimizing the damage she took and letting Armored Arms handle the offense. It was an even match. No—the king still had a slight advantage. Even with damage reduction, Kasumi was losing ground.

The king *was* a boss. She had stats and HP far beyond what any player could obtain and was wreathed in fires that did DoT damage—*and* she had barriers that negated attacks. One-on-one, this was hardly an even exchange of blows.

"Fey, Item Boost!"

"Heal!"

There was a cracking sound, and a green mist spread out. Iz's item provided healing over time, and Kanade's spell put Kasumi's

health back in the safety margin.

But then the floor lit up beneath the guild's feet.

This light covered a huge area. It clearly indicated where the next attack would land.

Chrome made a snap decision. He would not be able to handle that. He turned not to Maple, but to Sally.

"Flash Spout!"

A torrent of water toward the rear washed Kasumi out of the fight—and the others with her.

A moment later, a column of fire descended from the sky, just barely missing them.

But the king's assault was not yet done.

More flaming spears from the heavens. Their landing points were glowing warnings—they were smaller than the first barrage, but there were clearly more to come.

"She means business…!"

It was a sharp reminder of just how powerful Maple's defense combined with Martyr's Devotion really was.

But there was no use crying over what they didn't have.

With their movements so limited, keeping Kanade, Iz, Mai, and Yui safe while maneuvering them into position to attack the boss would be very difficult.

Iz could lay down barriers and team up with Maple to tank a lot, but with no agility to speak of, and each of these blows obviously fatal, defending would be *all* they could do.

"Sally, can you chip away a bit? This is rough!"

"I'm on it! I can dodge through this."

"Go get her, Sally!"

With attacks coming so fast and furious, they had to rely on the agile duo.

The rest would hunker down and try to survive, hoping the attack pattern would change once the HP dropped into another stage.

And if that just made the attacks more intense…well, they'd have to steel themselves.

Since the twins couldn't one-shot this boss, the only path to victory was through the boss's flurry.

Trusting Maple and Chrome to keep the others safe, Sally and Kasumi darted in.

"You're on damage!"

"Got it!"

Sally shifted her weapon to a bow again, darting across the air and peppering the king with arrows.

Her evasion undiminished, she matched the boss's speeds and peeled away the barriers.

With her new unique series equipment, Sally now had nonmagical ranged attacks—and her technical proficiency was so high, she could adapt to any situation.

When dodging wasn't an option, she'd switch her weapon to a great shield and block the attack.

The more aggro Sally drew, the easier the others had it. Of course, her HP was so low, a single hit would down her—but everyone had faith in Sally's skills.

"First Blade: Heat Haze. Third Blade: Blue Moon!"

Kasumi matched Sally's play. No matter how fast the boss reacted, if she was in Kasumi's range, there was no escaping her teleport.

Warp into the air, jam an attack home, and as the boss flew toward Sally, Kasumi changed directions with a jump, landing a second strike on the king's back.

The boss flew up, away from her—and Kasumi fell away, her mobility options exhausted.

"Use this, Kasumi!"

"Thanks! Fourth Blade: Whirlwind!"

And yet they both still had options. Sally's One Step in the Grave let her make platforms in midair, and Kasumi landed on one, using Leap to get back up after the boss, their combo letting her slip through the barriers and do even more damage.

"Waterway! Ice Pillar!"

Sally swam through the water path after Kasumi's leap, her webs spinning out of the water to nab Kasumi.

Kasumi was out of jumping skills—but Sally's webs put her where she needed to be.

Yanked up before the boss's eyes, Kasumi raised her katana.

Damage reduction had let her brute-force her way through the raining fires. Now she merely needed to land a big move.

The barriers popped up again. Kasumi grimaced.

But even as the barriers spawned, an arrow flew in, shattering them instantly—uncanny timing.

"The rest is yours."

"Final Blade: Misty Moon."

Sally knew *exactly* how long the barriers took to respond, and she downed that final defense with zero lag. Kasumi ignored the damage from the fire shroud, her hair turned white—and she slammed home a twelve-hit combo.





Each slice was as deep as it was sharp. Even as the flaming spears scorched her, she ripped through the king's HP.

The instant the last blow landed, Sally made a new foothold for Kasumi, who jumped again, positioning herself diagonally above the reeling king.

"Seventh Blade: Pulverize!"

Her katana swung down from above, a direct hit on the king's shoulder—slamming her into the ground below. This also gave Kasumi the distance she needed to recover—and set things up for their main attackers. The twins had been waiting for this.

"You handle the air!"

"We'll handle this!"

Kanade's barriers and Iz's items blocked the rain of fire while Maple and Chrome soaked the flames from the fore.

While Sally and Kasumi kept the king busy, they'd closed in—all for this moment.

""Farshot!""

An inescapable broadside. The twins' sixteen-hit barrage—right after Kasumi's twelve.

The powerful shock wave ripped through the king's health and slammed her into the far wall once more.

Yet all could clearly see that the boss still had HP remaining.

"……to the bitter end. Expanding this room was worthwhile!" the king's voice echoed.

The flame walls parted, and a massive black dragon's head emerged. A moment later, sharp-clawed legs and massive wings. The king had fully transformed, and the sheer bulk of her dragon form clearly needed this much space.

She took to the sky, and a roar shook the room, shattering all barricades and Ice Pillars.

Her jaws yawned open, and within were roiling flames. Everyone knew what that meant.

"Please, Maple!"

"Quick Change!"

""Heal!""

Maple changed to her white armor, increasing her HP—which

Sally and Kanade instantly topped up. By now, the king's red-hot breath was threatening to turn the entire room into a sea of fire.

Destruction well over what any ordinary means could block.

Fight the extraordinary with the extraordinary.

Maple Tree had an ultimate weapon that defied all reason.

"Aegis!"

Light burst into a dome over all eight heads, soaking the red-hot flames.

An AOE invincibility move. The most powerful possible defense—Maple nullified the boss's ultimate move. The battle was now in its final phase. Clearly, they could afford no mistakes on the path to victory against this foe.

"Stay focused, Maple."

"Will do!"

One final push. With their eyes on the dragon boss, Maple Tree raised their weapons.

Maple's strongest defensive skill, Aegis, had canceled out the king's breath attack, but the dragon's maw above was already brimming with flames again. If it had more attacks like the one Aegis had blocked, there was little they could do. Perhaps the next one wouldn't one-shot them, but they lacked the resources to keep Mai and Yui safe until the fight was done.

Without Martyr's Devotion, any defensive measures would work against them.

"Breath attacks?"

"We can handle those!"

The rain of fire continued unabated, and the twins were helpless against that. But they *did* have a means of countering the breath itself.

"Right! Kanade, Iz, back 'em up!"

"On it!"

"I can buy a bit of time!"

""Cover!""

Iz's items and Kanade's spells blocked the flames. Maple and

Chrome's shields blocked still more. A moment later—there was a *fwoosh*, and all-consuming fire breath descended from the king.

"You first, Mai!"

"I know!"

Mai leaped out from behind Chrome, eight hammers at the ready.

She didn't flinch, eyes on the approaching flames. Her hammers swung.

"Titan's Lot!"

The hammers hit the flames. The breath had exceptional destructive force, but so did Mai.

She'd sacrificed speed, durability, adaptability—all manner of things—so that her attack might be far beyond what any player was meant to have. Her hammers hit the flames and deflected them back at the king.

"With me!" Sally yelled, leading Mai and Yui forward.

The king's AOEs were only getting bigger. The breath was flashy and powerful, but not all of this worked against them.

"It's so big we don't *need* to set you up!"

Kasumi's Blood Blade banished the flames. Sally made walls with spells, momentarily making some room.

They no longer needed any elaborate setups.

The boss they were targeting was now huge and not nearly as fast. The twins could easily hit her.

""Farshot!""

Plus, she was low on health. They were within shooting distance of victory. Best to go for burst damage and a quick win.

"Full Deploy! Ancient Weapon!"

With Aegis done, Maple swapped her gear back and added Ancient Weapon to the barrage.

"Gonna borrow that! Full Deploy! Reality Twister!"

"Same!"

"I'll back you up!"

Sally deployed copies of Maple's weapons, adding to the cover fire. Iz was blasting bombs, and Kanade started mixing in attack spells with the defensive ones.

"Multi-Cover!"

Chrome bought time for them to rack up damage. Still the king's HP held out and they all saw the signs of another breath attack coming.

They'd expected as much.

This time, Yui stood before the encroaching fires. What Mai could do, so could Yui. Success was guaranteed.

"Titan's Lot!"

This time, Yui batted back the inferno. Scored by her own fires, the king lost significant HP. All hoped this would be enough to down her, but a tiny bit of HP remained. As she righted herself, flames sparked in the king's mouth and gushed from the burning walls behind her.

"Shoot…!"

"Maple!"

"Atrocity!"

At Sally's cry, Maple took monster form and bounded ahead. The flames hit her, and her sheer bulk blocked the rest.

Seven players in her shadow escaped harm, and Maple charged at the king through the fires.

The king's flames and claws struck first. But Maple's defenses ignored them both, and she leaped at the king in the air.

Maple breathed fire of her own, burning the king, and her claws sliced the boss's flanks.

"How's that?!"

Maple's teeth sank into the king's throat.

And that polished off the last of the HP bar. The dragon king reverted to human form.

The fiery walls died down, and the room returned to its original size.

All signaled that the fearsome battle was finally done.



CHAPTER 2

Defense Build and a Dreamlike Journey

Back to normal, the king landed with a boisterous guffaw.

"Ha-ha, well done! Most enjoyable. As thanks, take this." She snapped her fingers, and a single oversize treasure chest appeared. "Let's fight again someday, when we've both grown more powerful. Say…after you conquer several more castles like this one."

With that parting line, she let out one more satisfied cackle and vanished in a plume of fire.

"Okay…guess there's more of these."

"Hidden elements in hidden stages."

"Not much of a hint… It's gonna be hard to track them down. Don't think I saw anything about them in the books I've read."

"What she said might be the only hint there is."

"Does that get us anywhere?"

Maple and Sally *had* cleared a hidden castle before—the flying one.

"Come to think of it, that had a dragon boss, too."

"I feel like that could be significant."

"If there's several of them…think they're on other stratums?"

"We'll just have to go look. Pure coincidence we found this one, so it won't be easy…but at least we do have *a* hint."

If they were on the lookout while exploring, they were more likely to find things.

Perhaps it was a long-term goal, but it was yet another thing Maple Tree could work toward.

"So let's get this chest open. Guild Master, do the honors."

"Bring us some of that Maple luck. If the contents are randomized, I bet you'll pull something better than any of us."

"W-will I?"

A tough fight at the end of a hidden area—the chest that the dragon king had left behind was definitely promising.

They'd cleared it together, but this was Maple's guild, and they had no problem letting her hog the glory.

"O-okay, but don't get your hopes too high."

Maple put her hands on the lid and slowly lifted it.

"Whoa!"

"It's packed."

Their eyes were first drawn to the heap of gold and jewels. A mountain of items to sell. Nice and all, but this *was* a hidden area. They worked through the treasures, hoping for more, and found quite a few materials and consumable items along the way. Below those, they found two scrolls and a bracelet.

"Figured it wouldn't be something for each of us."

"But those scrolls…"

"…must give skills!"

"Let's scope them out together."

Maple picked up the scrolls, examining the skill they contained.

They were both the same skill.

Dragonfire Storm
MP Cost: 50
Create fire spears in the air that attack for a period of time.

"The same thing she hit us with."

"Pretty basic. Would work for anyone, but…"

Reproducing the king's attack would apply pressure to any foe.

There was just one downside.

"If it's fifty MP, Mai and I can't use it," Yui stated.

"So they're all yours!" Mai said to the rest of the guild.

"I don't have enough, either. Oh, but I *could* slot it to a weapon!"

Maple added.

"That leaves Kasumi, myself, Kanade, Iz, and Sally."

Skills and spells were vital in this game. Most players made sure they had a decent MP pool.

The five of them had at least fifty each.

"I'll pass," Kanade said. "I had fun just playing with everyone and have no shortage of AOE attacks."

He tapped the bookshelves floating behind him. They'd all seen him in action often enough to know how true that was.

"I'm out, too. Fighting was never really my style; I'll stay on support duty in combat," Iz declined.

"We know how much damage you do…but I get your point."

With the twins, Kanade, and Iz all out, that left four.

"Uh, Sally, I have an idea," said Maple.

"……Mind if I guess?"

"Huh? Can you?"

"You wanna cede these to Kasumi and Chrome, right?"

Sally had nailed it in one, and Maple looked astonished.

"It's very *you*," Sally explained. "And I feel the same way. They're the ones who found this area."

"……You're sure?"

"I'm not about to refuse."

The scrolls were clearly valuable, but neither Maple nor Sally seemed concerned.

"Heh-heh, just make good use of them."

"We know you will!"

Given that, both Chrome and Kasumi opened the scrolls. With these new skills, Maple Tree had gained two new powerful AOEs.

It would be a fierce follow-up for Chrome when he got in close. It would make good use of Kasumi's mobility, allowing a hard strike after she dove through the enemy line. Neither would struggle to find uses for Dragonfire Storm.

"Then that's settled. What's the bracelet?"

Chrome picked it up, scoping it out.

Dragon Embers
[MP+30]

Dragonfire Spear
Create up to two fire spears. These vanish after a while.

"Oh, it comes with a skill."

"Might be rare, then. Not many accessories add attacks."

"…Yeah, maybe I'm getting too used to that."

"We have more than our share of odd gear."

Twelve white hands floated in the air, and a cube that turned into weapons bobbed around them.

But this bracelet was still invaluable.

"Not exactly a unique series, but worth trying out."

"Do the spears float?"

"Let's find out."

"I wanna see!"

"Okay, gimme a sec."

Chrome took off an accessory, equipped Dragon Embers instead, and tried the skill out.

"Whoa?!"

The change was obvious immediately. Red flames ignited on his short sword hand, forming a spear.

He used the skill again, and this time a spear extended from his great shield hand in the same shape.

"I can't swap hands… Yeah, this may not be right for me."

"It does give you extra reach."

"If I was like Velvet and not already holding a weapon… It could also be good for a mage trapped in a close-quarters fight."

If a player already had something in each hand, it was impossible to also wield a spear effectively.

"We've already got enough accessories…"

"And there's only two of them."

Two floating hammers were better than two spears in hand. The twins knew what accessories were best for them.

"That wouldn't be true for most people…but is for you."

"I'll pass… Already got a skill," Kasumi said.

"Same. Doubt I'd learn to use it," Kanade admitted.

"I'm good, too. I've got Fey, so I'm gonna stick to fighting with items."

Which left only one candidate.

"Then it's yours, Sally!"

"You're sure?" Sally asked.

Maple and the others all nodded.

"You'll clearly make the best use of it."

"You've proven you can handle any weapon."

"In which case, help yourself. Take it and show off even more the next time we play."

Sally changed her gear, sheathed her daggers, and activated the bracelet skill twice, generating flaming spears.

"So it works when I'm not holding my weapons. Interesting…"

She checked the reach and ensured these flames could still block and parry—the bare minimum ability required to dual wield her new weapons. Besides the applied element, there was nothing unusual about them, so it didn't take Sally long to master them.

"The tenth stratum isn't far off, so should we hunt for hidden areas until then?"

"So far, the flying castle's the only other one we've found."

"I haven't heard of any others."

"Then let's take our time with it. The hidden areas themselves aren't going anywhere."

"Time…," Maple whispered. A rare flash of concern. "I've been told to focus on my studies soon. I should be good for the tenth stratum and the event, but that might be the end for me. Not sure how much I'll be logging in after that."

Everyone knew what phase of life *that* was.

"Studying for entrance exams? Fair enough. Real life matters more than games."

"Yes. They're *both* important."

"Then let's all work together on the tenth stratum and achieve one final goal. I mean, it's supposed to have a super-boss."

"Nice!"

"I'll do my part!"

"Then we're shooting for a quick clear? That way we'll get to play with Maple till it's over."

The tenth stratum would be a huge map. With only eight of them, "quick" might be a tall order, but it was well worth gunning for.

The harder the journey, the more satisfying the outcome would be.

"If Maple's gotta study, then how about you, Sally?"

"Yeah, afraid so."

Sally looked rather glum.

Maple Tree's members were all top-tier players, but Maple and Sally had made this guild—they were its heart and soul.

Both normal exploration and event battles would be very different without them.

"Roughly the same deadline?"

"Mm-hmm."

That firmed up their goal. Explore fast, slaughter monsters—locate and beat that super-boss.

"Let's do this!" Maple cried.

Everyone agreed, looking forward to going all out and finding a good place to end things.

"……"

She'd known.

She'd seen it coming.

She'd tried not to look.

But it was bound to happen.

Sally closed her eyes for a moment.

Happy travels. A dreamlike time. It came clearly to mind, because

it had been that much fun.

If only time could stop here.

It was an impossible wish that left a sad smile on Sally's face.
"……Maple, let's go get that boss!"
"Yeah! I'm counting on you, Sally!"
"Heh-heh, you know you can."
All journeys came to an end.
If she couldn't stop that…
Then she had to make sure Maple enjoyed it all to the very end.
This time, Sally's smile was a confident one.







CHAPTER 3

Defense Build and Waiting for the Big Day

Time passed. The days grew colder, marking the changing of seasons. Their breaths visible, Kaede and Risa were on their way to school.

"It's this weekend… You available?"

"I think so!"

"Great. Then we can all go together."

Yes. This weekend, the tenth stratum was going online. Ideally, they'd get the whole guild together. If they could run the dungeon to the new map right away, that would give them much more time to explore.

"You're already hitting the books, Kaede?"

"Yeah, but if I do well on this next test, they'll up my gaming hours! I should be okay!"

"Never thought I'd hear you say *that*."

"Argh. How are you holding up, Risa?"

"Getting grounded for a bit early on was motivating, and I've kept my grades up ever since."

"Whew! Heh-heh-heh, when you apply yourself…"

"Yeah, well. Don't want them taking my system away again…"

If they weren't careful, they'd pay the price. The next few months were especially vital; for real life and their game life, they could not slack on their studies.

"You playing today, Risa?"

"Uh…I wanna play a lot this weekend, so I'd better get ahead in my work today."

"Then let's have a study session this evening."

"Sounds good. Don't you go getting sick this weekend!"

“Right, I’ll be careful!”

Chatting away, they hustled to school.

The classroom was deserted, so they put their backpacks down, still talking.

“Any holiday plans, Risa?”

“Doesn’t sound like my family is going anywhere far. You?”

“Same. But our plans might not overlap with yours.”

They’d spent so much time together that it felt weird whenever they were apart.

“It doesn’t feel right. Do you remember when we first met?”

“Of course!” Kaede cried.

Grinning, Risa took a trip down memory lane.

“Didn’t think we’d be playing together for anything like this long.”

“Eh-heh-heh, true.”

“Lately we’ve been together in the game, too.”

“In the game, we can meet even if we’re far apart.”

“Yup, yup, the joys of online play.”

Physical distance was no barrier online. As long as they were both logged in, they could see each other anytime. It was that easy.

“Even if we’re not always together, we’re not that far away in real life. We can meet up a bit on weekends.”

“Yeah…and it’s still a long way off.”

“Mm-hmm. So Kaede, make sure you hit those books so you can go where you want.”

“Will do! Just don’t forget about the study session tonight.”

“I’ll be there.”

Both girls were looking forward to it, and time flew by. Not long after they got home, they were on a voice chat.

“Until dinner, then?”

“Sounds like a plan!”

Both opened their books, ready to study.

“Risa, your grades really are steadily improving.”

“I’m treating it like a score attack. Really don’t want them taking this game away from me again…”

“Ah-ha-ha, that’s so you.”

If she was going to do it, she would try to get a good score. Risa’s core gamer mentality was working in her favor.

Her GPA had been steadily rising, all because she didn’t want to waste a moment of these happy times.

“Are you in the safety margin?”

“Nah, it’s a pretty tough requirement. And since I got my grades this high, it’ll be even more obvious if they drop.”

“That’s true.”

Kaede and Risa spent a few hours studying, closing their books just before dinner.

“I’m all tapped out! But I think I made good progress.”

“Nice work.”

“The tenth stratum’s almost here! There’s fun waiting for us after this hard work.”

“Good attitude. That’s my thinking, too.”

Kaede sure had changed. Not long ago, she’d never have been this excited. How many other games had they tried out? Risa was sure she’d never seen Kaede enjoy herself so much.

With a smile that was equally happy and sad, Risa suggested, “Let’s go around the tenth stratum together.”

“You and me? I assumed that was the plan!”

“We’ll find lots of hidden areas, take down powerful bosses, and see all sorts of beautiful sights.”

“They said the tenth stratum was super big. I bet it’s got all those things!”

“Looking forward to it.”

“Mm-hmm!”

Play while they were free to.

No telling if there’d be a next time.

Risa was pretty sure there wouldn’t be.

“……Let’s make the most of it.”

“I can’t wait!”

“Heh-heh, yeah, neither can I.”

Voices from downstairs called their names. Food was on the table, so they hung up and left their rooms.

◆□◆□◆□◆□◆

The day after their study session, with the tenth stratum looming—Maple Tree's Training Room was bustling.

"Purple Bolt!"

"Oboro, Smog!"

Velvet and Sally were dueling. Sally effortlessly wove through Velvet's rain of lightning, then hid herself in a smoke cloud that blanketed her foe. A second later, she reappeared right next to Velvet.

Velvet ignored this completely. She let Sally close in, taking no defensive maneuvers even as the daggers swung.

And Sally vanished as the daggers made contact.

"I ain't falling for that trick forever!"

The smog cleared, and Sally backed away.

"If I can't tell which is real, then to hell with it! There's no point in reacting until after you do damage!"

"That approach does work for you, Velvet."

Velvet had skills that let her move as fast as Sally—if not faster—but enough HP and defense to plunge straight into an enemy camp.

Sally used her tricks and illusions to ensure only she was doing damage, but with daggers, she had to be close to do any real harm.

Best for Velvet to wait patiently for her to make a move, striking back when she was sure it was the real Sally.

Lose a limb to win the battle—if that let her land a hit on Sally, whose minimal HP would bring her down first.

"How d'ya like them apples?!"

"Then I'll just try another tactic."

Sally sheathed one dagger and transformed the other. She now held a bow. If she couldn't get close, she didn't have to. Sally's weapon selection was no longer limited.

"So you can make *any* weapons, then?"

“That I can. If you’re gonna wait, then I’m gonna shoot you down! Ice Pillar! Waterway!”

At her cry, several ice pillars appeared, and a path made of water wound through the air.

“Here I come!”

Webs shot out of Sally’s hand, and she moved from water to air to land, bounding all around Velvet.

“……!”

It was hard to believe, but Sally had yet to take a single hit from Velvet’s lightning. However, Velvet didn’t want to be the aggressor. Attacking left her exposed, and that’s what Sally wanted. Velvet dodged the incoming arrows and spells as best as she could, watching Sally closely.

“Sure does hurt!”

Dodging the lightning was strengthening Sally’s Sword Dance aura. Velvet didn’t know the exact effect, but judging from how hard the arrows were starting to hit, she couldn’t exactly let Sally run wild.

Sally wasn’t closing in. Velvet had to attack, so she charged her opponent.

“Polar Flash!”

If there was no way to avoid exposing herself, it would be best to minimize that exposure.

A blinding pillar of lightning centered on her, sending bolts in every direction.

No hits. But Velvet had a plan. Polar Flash was the kind of skill Sally struggled with the most: No matter how dodgy she was, there was no escaping a giant circular AOE. When it went on cooldown, that gave Sally a reason to get close.

Sally was cautious. Odds were high she’d stay back and keep firing arrows. But Velvet knew Polar Flash was grounds for a different choice.

The upshot: The moment the column of light vanished, Sally

swapped her bow back to a dagger, darting in. Velvet looked faintly surprised, but she considered this attacker might be a fake and stopped herself from unleashing a skill.

She could survive one hit. She held out as long as she could, scanning her surroundings.

Once in range, Sally swung those daggers, and they sliced across Velvet's chest and belly, red sparks spraying.

"……?! Stun Spark! Purple Bolt!"

A frontal assault. It had caught Velvet off guard, but she wasn't about to let Sally make a clean getaway. She kept pace with her using an electric stun skill, then thrust a fist forward to send lightning after her.

It was a clean hit, and Sally vanished into thin air.

"…!" Velvet nearly gasped.

The next thing she saw was two flaming spears running through her back and out her chest, accompanied by an unadorned greatsword.

When had they swapped places? She was unable to answer that question, but the Sword Dance–enhanced triple strike demolished Velvet's remaining health.

This was merely a Training Room duel. They'd respawn right away after a loss, their cooldowns over.

Which was why they could go full throttle.

"When?! When'd you do it?! When did it become fake?!"

"That would be telling. What do *you* think?!"

"Augh! You were real until the hit landed, so it's gotta be after that…"

An illusion had taken Sally's place, while the real one dodged Stun Spark and Purple Bolt, avoiding all the raining lightning and moving around behind Velvet.

It sounded impossible broken down like that, but this was Sally.

"And those spears are magic! That seems pretty damn strong."

"They are."

The backstab, the water veil, the pillar of ice, the phantom distraction—so much had happened outside Velvet's range of vision, and the upshot was that only the outcome made sense.

That really proved just how unorthodox Sally's style was.

"So I learned jack."

Sally could tell Velvet had yet to see through the subterfuge.

She'd been making good use of Reality Twister since the event. That had made the damage done by a fake Sally (generated by Mirage) momentarily real. Sally's internal clock was so precise she'd nailed the date change during the fight with Velvet and Hinata—matching the skill to the Mirage's attack motion was easy.

It was an ace up her sleeve, too tricky for anyone to decipher. As a result, no one outside of Maple Tree really knew what Reality Twister could do.

In fact: She'd been fake since Polar Light. The whole time.

But to work that out, one had to know about a secret skill.

Unless Sally told someone, the truth would remain shrouded in darkness.

"I should have the advantage!"

"I'll give you that."

"I really need Hinata along…"

"I'll just bring in Maple."

"Ah-ha-ha, that would be fun."

If her movements were limited, even Sally wouldn't be able to fight for long. Velvet's real strength came out when Hinata was at her side. A rematch this soon after the event wasn't a bad idea. Maple and Sally's plan had just barely come out on top, but either side could have won that night.

"Thunder Storm's plans for the tenth stratum?"

"We'll see what it's like once we get there, but I'm planning on blitzing it!"

Naturally, she meant with Hinata in tow. She'd let Velvet ignore gravity and run wild—there was nowhere they couldn't go.

"If it's not a quest, you might be able to run directly to the final

boss.”

“I hella doubt that’s possible. I mean, there’s plenty of flying pets, right?”

Flight was becoming a force to be reckoned with. The event had proven it. There was still only one turtle rider, but it wasn’t just Pain and Mii wheeling around those skies.

Given that, the developers would have to plan for it.

“What about you?”

“I just know Maple and I are going around together. Easy for us to align our schedules.”

“What about the event? You’ll be in the PvP, I know.”

“Yeah, that’s the plan.”

“……Then it’s on?”

“Well…we’ll see.”

“Aww!”

Velvet looked shocked, but Sally knew what she meant.

If there was a PvP tournament, would Sally fight Maple?

That was the unspoken question.

“By the event, we’ll be busy offline. It’ll be harder to log in.”

“All the more reason!”

“……You’re a big PvP buff, but for how long? Since when?”

“Er…um, hmm. I wasn’t really a massive gamer or anything, I’m just…naturally competitive.”

“Same. I’ve always liked this sort of thing. But lots of people don’t—and they’re not wrong.”

“True.”

“Maple’s got nothing against it, but she sure doesn’t like it as much as I do. So I’m not sure if us fighting would be fun for both of us.”

It would be their last event, and Sally wanted to make it one to remember. If Maple would have fun, then Sally would love to fight her—she’d always wanted to.

“But if it’s not meant to be, it’s not meant to be.”

“Are you being nice, or just awkward?”

“……”

“There’s plenty of time, so see what happens. But if she doesn’t

want to fight you, I'll take you on!"

"You're just a battle junkie."

"You betcha! Let's go again! I wanna turn the tables on you."

"Sure, sure. I'll still win."

The dream was still distant.

The decision was not yet made.

Sally and Velvet faced each other, and at the buzzer—both broke into a run.



CHAPTER 4

Defense Build and Off to the Tenth Stratum

At last, the weekend arrived. The dungeon leading to the tenth stratum—and the new map itself—were finally online. Maple Tree's members assembled in their Guild Home.

"About time!"

"First, let's try and clear this dungeon in one go."

"No news about what's inside yet. But I doubt we'll struggle."

"Yep, just be careful, and do what we always do. That should be enough."

They'd only just downed a really tough (royal) boss together, and they were pretty confident in their team play.

The levels and skills they'd gained along the way meant they had a lot of options in a fight.

Kasumi could use her mobility and knockback skills. Sally could use water and ice for defense or to give herself footholds. Chrome and Kanade had speed debuffs.

Bosses weak to paralysis were increasingly rare, but Maple had some status effects, too.

And if they had Iz's buffs, then Tsukimi and Yukimi could carry Mai and Yui right up to any boss.

There were lots of ways to get their main DPS in position. All they had to do was pick the least risky or most likely to succeed and press their advantage.

"We're all here! Let's head to the dungeon location."

"I'm all stocked up on items. Ready when you are."

"Then shall we ride Haku?"

"All righty, then! Off we go!"

Their goal: Clear this dungeon on their first try. If they pulled that

off, they'd have time to start exploring the tenth stratum.

No sense in dallying once everyone was ready. Out in the field, they all climbed aboard Kasumi's pet snake (enlarged with the Supergiant skill) and rode it to the dungeon entrance.

None of the monsters along the way proved to be a threat, and they reached their destination safely.

The dungeon entrance was on the border between the watery nature and fiery wasteland kingdoms, in a zone that bore hallmarks of both.

Perhaps there'd been a temple there, once. There were crumbling columns, surrounded by water and ice, buried in lush vegetation. Other sections had crumbling pavement from which lava flowed, scorched by lightning strikes.

And a blue magic circle at the center of it all.

This would teleport them to the dungeon. No telling what lay on the other side.

"We've got no knowledge of the dungeon beyond…"

"And now I'm hesitant to start with Martyr's Devotion."

That skill/buff cancelation move the dragon king had used was still at the front of their minds. Naturally, that was hardly the average boss, but they couldn't deny it was possible. Just as Maple Tree's members had grown stronger, the developers had been crafting more powerful monsters for them to fight.

No intel meant no ready solutions.

Martyr's Devotion changed their entire approach. It was not a skill they could afford to lose for nothing.

"Let's keep it in reserve. If the teleport drops us right into danger, I'll buy time with Guardian; if needed, you can bust it out then."

"Got it!"

"Worse comes to worst, I'll use a grimoire. I've got a few good defensive skills in stock now."

Safety first. With defensive strategies in mind, Maple Tree stepped onto the circle.

There was a splash—and they landed in water. The teleport had taken them to a flooded ancient white building. The water was about chest high.

There was a line on the walls and plenty of light—enough for them to make out tall ceilings and broad corridors.

"Mai, Yui, you all right?"

"Yes…b-barely!"

"We're fine on top of our bears!"

If this water came up to Maple's chest, then the even shorter twins would barely have their heads above water. They'd have to ride their pets around.

"Argh, this water's nerfing our AGI. A thirty percent debuff is brutal!"

"Exactly like my Oceanic, then."

As long as they were in contact with it, they'd be moving slowly. They had skills that would get them out of the water, but considering the area layout, it seemed better to just go with it rather than try to avoid it.

With their feet on the ground, they'd have less AGI—but firm footing. Deciding they could resort to buffs if they were really in trouble, they started moving.

"Um, it sure looks like a fight will happen here…"

"Yeah, that's why these halls are so wide."

"Speak of the devil. Incoming!"

Down the passage, a monster was sliding along the surface of the water, riding a magic circle that kept it afloat. It held a staff bearing a large blue gem.

An HP bar was over its head. This was the first encounter. All eight raised their weapons.

"Just the one?"

"Yeah, nothing behind it."

No front-or backline fighters. Just a single mage—that was inherently unnerving. They all watched closely.

A moment later…

…a magic circle spread out beneath their feet.

The waters' waves swelled. Several currents attacked, whirling furiously, tornado-like.

"Maple!"

"Martyr's Devotion!"

Sally made the snap decision that they could not defend against this, so Maple got her protection out just before the torrent smashed into them.

"……!"

She could feel herself moving. At the mercy of the waters, not even sure which way was up.

Martyr's Devotion only offered protection within a certain area. If she was swept away, anyone left behind would be undefended.

Maple panicked as she hit some kind of wall and went under, but she soon got her face above water.

"……Haku! Thank you!"

"Whew, managed to coil around everyone."

"Good call, Kasumi. We're saved! This new stratum's not kidding around if even the regular encounters are this rough."

"What do we do?"

"Without Maple, we're in trouble!"

"But she's not faring much better."

Supergiant Haku's bulk was coiled round them, warding off the whirlpool. The roaring waters were like the base of a waterfall, pounding against the snake's scales. Naturally, Martyr's Devotion kept it unharmed.

Haku might be invulnerable, but the main goal of this current was the formation-disrupting knockback effect. This was keeping Maple pinned against the snake's flank.

"Yeah, constant knockback. We're not able to move forward."

It was hard to defend anyone who was getting flung backward.

"We do have options, but…this is supposed to be a trash mob. I'd rather conserve resources and find a reliable way to win."

"I can keep Haku safe, so what about…" Buffeted by the constant effect, Maple made a suggestion.

"……That does seem reliable."

“Okay, let’s try it out!”

“I’ll scope out the fore.”

Iz pulled a long tubular item out of her inventory, stretching it over Haku’s coils.

This allowed her to see over the snake’s bulk.

“Found it. Wow, no signs of the water stopping.”

“You’ve got everything.”

“Not everything, just what I’ve made.”

“Warn us if it does anything funny. Haku!”

Kasumi barked an order, and there was a rumble as its bulk slithered into action. Maintaining the coil, it began moving toward the monster—like a scaly tornado advancing.

“Close enough!”

“Haku!”

Kasumi had her pet stop, using its length to keep Maple Tree safe while slithering up the current to bite the mage.

Chomp. The snake’s jaws cut the mage in half. That may sound surprising, but this was *just* a backline monster running solo. As long as they got close, fatal damage was easy to achieve.

The moment the mage died, the raging current subsided, and the waters resumed their gentle lapping.

“Fortunately, it’s a broad corridor. Let’s just keep Haku out.”

“Yeah, gonna handle the next one the same way.”

“Thank you so much!”

“You’re the best, Kasumi!”

“That mage was a pretty nasty monster. A big knockback skill while our AGI’s reduced? Thanks to Maple and Kasumi, we were fine, but if we’d all been swept away, that would not have gone well.”

“We know what it looks like, so be careful if it shows up with anything else.”

“Let’s hit it before it hits us!”

“That would be best.”

They knew the monster was a glass cannon—high offensive

power but low defense. Machine God's bullets could keep them out of harm's way.

"We're only just inside the entrance. Keep an eye on your reserves as we head in."

"Will do!"

With the first monster down, Maple Tree headed deeper into the dungeon.

No splitting paths, just one big hallway. Not long after, that mage appeared again, but this time it was supported by three frontline monsters carrying lances and great shields.

"Maple, go for it!"

"Okay! Deploy Artillery! Commence Assault!"

A metal trunk grew from Maple's back, branching into a bunch of cannons.

They soon spewed fire, slamming shells into all four monsters.

Just one of these would likely melt the mage, but the three tanks stepped in, covering it.

Metallic clangs filled the hall—a sign the defenses were effective.

The tanks were barely taking damage.

"Didn't think it would be *that* easy."

And since that was the case, Sally glanced once at Kasumi. Haku formed a protective wall just before the torrent slammed them again.

The roar of the current, the endless knockback. Maple's skill soaked it all, slamming her against Haku's flank and allowing everyone else to stay mobile.

Iz raised her tube, hoping they could get Haku in there to feast.

But then—

Damage effects went off, and Maple's HP started dropping.

"Erp?!"

""Heal!""

Sally and Kanade reacted first, topping up her health with some

spells. Her HP dropped as fast as they healed.

"Tch, the lances?!"

"I'll keep her healed—you figure out our next move!"

"Urgh, they won't stop hitting me!"

Iz pulled a bunch of potions out and started dosing Maple.

Heal was an early-game spell, the first they'd learned, and it was just not keeping up. Kanade had other healing spells, but healing was not his main job. Thus, they resorted to Iz's powerful items.

The potions directly replenished Maple's health, and the crafter created a zone that healed over time.

Maple gave up on attacking, using Meditation to heal herself.

"Kasumi, keep the snake behind us, but open the way forward."

"Mm-hmm."

Haku slithered aside, blocking the path to keep Maple in position.

That removed the wall between them and the enemy. The lancers charged in through the howling current.

"Mai, Yui, stay calm and do your thing. Maple will keep you safe."

""We know!""

Riding their bears through the waves, they kept their eyes open, locked on the three lancers.

""Double Stamp!""

The howling waves were joined by metallic clangs. These things withstood the twins' hammers. Their DPS had blown away every monster, so this was clearly not an issue with their attack stat. Both knew this meant there was a cap on the damage they could deal while those great shields were up.

"Mai!"

"On it!"

In which case, they had to amp things up, and they had more than two weapons each. They kept swinging while Helping Hands carried the rest of the hammers around behind the lancers.

Their enemies had one shield each. Not enough to block all these hammers.

""Hyahhh!""

The hammers slammed from both sides.

The caps were not designed for two attackers, and the lancers

could not withstand a direct hit. The front lines crumbled, and Sally moved in.

"Let's try this out! Wave Ride!"

It was a new skill she'd earned by leveling Water Wielding. Like Flash Spout and Waterway, it pushed aside everything before her, letting Sally move across the waves.

The tornado-like current obscured her vision, but once she was through that, she had a clear view of the mage beyond.

"Ice Pillar!"

The frozen column rose behind it, and her webs shot toward that, yanking her close to the enemy in the blink of an eye.

That prevented her from dodging much, but with Maple's protection, she didn't need to.

"Quintuple Slash!"

Sally got there too fast for the monster to draw back, landing a powerful combo that proved too much for the mage. It burst.

"Thanks, everyone!"

"No, thank *you*!"

"Maple saved us."

There was no time limit on Martyr's Devotion: A skill only Maple—with her ability to withstand all attacks—could make full use of.

And that meant Maple Tree had all sorts of strategies only Maple Tree could ever use.

"Let's go with Iz and Kanade on healing, Chrome blocking anything Maple can't handle, the twins handling the front lines, and Kasumi and me flying in to hit the back."

"Got it. Knowing they've got piercing damage means no fights are guaranteed. To minimize risks, we'll leave Haku on standby and go for quick wins."

"There might be more monsters, too. Be careful."

Like Kanade said, these two types weren't necessarily all this dungeon offered. Best to stay flexible and save their best skills for when they were really needed.

For the time being, they changed formation. The monsters came in even stronger, and they batted them away, gaining confidence as they went.

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They went through a number of fights in which Maple was flung back into Haku's gentle embrace.

Parties built around mages with formation-destroying currents were not expecting Maple to soak all the knockback, or for parties to have a powerful way of keeping themselves put.

Once they'd found a winning pattern, Maple Tree started making steady progress.

"……? It's not as deep here."

"You're right."

"Whew, it's much easier to move around."

The canal-like dungeon must have been on a steady incline; gradually, the waters vanished, and they found themselves on dry land.

"The paths are narrowing. Haku can't fit through."

Supergiant was great, but it ran up against spatial limitations. Kasumi couldn't use it indoors.

"If they're done with the knockbacks, we'll be fine. I can handle normal attacks."

"Let's hope."

Maple had spent the bulk of their time in the dungeon either pinned against Haku or walking to the next fight.

Her abilities were still helpful, but it was hard to really call her a good match for these foes.

"Thanks for tanking, Maple. There's more to come!"

"Yep! I'm good to go!"

"The vibe's shifting…"

"New monster types?"

"Likely. No need to change the terrain otherwise…"

They moved on until the water was out of sight. There they saw a faint light down the dimly lit corridor.

They braced themselves for a fight, but the light wasn't moving. Soon they were close enough to identify it.

"Wow…that's incredible…"

Before them was a pit leading to a deep valley, stone pillars serving as platforms.

Peering in, they could see the red glow of molten lava—even Maple wouldn't survive a fall in there.

The gaps between the pillars were sizable, but not too far to jump. Still, not the firmest footing.

"DOT damage…but likely not instadeath."

"Wanna jump down? I'll attach a lifeline."

"No, thanks."

"Jokes aside, we're very high up. If you do fall, it'll be hard to get back."

"Platforming fails are too scary, so lemme make a path."

Sally used Waterway, connecting all the platforms.

"Subzero Domain."

With a crack, the water froze. Now they had a wide ice bridge connecting everything. They had to be careful not to slip, but they made smooth progress over the lava.

"Much safer!"

"Yeah…but they're not making it easy."

Seeing Sally raise her daggers, Maple looked up at the path ahead.

The lava below was not the only threat.

There was a wyvern coming toward them, flanked by two crackling balls of lightning. Maple Tree's footing might be unsteady, but there was no avoiding combat.

"Kasumi, Maple!"

Sally called two names, and both people stepped forward. No one wanted to cede the air to the enemy. It was best to attack before the monsters even got a chance, in hopes of improving the situation.

Kasumi and Sally had options in the air, and Maple followed to keep them in range of Martyr's Devotion.

"Flash Spout!"

Since Subzero Domain was still active, the water froze quickly.

Kasumi ran up this new ice, vaulting off it.

The monsters responded. The wyvern breathed fire, and the lumps of lightning sprayed sparks.

Kasumi let them hit, getting closer to the enemy as she fell.

"I'm fine!" Maple cried from behind. If these attacks couldn't hurt her, no need to pay them any attention.

"Armored Arms! Blood Blade!"

The extra blades slashed at the wyvern while the whiplike liquid snared them all.

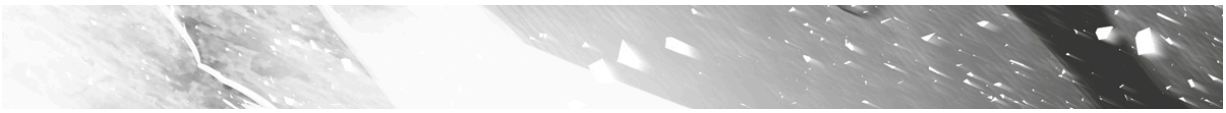
"Necro, Dead Weight."

Chrome's speed debuff backed Kasumi's assault.

"First Blade: Heat Haze."

As she started to fall, she used a skill to ascend again, and another skill that was guaranteed to place her right in front of her foe.





She'd gotten very good at chaining skills to stay airborne. She went right into Third Blade: Blue Moon, bounding around. The lightning balls had no health and were soon gone, and she landed on the wyvern's back.

"Fourth Blade: Whirlwind."

The Armored Arms swung with her, and she landed a clean hit, bringing down the wyvern. Kasumi bounded away from it before it burst, landing on a pillar.

"Whew, that's all she wrote."

"Nice. You made it look easy."

"But if I do fall, I'm done for. Keep an eye out."

"True."

They rejoined the party. The biggest threat there was fighting at all. If they kept their nerves about them, and watched their step, the monsters themselves were not that scary.

"Be careful, everyone! Onward!"

The row of platforms went on for a while, and they moved out across the ice bridge.

Eventually, Iz took over for Sally, placing boards between the columns and providing steadier footing. That meant Mai and Yui could relax and hurl iron balls around—and that got them through the platforming area.

Their tricks had made it easier and brought them to a huge, elaborate door.

Clearly the boss room. The final hurdle keeping them from the tenth stratum.

"Should we buff up?"

"Yeah. If it cancels them, oh well."

""Yes, please!""

She could always use items again. If victory was their goal, best to go in prepared.

They left Martyr's Devotion in place, buffing up the twins. They were Maple Tree's safest path to winning.

Once they were ready, Maple opened the door and they stepped in.

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The boss room was divided down the center. Not physically—conceptually.

To the left were babbling brooks and verdant greenery. Walls and obstacles made of ice dotted the landscape.

To the right, lava burbled through cracks in the rough ground. Lightning regularly arced between floating yellow crystals.

And in the rear, two figures stood back-to-back.

One held a long staff studded in blue gems. A tall, gaunt wizard in a lavishly embroidered white robe.

The other had a dragon's head, scales on its arms and legs, and massive wings. It was over seven feet tall, clad in full armor, and wielding a lightning-laced greatsword as tall as it was.

Maple Tree took a step forward, and the two bosses turned toward them, brandishing their weapons.

Water and lava spurted from the ground, transforming the room.

The battlefield collapsed. Waterfalls—some made of lava—flowed into the abyss below, and the ground was now made of rocky pillars that resembled the path they'd taken in.

Some of these platforms were covered in ice, water, lava, or electricity—using those would likely involve a penalty.

Before Maple Tree could regroup, the mage aimed his staff at them.

Five blue magic circles deployed. Guessing what they meant, Sally turned to Maple.

"Heaven's Throne!"

A pure-white throne appeared.

A tornado-like deluge emerged from the magic circles, washing everything it touched into the abyss below.

Sally and Kasumi took evasive action. Chrome nullified it with his

shield. But not everyone had those options.

"……! I-I'm okay!" Maple yelled over the roar of the torrent.

Everyone's knockbacks were hitting her, and she couldn't move at all, but the throne kept her from flying away.

If she tried to stand up, she'd likely slip right off the pillar—a fall from which she might never return.

"If I can't move, then…Ancient Weapon!"

With a *ka-chunk*, her cube split apart and became a massive tube.

Every hit the party took went to Maple, so the energy powering Ancient Weapon was increasing rapidly. She might be stuck on her throne, but that just turned her into a stationary turret.

A blue beam of light shot back up through the quintuple torrent. It was aimed at the source of the spell. But before it hit, a giant white circle spread out, blocking the beam with an equally large wall of ice.

"Keep shooting, Maple! It can't use that for every attack!"

"You got it!"

Still, Sally thought that if Maple's attacks couldn't end this, the rest of them would have to tip the balance.

The torrent and terrain made that difficult. Martyr's Devotion covered a substantial area, but it didn't reach all the way to the mage.

That made it a tall order to get Mai and Yui all the way over there.

As she racked her brains for a solution, the battle progressed.

The dragon warrior took to the skies, coming to them. It was obviously a close-range fighter. With little room to maneuver, Maple Tree couldn't position themselves advantageously, but they preferred it when bosses came to them.

"Take that one out first!"

"Got it!"

"I'll make some legroom!"

Iz took out some iron plates and let them fall over to connect the pillars.

Fire breath hit them, but Maple kept Iz safe, and she'd been

particular about the durability of the iron plates, so they survived the fires, too.

"Chrome and I will slow it down."

"Sally and I will pin it in place."

""Got it!""

"Then let me give you room to maneuver… Taunt!"

The dragon warrior was headed for the twins, so Chrome distracted it, blocking the greatsword as it dropped from the sky.

"Gah……!"

A crushing blow. It was a unique sword that his shield alone could not stop. Electricity crackled, and Maple shouldered the stun.

Which meant Ancient Weapon stopped attacking.

Two magic circles covered the ceiling, one red, one white. Definitely bad news. But before anyone had time to move, a pillar of ice and a pillar of lava rained down.

"I'll block 'em, someone take the boss! Guardian! Spirit Light!"

They had two great shielders. If Chrome pulled and nullified the damage on top of Martyr's Devotion, they could survive any AOE.

And while he bought time, Maple recovered from the stun and started shooting at the mage again. Iz and Kanade finished expanding the platform.

Kasumi and Sally were darting around.

"Going right."

"I'll take the left."

On safe footing, Kasumi dove below the dragon warrior.

That close, it couldn't ignore her, and the second it turned, Sally webbed off an Ice Pillar and hurtled it toward its back.

"Flash Spout!"

Formation disruption, foothold creation, occasional evacuations—Sally's water skills were good for all sorts of things. This time it pushed the dragon warrior away.

As it escaped the spout and tried to fly upward, purple mist surrounded it.

"Necro, Dead Weight."

"Slow Field."

"Now!"

Chrome, Kanade, and Iz cast debuffs, diminishing the dragon warrior's velocity.

Mai and Yui were already potioned up, and this bought them enough time to move in.

""Destroy Mode! Double Strike!""

The blows were so heavy, the dragon warrior's greatsword seemed almost adorable in comparison. Flash Spout had knocked it their way, and they knocked it the other.

With a boom, the warrior slammed into the wall behind the mage. Its HP bar dropped like a stone, and they were sure they'd finished it off.

But a moment later, the wall behind it lit up. A white magic circle refilled its HP bar to the halfway point.

""No way!""

"The mage has a resurrect…or wait…"

"Is this one of those 'defeat them both at the same time' fights?!"

"Very possible. Problem is…"

One, they could handle. But with this formation, they couldn't handle both at the same time.

The mage was too far away. And the twins weren't exactly capable of reducing their damage. If they acted, they one-shotted things. If they wanted to hit both at once, they'd have to split up the twins.

In which case, the problem was Martyr's Devotion's limited range. Splitting the twins meant they had to take risks.

"Gotta send several of us to the back, huh?"

"Not seeing any other way. But who…?"

Mai or Yui, one or the other. They'd have to split up Maple and Chrome, too. Then someone would need to help expand the platforms.

Doing all that at once didn't leave much wiggle room.

And the cost would be stability. If they failed to pull it off the first time, they'd have trouble regrouping.

If they had to take a risk, they wanted their odds to be the best they could be.

"Sally, what do we do?"

"Maple, any ideas?"

"Huh? Me?!"

Maple's jaw dropped. She had not expected the ball to come to her court.

But Sally had a good reason for asking. Since Martyr's Devotion was key to their strategy, Maple's opinion mattered.

"If you've got nothing, we'll just have to avoid them, then try and hit when they're exposed."

The knockback came from that torrent. If they could find a way to get out of that, then Maple would be free to move.

Still, that would take time and effort.

"……I think I might have something!" Maple said, brightening up.

"Yeah? Then I'll distract him while you hash it out," Chrome said.

Everyone darted over to Maple, and they went into a huddle. They soon concluded that the risk was worth the return.

So it was time to lay the groundwork. Kasumi quickly relayed the plan to Chrome, and he looked appalled…but agreed.

To one-shot both bosses at once, they had to split up the twins.

Maple couldn't keep both safe, so Chrome had to step up.

"Wool Up! Crystallization!"

Maple solidified the surface of her woolly form.

"Okay, the timing will work."

"Cool. Then I'll bring it in!"

No time like the present. Despite her added bulk, Maple was still somehow stuck to the throne.

"Ready, Mai?"

"……Ready!"

"Go!"

"Fey, Item Boost."

"Mass Spell Barrier!"

Sally gave the sign, and Mai raised her hammer. As she did, Iz buffed her items, putting barricades on the platforms as Kanade put up magical defenses. That momentarily stopped the torrent, freeing Maple from the knockback.

The crystalized Mapleball was no longer pinned to the throne. Mai's hammer swung, sending the orb flying.

It was a brute-force approach, but still, the torrent would push her back.

So Maple employed her sole means of combatting that.

"Heavy Body!"

A knockback-nullification skill. With Maple's stats, it also immobilized her, but that didn't matter when she was already in the air. She was safe until she landed.

A wall of ice appeared to block her approach. The Mapleball was hardly iron. Even with Mai's power behind the launch, it would do no damage on impact.

But just before she hit the wall, the crystallization ended.

"Wow, Sally!"

She'd timed that perfectly. The red glow inside the wool grew brighter with no crystals to block it.

There was an enormous boom. All the explosives stuffed into the Mapleball blasted away the ice wall.

""Taunt!""

Maple and Chrome both drew aggro. The dragon warrior charged at Chrome, and an ice road stretched across the air behind it.

Mai was in the boss's blind spot.

"The rest is yours!"

Maple went rolling across a nearby platform. Her job was punching through that ice wall. She had skills that did damage…but nothing like the twins'. She alone could not guarantee a simultaneous defeat.

But her ball had contained more than just explosives. It had held another attacker—one a bit more reckless than Mai, with the guts to carry off a crazy plan.

Through the shattered ice wall, sliding right up to the mage, with her hammer raised—Yui.

""Double Strike!""

They were on opposite ends of the room, but their timing was perfectly in sync. Hammers slammed home and the bosses hit the walls beyond.

Dust flew. Fire and water burst. They heard the bosses shatter and saw them vanish. Their plan had worked. A smile lit up each of their faces.

Once the bosses were down, the field returned to a more walkable state. The others caught up with Maple and Yui.

"Nice. That went well."

"Yeah! Thank goodness."

"The twins' strength is epic. At least these bosses didn't have damage caps like that king."

"That was clearly exceptional. But we'll still have to watch out for it in the future."

They'd made one attempt at downing the dragon warrior, and that outcome had proven that their strategy had potential. If the mage had turned out to have a damage cap, the plan would have backfired.

Things had gone well this time, but from now on, they'd have to account for the fact that the twins couldn't one-shot everything.

"We're all looking forward to the tenth stratum. Let's go check it out! The path's opened up back there."

"I wonder what it's like. I've heard it's the biggest yet."

""We can't wait!""

"Then let's move out!"

Maple led the way, and they climbed the stairs to the tenth stratum. After a lengthy climb, they saw light pouring down from above.

They were almost there.

Anticipation swelling, they took their first step onto the tenth stratum's field.



CHAPTER 5

Defense Build and Splitting Up

The view opened before them, and they found themselves on top of a hill. The sights of the tenth stratum surrounded them. Dead ahead were steep mountains, their peaks buried in clouds. The scenery around that…was awfully familiar.

"Are those the third stratum's machines?"

"Those cherry blossoms are very fourth layer. I see some Japanese-style towers, too."

"Is the fifth stratum up above? The clouds are clustered, so I can't see… What do we think?"

Repeats of each map's theme.

From the look of it, every stratum was represented somewhere. At the moment, they were in a bog-standard fantasy zone with lots of natural splendor.

Just like the first stratum.

"Really takes me back, Sally!"

"Yeah, it's been a while. It'll be fun to tackle this. Let's find that boss!"

"Of course!"

As they spoke, a message arrived from the developers. It was a brief rundown of the tenth stratum's main purpose.

"Uh, let's see…"

Maple read through it.

The tenth stratum was menaced by a being known only as the demon lord. By visiting villages and completing quests, players could track down the demon lord's location and ultimately defeat them.

"Uh-huh, simple enough."

There was one big town in each themed area, and they could

base their operations out of any. The questline branched a lot, so they could clear it in whatever order they liked.

"'There are a lot more hidden items and skills than in previous layers, so seek them out'…ooh!"

"Still more?! Damn, if they've pointed it out, they must mean it."

"They really went all out. I'm almost scared to wonder what the eleventh stratum will offer…"

Players were getting stronger, so it was safe to assume monsters would try to keep up. Best to find as many hidden upgrades as possible.

"How many will go entirely unnoticed?"

"But if there's lots, then you're almost guaranteed to find something!"

"I can't wait!"

"Exploring, bosses…and secrets galore!"

"We're in the first stratum, right? Should we hit up the Guild Home here?"

"Agreed! We need a break. That was a tough dungeon!"

"Exactly."

They found the town on their maps and headed toward it.

After a brief walk, they reached the closest town.

The look of the place was nothing out of the ordinary—a stone-paved road lined with NPC-run shops, and behind them, all the Guild Homes. The construction was classic European style—like in any typical fantasy game.

Neither the layout nor the NPCs were remarkable. It was exactly like the first stratum they had cleared. For the majority of the game's players, this was where it all began.

And now it marked a new beginning.

"First stop: our Guild Home!" Maple cried. With one eye on her map, she led the way.

They might have seen a town like this before, but that just meant even the slightest variations caught their eyes. The tenth stratum's shops sold very different things, and the NPCs were different, too. As were the quests they offered.

Elements of the previous environments might be available, but this was an all-new map.

Especially the hidden parts.

Staving off the urge to explore right then and there, they headed to the Guild Home as fast as their legs could carry them.

Inside the Guild Home, they got right to planning.

"What next?"

"Explore out of this base…or do a circuit of the stratum, unlocking the other Guild Homes."

The tenth stratum was huge. There was a town for each theme, and Guild Homes in each of them. There was a teleport circle in each, making it easy to bounce from town to town.

"Probably best to get those unlocked early. Sounds like you can progress the quests from any town."

"So we should split up?"

"Yeah, to start."

Best to lay the foundations for further exploration. Maple Tree set to unlocking Guild Homes as their first goal. And when they moved on to the second goal, Chrome spoke up.

"So I've got a proposition. Well, maybe that's too grand a word for it, but…it's a thought."

""……?""

Maple and Sally had no clue what it could be, but everyone else seemed to be aware of it. The two of them waited for him to elaborate.

"You said you won't be logging in much for a while after this stratum's event, right? So we want to help you explore however you please."

"Heh-heh, we want you to play to your heart's content."

Leveling, questing, dungeons—

Everyone's priority was to help with that.

That was what Chrome suggested.

"You've both helped us a ton, not just in events, but in the regular grind."

"Nothing as formal as paying back that debt…but we want to back you up."

"We'll handle tough monsters!"

"We'll be useful!"

Fun was always the priority in a game. Until the time came to step away.

"Thank you! But…how is that different? Don't you always help?"

"Ha-ha, that goes both ways. Take it as a statement of intent."

"Got it. It is appreciated!"

Maple and Sally would take all the help they could get. They'd always planned to play the hell out of this stratum, and that would require every member's involvement. The tenth stratum was just *that* big.

Still, that didn't change their ultimate goal—beating the super-boss hidden somewhere on the map. They wanted to defeat that demon lord! Ordinarily, they'd have to race all over, clearing quests and hunting for information—that's where the rest of the guild could step in.

"But…I bet Maple comes back with the biggest clue."

"Mm-hmm, she does that."

"Heh-heh, she's got a proven track record."

"Nothing will surprise me."

""Maple's amazing!""

"I-I'm not that confident…"

"……You'll do fine."

"You too, Sally?!"

"Ha-ha, sorry. What do you *want* to do, Maple?"

With her guildmates backing her up, she could go anywhere on the huge map. Take any quest or dungeon. She was free to play or explore anywhere and everywhere.

"……Then, Sally, since they're offering, let's you and me explore it together!"

“Ha-ha-ha. Sure, I’m glad you chose me. I’ll be your sword and shield, Maple. Wherever you go.”

“Ah, you’re my knight now? I accept this honor.”

“You’ve got it.”

She’d let Maple play her way. Relax and let the guild take care of the rest. With that, Sally and Maple’s tenth-stratum adventure began.

With the discussion over, no tears were shed—they got right to exploring.

“I’m gonna head to the sixth-stratum area. Probably tough for you two,” said Chrome.

“Heh-heh…more like tough for Sally.”

“Please take care of that…”

“Then I’ll head to the fourth stratum. That’s where my interests lie…,” Kasumi offered.

“What should we do?”

“Hmm…considering the fights that are on the way…”

“Want to ride on our bears?”

“Having some protection makes it easier for us!”

“Then let’s do that. I guess the third stratum’s closest. If they have flying machines, that’ll make things easier.”

Chrome took the sixth stratum, Kasumi the fourth, and the other four the third—each headed in a different direction.

“Call us if you need help! I’ll fly right over!”

“Literally!” Chrome laughed. “Okay, I’ll call if I’m in trouble. Things can get a bit hairy on my own.”

Hoping everyone made it, Maple and Sally waved them out.

“That offer made me kinda nervous.”

“Don’t sweat it! Like you said, Maple, it’s just what they’ve always done.”

“Yeah!”

“So where do we start?”

“That’s a good question.”

“Ah-ha, there are so many options.”

They could just run straight out into the field nearby, but after some thought, they decided to look around town first.

"Maybe we'll find some quests!"

"Sounds good. That's more likely to get us somewhere than just wandering."

Maple and Sally left the Guild Home and started roaming the streets.

"Really feels like a classic fantasy world. Anything catch your eye?"

"Oooh, oooh, what's that back there?"

Maple was pointing all the way down the main road at a two-story building guarded by a pair of armored NPCs with spears. Smoke rose from a big smokestack; much of the rest of the town was residential looking, but this place seemed like it *did* something.

"Wanna check it out?"

"Definitely!"

At their approach, the NPC guards glanced their way but didn't try to stop them from entering.

There were several NPCs walking around inside, carrying bundles of paper covered in maps and writing. There was a big table at the back, and a discussion raged around it.

The man at the center of that discussion reacted to the girls' approach, turning to face them.

His armor was even heavier than the guards'. A big shield and sword stood behind him, suggesting he had the power to match the armor. Even the NPCs were tenth-stratum level.

"Pardon me. We were just discussing our countermeasures to the demon lord's invasion. There have been so many monster attacks. What brings you here?"

When his line ended, a quest mark appeared above his head.

"Maple, we can accept quests here."

"True!"

"Good, we found something already."

"Uh, let's see…"

It wasn't just one quest. They'd unlocked several, but there were a bunch still unavailable to them that had unlock conditions listed.

“Ah-ha! Looks like you have to clear quests in other towns to access these.”

“So you can make progress anywhere. If you do a bunch of quests in a different town, maybe you can skip a bunch of the early stuff here.”

“Makes sense.”

They didn’t have plans to visit other towns just yet, so they decided to do a few of the quests available here.

“Then…how about these?”

“Yeah, let’s go with them.”

They took the quests, and the man spoke again.

“You’ll lend us your aid?! Fantastic! We’re short on hands. Still… they are ferocious. A chance to demonstrate your own might!”

Harder jobs would follow. Clearing these quests would unlock more.

“We’ll do our best!”

“Even a simple quest is likely harder than anything on the ninth stratum, so let’s stay focused.”

“Yeah! Let’s go clear this thing!”

“That’s the spirit.”

They checked the quest destination and headed out of the building.

650 Name: Anonymous Mage

Tenth stratum too big

651 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Way too big…

652 Name: Anonymous Archer So much to do

653 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Anyone recommend a starting town?

654 Name: Anonymous Mage

Haven’t checked them all.
But definitely *not* the eighth stratum town.

655 Name: Anonymous Archer

Diving every time is rough!
Though I ain’t been…it might actually not be that bad.

656 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

Monsters=tough.
They’re a bit overkill, right?

657 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

They’re meant to filter us.

658 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

On the upside, there’s lots of ways to get around.
Not all of us tamed mountable monsters.

659 Name: Anonymous Mage

Not just horses. You can ride dragons!
They’re pricey for a rental, though.

660 Name: Anonymous Archer

It’s huge that we can *all* fly.
And they’re fast.

661 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder But even so, exploration’s endless.
Tons of quests, hidden events, secret areas…

662 Name: Anonymous Mage

They said there’d be more.
Are there?

663 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

If you can’t find a hidden area it might as well not exist.
Far as I’m concerned, NWO has no such thing.

664 Name: Anonymous Archer

Given the sheer size of the map, your odds of stumbling on a rare event may not be improved much.

665 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

But they said there were more, so here’s hoping!
I really wanna stumble on one.

666 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

That’s down to luck and your instincts.
Though I’m sure there are some good skills out there if you’re just tackling hard quests…

667 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Lots of places on this map have overlap between the themes, which makes everything look like it might have a secret in it. That *is* exciting.

668 Name: Anonymous Mage

Gotta get powered up before the event.

669 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder Trust your luck and keep those feet moving.

670 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Oh, yeah, if you're mostly getting items from crafters, scope out the shops.
They got some good stuff.

671 Name: Anonymous Archer

Can confirm!

672 Name: Anonymous Mage

Shouldn't *just* run round the field, then.
There's a reason there's so many towns and shops.

673 Name: Anonymous Great Shielder

There are also traveling merchants out in the field.

674 Name: Anonymous Mage

Too much to explore!

675 Name: Anonymous Spear Master

Something somewhere's gotta lead to a rare event.

676 Name: Anonymous Mage

Overwhelming!
But in a good way!

677 Name: Anonymous Greatsworder

Word

Any tears shed were probably happy ones. It was clear they were a long way from running out of places to go.

◆□◆□◆□◆□◆

Maple and Sally were headed to the field to take care of those quests…

But on the way, they saw a player mounted on an armored dragon, taking to the skies.

"Is that a pet?"

"……Doesn't look like it. Let's check it out."

"Okay!"

They made a detour to the dragon launch site.

There they found a lot of armored dragons and the horses that the players had previously ridden. There were a bunch of mounts, animal and monster alike.

"……Guess you can rent them. The dragons are pretty expensive."

"Are there limits…?"

"I'm afraid you do still need stats. The numbers would be fine for any normal player who made it this far, but…"

Maple's build was so extreme she'd struggle—and fail—to ride them.

"Heh-heh, but two can ride these!"

"Oh!"

"If we want to try it, I'll have to be in front. I've got the stats to ride any of these."

"So Syrup's gonna take some time out…"

Maple usually kept her turtle aloft with the Psychokinesis skill, and it was quite slow. Not nearly zippy enough to explore a map this big.

"They are *just* movement options, no combat assists, so we'll just have to get Syrup to help us in battle."

"Can do! Um, we've done horses, so let's take a dragon!"

"Cool. They can fly, which should help a lot. And that's why we came over here anyway."

"Yup, yup!"

Dragons weren't cheap, but the girls had played a lot and had plenty of money saved.

Both climbed aboard a smaller dragon. At Sally's signal, it took to the sky.

"So fast!"

"Fastest mount yet! Don't fall off! I mean, I'll come pick you up, but…"

"I know!"

Maple could survive any fall, but it would be bad if she landed on someone.

She kept a firm grip on Sally, who kept the dragon's head pointed toward their destination.

They flew for a while but, in time, neared their goal and descended to a landing.

"It'll fly to our position if we call for it…for the duration of the

rental anyway. We just have to leave it somewhere safe."

"Then we don't have to worry about it in a fight!"

They had the dragon stay put and headed to the quest marker.

It was a goblin den. They'd cleared their share of these before—the darkness deepening as they went in, monsters awaiting them. The goal was to kill a set number of them—a basic hunt quest. Defeat the demon lord's minions and secure the safety of the realm.

"Guess we've gotta go in."

"I'll lead the way!"

To kill monsters, they had to go to them. Maple raised her shield to keep Sally safe and advanced into the gloom.

Not long after, they spied a few goblins.

"All right!"

"……Maple!"

"Yikes?!"

Sally grabbed Maple and yanked her back—just as a jagged spear shot out of the wall. It scraped Maple and damage sparks flew.

The goblins cackled merrily and fled deeper in.

"They've set traps."

"Oww… Thanks, Sally."

"Damage isn't *that* high…but they're piercing."

No ordinary trap could get through Maple's defense. If it could—it would one-shot any other player.

"Even if you do get hit, as long as we stop to heal, you'll be fine. But there's no telling how fast these traps will spring."

If piercing arrows shot at her from all directions, she might go down before she had a chance to react.

Sally told Maple to check the floors and walls as she went, but after a minute's thought, Maple had a different idea.

"What about this?"

"Hmm? Lay it on me." Maple explained her idea, and Sally nodded a bunch, thinking it over. "Not bad. No risk to us… Let's try it!"

"Woo!"

"Start the setup."

"Okay!"

Maple moved in front of Sally. Unable to tell exactly where the

traps were, she aimed her short sword toward the back, tilting it slightly downward.

"Hydra!"

A torrent of poison shot out, purple goo coating the den's interior.

Maple nodded, pleased with herself, then took some bombs from her inventory.

Iz had made them. They exploded after a brief delay. Naturally, they were plenty powerful.

"Okay!"

"Flash Spout!"

On Maple's signal, Sally summoned a stream of water, washing the lethal poison and bombs into the depths of the den.

"Hydra!"

"Waterway!"

Maple made poison; Sally washed it away. There was only one way in or out of the den, and they were standing in it.

They didn't hear screams, but over the whoosh of toxic water, they heard the bombs going off.

"Oh! The quest count went up!"

"That went well."

A goblin had perished *somewhere*, whether poisoned, drowned, or blown to bits. The den was now filling with poison diluted in water, all without the duo even taking a step.

Just as the dungeon began to resemble the eighth stratum…

"Oh!"

"Nice."

"Yes! Quest clear!"

"A clean…? Yes, a clean victory."

It must be a hellscape in the back, but they couldn't exactly go see. The water and poison would time out and vanish eventually.

"Since that was easy, let's move on to the next. This one seems made for you."

"Oh, I know what you mean!"

"Yep, *that* quest."

They'd taken several quests with an eye on making short work of them and getting to the demon lord all the faster. Since they'd slaughtered these monsters from the entrance, neither girl was worn out. They could tackle the next fight in peak condition.

"It's a bit far, so let's take another dragon flight."

"Rad!"

Maple hopped on the dragon behind Sally, and they took off again.

"At this rate, we should have time for a third. Ideally."

"Heh-heh-heh, I've got this!"

"I know you do."

They flew for a while, then reached their destination. Flying so fast that they could avoid most monsters. Dragon power.

When they landed, they found the trees and flowers had withered away. It was a wasteland.

"We're here!"

"All right, the quest name seemed very Maple, but…"

That's why they'd picked it. The quest was called Eradicate the Source of the Poisons! It left little room for confusion.

Poison = Maple, Maple = poison. She'd gained many other options and a variety of techniques, but that was still an invaluable tool. She'd just wiped out an entire goblin nest with it! And she didn't just sling poison—she was immune to it. Poison couldn't do much if someone had countermeasures, and between Poison Nullification and Martyr's Devotion, Maple neutralized the threat.

The ground before them had several cracks in it, from which purple gas rose.

"Very toxic looking!"

"Better put Martyr's Devotion up first."

"Good idea. Martyr's Devotion!"

Wings spread from Maple's back, and a defensive field spread out, transferring all party damage to her.

Even Sally could not dodge poison mist. If an enemy blanketed the area, she'd be forced to waste a valuable skill.

They weren't sure if these enemies used AOEs, so it was best not

to assume she could evade them. Sally might make it work anyway, but one way she'd avoided taking damage thus far was by not pushing her luck. Their best option was for her to rely on Maple's skills.

"Let's check these out."

"Yeah."

Maple moved over to the crack and waited for the next gush of purple mist. A moment later, she was right in the thick of it and checked the effects out. She turned back to Sally and called, "Should be fine!"

"Mm-hmm, then we just have to watch for monsters."

"On it!"

Certain the terrain was no threat, they headed in.

The farther they went, the more cracks there were, until the mist nearly blinded them. Maple made it so that it was *just* a visual obstruction, but to players weak to poison, it would be hard to even move around.

"Wow…it's like a purple fog!"

"I could definitely not dodge this. Glad we chose this approach."

As they plodded onward, they finally found a monster.

Snakes with purple scales—matching the mist—slithered in from all directions. Nothing as big as Haku, but still a few yards long. They could wrap themselves around Maple and Sally with length to spare and were at least as thick as either girl's torso.

Once a player was bound, escaping would be tricky. That was their first impression, so without a word, they put their backs to each other's, ensuring they weren't caught from behind.

An automatic choice, ingrained from many previous battles. As their weapons rose, the purple snakes shot forward.

Even if they hit, Maple would soak it. Sally knew that, but her eyes caught the snake's attack with pinpoint accuracy.

"Ice Pillar!"

She wasn't about to let herself put Maple in any danger.

The pillar launched one snake into the air, then she swapped her weapon to a hammer and smashed another snake's head.

Since Sally had taken care of two, Maple merely needed to swing

her shield—annihilating the snake in front of her.

Unlike Sally's attacks, this was Devour. Still a no-holds-barred one-hit kill.

She didn't need tricks or fancy maneuvers. One touch and it was over. The simplest thing.

But Maple couldn't handle everything as smoothly as Sally. She swallowed up one snake, but the remaining one shot in from the side, biting her torso.

"……Hyah!"

But biting her meant getting close. And she had more Devour left. Which meant it was dead. She merely pressed her shield to it, and Devour ate the other snake. Didn't even take a second.

"Whew!"

No damage. At close range, Maple was stronger.

"I'll handle the rest. Save that for the boss."

"Got it!"

Sally could handle two at once. Maple settled in for Machine God suppressing fire.

But that's when Maple's HP suddenly dropped.

"Huh?"

"Waterway!"

Sally detected it immediately, attached her weapons, and yanked Maple up and above.

"Leap!"

She made a foothold in the air above, bounding even higher up above the purple mist, ensuring there was not so much as a mosquito around. Then she yanked her webs, pulling Maple into her arms.

"Heal."

"Syrup, Awaken! Giganticize! Psychokinesis!"

Maple also handled this well. Catching on to Sally's plan, she made her turtle large enough to sit on and had it float in the sky below them. They landed on its shell.

Now they were safe, but confused. Neither knew why Maple's HP

had dropped.

"Wh-why'd I take damage?"

"Don't panic. I'll heal you up; you check your status."

Sally took out a potion, prompting Maple to investigate.

"Um…huh? I'm poisoned?"

Maple found a poison icon over her HP bar. She hadn't seen one of those in so long, it left her slack-jawed.

"Poison, huh? Then let's cure status effects."

Maple drank the potion Sally handed her, and the poison icon vanished.

"Oh, this might be it! Reduced resistances!"

Not a status effect, but a debuff—weakening Poison Nullification for a few minutes.

"Interesting. That must be a side effect of the snake's bite. Making you vulnerable to the poison mist."

"Then I can't get bit!"

"Right. Get your shield up or dodge? Monsters are getting pretty nasty."

"You can't even trust resistances now…"

"Iz has items that buff resistances, and there's all kinds of skills out there."

Like Maple, most players had resistances, and items were getting pretty good at handling these situations, too. Monsters with status effect–focused builds would logically come up with ways of getting around that.

"Best to keep it in mind, then. That'll help avoid panic when the moment comes."

"True!"

"It's not all bad news."

"……?"

"If monsters are using it, then somewhere out there is a resistance-reduction skill for players. If you get your hands on that…"

Maple still used poison a lot, but these days she was mostly going for the instant-death effect provided by Bug Urn Curse. Her poison and her powerful paralysis move were no longer really pulling their

weight.

"Ooh!"

"Of course, someone might use it against us. Gotta be careful."

"Right! Okay, then let's go catch one of these snakes."

"……?"

"I mean, if I eat one, I might get the skill!"

"Oh. Right. Snake meat… Fair enough. I'll catch one alive."

Some people *did* eat snakes. Sally managed to convince herself of this and waited for Maple's debuff to expire; then, it was time to catch a snake.

"One should do for now, right? We know we can heal the poison damage."

"Um…but how do we snare one?"

"Might be a bit risky to try that inside the toxic mist. I'd like to pull one up to Syrup's back…which *should* be doable. Hmm…"

Most monsters didn't exactly slow down at low health. Even with one HP they'd be sprightly.

"Any ideas, Sally?"

"Um, some, just…"

"Lay 'em on me!" Maple leaned in excitedly, eager to hear what Sally suggested. Sally resigned herself to it and explained her plan. "I can do that!"

"That's why I was reluctant… It's risky!"

"It'll be fine. If I'm in trouble, I'll just attack."

"……Fair. All right. Let's give it a shot. Stand over there."

Maple stood up, and Sally shot some webs at her, winding them around her waist.

"I'll be waiting for your signal."

"Aye-aye!"

Sally moved to Syrup's edge and lowered Maple over. The prey: a snake. The bait: Maple. Fishing: start!

Since the ground was hidden beneath the purple fog, Sally had to wait for Maple's sign.

After a moment…

“Sally! Now!”

At the cry from below, Sally reeled in her webs. On the other end, she could feel something heavy—a sign they’d hooked their prey.





“Potion, please!”

“Mm-hmm.”

She tossed a few potions down and went back to pulling Maple up. At last, Maple came over the edge, and went rolling across Syrup’s back……totally trussed up in that snake and unable to move, its fangs buried deep in her neck.

“Can you get your mouth open?”

“B-barely!”

“I’ll keep healing you. And I’ll debuff its defense.”

“Thanks!”

“I’ve got a few seasonings, too.”

“Th-thanks?”

These snakes could reduce Maple’s resistances, but outside the poison fog, they weren’t exactly exploiting their full potential. Their native poison was weak enough that Sally’s healing could keep up.

Meanwhile, Maple started chowing down. This didn’t do a lot of damage, but the snake had no way to heal. And that was everything.

“Let’s try a different flavor.”

“Oh, that’s spicy!”

“……That’s probably the poison.”

“Ahh…”

Maple steadily munched away, and at long last, the snake’s HP hit zero.

Always good to enjoy what one fished up. The snake vanished with a shattering sound, and Maple was free of her bondage.

“Well? Any skills?”

“Um…sadly, no.”

“Well, them’s the breaks. There are lots of monsters! Might be worth trying if we find anything else with that skill.”

Resistance reduction would really expand Maple’s arsenal. They might find more promising monsters—or hidden events—while they were exploring the tenth stratum.

Best to call it one more thing to look forward to. For now, they had to avoid the ground, so they flew on toward the toxic depths.

“Think anything’ll stop us?”

"Not sure. Not at first anyway."

If Syrup could take them all the way to the poison boss, great. Hoping the other monsters wouldn't obstruct them, they enjoyed a pleasant flight.

So far, so good. They were now pretty far in, and examining the ground from the edge of the flying turtle's shell.

"I can't see anything!"

"Guess we'll go down."

Even these two would struggle to defeat foes they couldn't see.

Perhaps they could pull it off eventually if they dropped a bunch of Iz's bombs and Maple fired all her Machine God artillery, but there was no need to waste that much time and resources.

"Maple, lower us down."

"Right!"

They couldn't see below, but it was best not to dive off the side. Maple slowly lowered Syrup into the mist. Beneath that fog, they couldn't tell if they'd be landing in a monster den or a bottomless pit.

They'd taken a blind leap once before, and they'd nearly landed on a bunch of spikes. These days they preferred to look first.

"Anything?"

"Not even a sound!"

"Then let's land."

With a *wump*, Syrup dropped to the surface. Their surroundings were still blanketed in purple fog, but there were no signs of any monsters.

"Where is the source?"

"Maple, is that it?"

"……?"

Sally was pointing at a huge crack in the ground. As wide as the two of them standing side by side with arms outstretched. They moved closer and peered in. The quantity of mist pouring out was certainly far greater than anywhere else.

"Yikes!"

"If you couldn't null poison, no way you'd get through this."

"Keeping Martyr's Devotion going, then!"

"Even more grateful for it."

On closer inspection, there was a series of platforms along the crack's edge. They couldn't exactly ride Syrup down, so they'd just have to follow the intended route.

"No telling what's waiting after a fall, so be careful. If we get separated, we won't even be able to locate each other."

"Yup, minding my step!"

Gingerly, they descended into the crevasse. Eventually, they reached a murky underground chamber. There was a hissing sound from every direction—poison spurting out.

"Watch out."

"Yeah. No telling what's hiding here."

On guard, they examined their surroundings. The space was pretty big, but the ceilings were fairly low, making it feel cramped. It would be tough for them to maneuver vertically.

Splut. Mingled with the hissing poison, they heard a sound like liquid splattering.

A dark-purple liquid shot out of the fog, and they knew right away that it was poison. A lump not unlike Maple's Hydra was coming their way. Sally reacted first.

"Flash Spout!"

Sally stepped out of the skill's way, and the stream of water pushed the poison back. Maple raised her shield against this unseen foe, scurrying to Sally's side.

"Something's out there."

"A boss…right?"

"Probably."

Without seeing it, they didn't have much to work with. But the boss wasn't waiting for them; it was lobbing more poison their way.

The projectiles were on the slow side. Sally could easily avoid them, and even Maple probably could if she tried. But if this was a poison slinger, then they couldn't exactly charge recklessly at it.

"It stays on the ground, huh?"

"Sally, don't step out of range!"

A puddle of poison remained where the projectiles landed. The duo was already half-blinded by the fog, which meant the field gave the boss a big advantage.

Without Martyr's Devotion, they likely wouldn't even have had time to stop and talk.

"Guess you could start firing back?"

"Sure thing!"

Maple deployed her weapons and sent a barrage into the fog. She swept the area, up and down, right and left, and caught something —chipping away at its HP.

Spotting that, they closed in. Sally moved ahead but stayed inside Martyr's Devotion and tried to catch a glimpse.

"It's some sort of slime!"

A big, purple gelatinous body. Purple mist sprayed out of it, and the entire boss itself appeared to be made of poison. It had no arms or legs, no eyes or mouth. It was a living ball of poison.

"Cover Move!"

Maple caught up with Sally, allowing her to get even closer.

The boss moved slowly. There was no way it could escape from Sally. She called out Oboro, wreathed her daggers in fire and water, and charged in.

"Quintuple Slash!"

Her blades sank deep, leaving gouges spraying red sparks. But even with the three layers of damage her skills did, it didn't feel like she'd accomplished much.

"Pretty tanky… Does it have damage reduction?"

Sally backed off before it could counterattack, squinting into the fog to see what it did.

The boss swelled up and sprayed a stream of extra-thick toxic fog.

"Sally!"

It spread rapidly, making dodging hard. Martyr's Devotion was still active, but Maple called Sally close, just in case, and the mist caught up with them.

"Urgh……?!"

"I was afraid it would have one!"

That icon meant Maple was poisoned. Even the regular snake mobs there had resistance reduction; it was no shock that the boss did, too.

The only problem was that they had no options to get away.

"Maple, you focus on healing."

"Heaven's Throne. Glow of Deliverance. Meditation."

In addition to her healing skills, Maple used one of Iz's items, surrounding herself with green mist that healed her continuously. With a regular potion topping it off, she had five heals at once, and that filled up her HP nicely. Watching Chrome fight had proven the strength of constant healing.

"If it's *just* poison, I should be all right."

But if she was sitting on the throne, Maple couldn't move. While Meditation was active, she couldn't even attack. Maple was currently a statue that provided impenetrable defense.

"We've gotta make it come to us…but will it?"

At this range, the boss was content to lob poison at them. The boss fight was likely not designed to be a lengthy battle of attrition (not in this poison), which meant one or the other—Sally—would have to move if this fight was going to go anywhere.

But Sally also couldn't leave Maple's protection.

Maybe Flash Spout would knock it their way. She considered the idea, but then Maple let out a squawk.

"Sally! This might be our shot!"

"……?"

"It's got a resistance reduction!"

"……! Right. On it."

It seemed her friend had not even considered that this might be a tough battle, much less a losing one. Was that confidence born from strength? Or from faith in her fighting partner? *Hopefully the latter*, Sally thought, changing up her strategies.

The snake had been an appetizer. Now for the main dish.

Perhaps the boss had what they wanted. Sally did what she could to deliver that slime to Maple's gullet.

“Okay! Iz really gives us so many more options.”

Sally had been tossing balls into the back. Not at random, either. The angle and sound of the incoming projectiles gave her a good idea of where the boss was, so she was aiming these balls to land behind it.

There was a thud, and the mist rippled.

When she heard that, Sally shot her webs into the fog. She felt them snare something. Certain it had worked, she reeled them in.

Something scraped across the ground. Breaking through the mist—several large spheres. And the blob-of-poison boss, pulled by the pile of balls behind it.

“It worked!”

Iz had made these balls. They grew bigger over time. Ordinarily Maple Tree tossed them into the air and they grew spikes and attacked, so Sally hadn’t planned on taking advantage of them. But she’d managed to work them into her plan to bring the boss to them.

“Ice Pillar!”

This skill cut off the boss’s escape route, pinning it right in front of Maple.

It was flinging a bunch of poison at point-blank range, and Maple was getting all gooey, but since she took no damage from this, she didn’t have to care.

“I got it here… You going for it?”

“It seems soft! It’ll be fine!”

“I was more worried about the unappetizing appearance, but… your head still won’t reach, huh? Lemme fill in the gap.”

Sally pushed the boss even closer, until Maple could reach it with her mouth even sitting down. They were now so close that it tried to attack by climbing on top of her.

“Can you breathe?!”

“I’m not underwater! I’m fine!”

“Whew! I guess you can fight this one sitting down. It is edible, right?”

Maple’s response was action. Little damage sparks were spraying from the boss, its HP slowly falling. They weren’t letting it go until it

was gone.

"Enjoy!"

"Will do!"

She was totally buried in poison but sounded bright and cheery. Sally relaxed and stood ready for the unexpected.

Maple's battle feast went on for a while. This was the tenth stratum; if eating were their only attack, it would take a crazy amount of time to defeat the boss. But the skills Maple had obtained before only required the final attack to be a bite (more accurately, a drain attack). Sally had confirmed that when she acquired Web Spinner.

"Double Slash!"

Sally was shortening the feasting time but keeping her damage on the low side, not wanting to carve it down to an HP benchmark that would change its attack pattern.

But as Maple ate one bite at a time, that moment arrived.

The poison ball began to wobble. Sally watched closely as it slipped from her bindings, vanishing.

That alone was no problem.

But Sally saw the glow of Martyr's Devotion moving, too, and sprang into action.

"Superspeed!"

Fortunately, the skill had a generous range. Sally ran in the same direction and managed to stay under its protection. Normally, that light just drew attention to them, but this time it saved her bacon.

"Maple, you okay?"

"I-I'm fine! Didn't expect it to bound away like that!"

Relieved to find each other safe, they realized that the purple mist was dissipating. They'd likely still be poisoned, but the visual obstruction was gone.

And their new expanded view revealed several poison blobs bouncing around.

"What the—?!"

"……It split? If we can't guess which one is real, we'll waste a lot

of time as this poison eats away at us. It's sure spraying poison like crazy."

The floor was now so covered in goo, there was no safe place to stand. Naturally, the poison projectiles would normally do actual damage, requiring a swift end. For most players, a boss that split itself would be a tough fight.

"But you're only inside one of them, which sure makes that easy."

"Pure chance, but whew!"

"Let's take this down ASAP. Gonna be hard getting back to the throne."

Sally used some potions to make up for the loss of healing and waited for the meal to end.

"How's it taste?"

"Not great…"

It might be the same color as grape gelatin, but it was all poison. Not exactly a pleasant flavor.

"Yeah? Hang in there."

For better or worse, Maple had achieved success by eating enemies, and it was a regular part of her repertoire.

"Let's hope you at least get a skill this time."

"Yeah!"

As they kept one eye on the gradually diminishing HP bar, the boss gradually stopped moving, and the battle drew to a close.

The last bite killed its final HP. There was a sound like shattering glass, and the poison mass around Maple disintegrated.

"Thanks, Sally! On my own, I'd never have beaten it like this."

"Yeah, without a healer, that would have been rough. Glad I could do something. Ooh, the poison's gone, too."

When the boss died, the purple fog lifted. Maple was finally free of that status effect and need not worry about it again.

"Well? Any skill?"

"Oh! I almost forgot. Um…yep! There's a new one! But it isn't resistance reduction."

"Bosses deliver! Well, wanna try it out while there's no one

watching?”

“Why not? But I’m short on MP. I guess I could put it on my armor?”

“You that low on it? We could change your gear…”

“You can adjust how much MP it uses. One hundred, two hundred, or three hundred.”

“Well, you’d want to have the highest value available, so maybe putting it on your gear’s the best solution.”

Getting to 300MP with gear alone would take some doing. Since Maple already had gear that offered free uses for high-MP skills, taking advantage of that was the natural choice. Maple slotted the skill onto her armor.

“Then let’s go for the three-hundred-MP version!”

“Sure, lemme see it.”

“Toxic Fission!”

Purple goo surrounded Maple, then ran down onto the floor and spread out.

The purple puddle bubbled; then three columns rose from it.

These gradually changed shape and took human form. They even had the right colors, and they were soon indistinguishable from Maple herself.

“Wow, I can’t even tell them apart! How much can it copy?”

“They can’t use any skills, but the stats are the same!”

“So Absolute Defense won’t apply, but…I take it your gear stats are reflected?”

“Mm-hmm!”

“Fascinating.”

Even without any of her skills, Maple’s unique series boasted extremely high defense. Between her raw stats and the armor, ordinary attacks wouldn’t scratch these clones.

“I can give them some instructions, but if I don’t, they’ll just attack with poison.”

“Oh, like the boss.”

“And if I use it again they explode!”

“……?”

“Toxic Fission!”

She called the name again, and all three Maple fissions burst, scattering poison everywhere.

"……"

"Wow…they really did explode!"

It was quite a shocking sight, but Sally soon convinced herself that it worked in their favor. She double-checked something else.

"Does Bug Urn Curse work with that?"

"It says skills don't…"

"But since they count as one of your poison skills, I thought they might."

"True…"

"If it does apply, this could be pretty powerful. They're too tanky to take down, and you can detonate them if anyone gets close. Unlike my clones, they're durable enough to fend things off."

"Nice! This might be a great skill!"

"Let's test what we don't know, then work it into our strategies."

"Yeah!"

With solid results under their belts and the quest cleared, they left the lair of the poison boss behind.

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As Maple and Sally made progress, the other guilds were spread out, taking on areas that played to their strengths and doing their bit to conquer the tenth stratum.

Naturally, some guilds were making faster progress than others—the Order of the Holy Sword among them.

"Ray *is* a rare monster. Those rental dragons aren't nearly as fast."

"Don't fall off. There'd be no saving ya."

"Oh, almost there, Pain."

"Yes, beginning the descent."

Pain's pet dragon, Ray, had Giganticize, so all four guild leaders could fit on its back and they didn't need to rent anything. Ray's speed had saved them many times during the last event, and it was

helping with the sheer size of the new map, too.

Ray landed, and they hopped off.

"That's as far as flying gets us?"

"Sections of the sky are off-limits, yes."

There were strong winds and unbeatable monsters gating sections of the air. Some quests or events would be ruined if players could just fly over, so the developers had found ways to prevent it.

"If only Umbra had Giganticize…"

"Not gonna learn it now. That's a starting skill."

It would be nice to ride Dread's wolf around, but that was likely not in the cards. Umbra made up for that with lots of handy combat skills—best to use it that way.

"Okay, let's make short work of this."

"Then I'll buff speed. Hmm?"

Frederica made to do that but spotted a column of light moving rapidly through the area.

She looked up and saw a rental dragon flying overhead. Not long after, it began to descend, and it was soon lost behind the trees.

"Was that…Maple?"

"I'll bet. Looked like Martyr's Devotion."

"There something over that way?"

"Not according to our info."

"Let's go check it out!" Frederica suggested. "Maybe they've stumbled on something rare."

"Can't rule it out."

"Hmm. Then it'd be worth the detour."

"Oh? For real?"

Frederica blinked in surprise; she hadn't expected anyone to take her seriously.

"Ha-ha, it was your idea, Frederica. Maple Tree's a guild worth keeping an eye on. A chance encounter on a map this big is a good opportunity to assess their progress."

"Then back aboard Ray! Good thing you haven't shrunk it yet."

"Indeed. Ray!"

Pain got them all aboard, and they flew off across the forest, following the light.

Once they were back on the ground, Frederica scanned their surroundings.

"This should be the place…"

"……!"

"……!"

"Yeah, there's certainly *someone* here."

They could hear voices and combat but couldn't tell who it was. At least they weren't inside a dungeon. Frederica led the way, keeping her eyes peeled, and they soon heard familiar voices through the brush. Certain they were on track, they poked their heads through the bushes.

There they found *three* Maples. Being hugged by a giant bear. The bear was doing its best to maul the Maples, but it was doing no damage at all.

As they watched, the bear suddenly exploded despite having plenty of HP left.

"……?"

Frederica had assumed these clones were Sally's skill at work, but apparently not.

They looked the Maples over again, wondering what new skill this might be. And suddenly the Maples exploded, splattering pieces everywhere.

"Eep…!"

"Hmm? Oh, Frederica!"

"Er…yoo-hoo, ladies!"

The sight was so horrifying, Frederica had given her position away, and the girls came running over.

A moment later, the male Order members revealed themselves.

"Sorry about our mage. We saw you flying by and followed, hoping to chat."

"Ah-ha!"

"We figured you might have found some rare event. This is a bit off the quest chain. But you were just testing out a new skill?"

"Want us to test it on you first in the next event, Frederica?"

"I'd rather not…"

"Heh-heh, now that you've seen it, we cannot let you live."

This was clearly the sort of skill of which a player had to know the full specs to really do anything about it, so Sally was just joking.

Even if the Order worked out everything, the skill would still be a nightmare.

"Frederica may not have planned on it, but she did wind up spying on you. By way of apology, we can offer some information."

They accepted that gesture and received a few pieces of handy intel.

"Impressive. The Order's making rapid progress, then?"

"Fairly. We've got a lot of members, but we still feel shorthanded."

"If it was just about clearing these quests, we'd have that covered. But focusing too hard on that means we'll miss all kinds of hidden events."

"We're getting stronger! Oh, let's schedule another duel!"

"Sure. Looking forward to it."

"Even with our membership, the bulk of the map remains untouched. We need everybody we can get. We've allied once before and would appreciate your cooperation once again."

"You got it!"

"If you need help, just say the word. We'll lend a hand."

"Mm-hmm!"

"I guess I could say the same? We were just planning on exploring anyway."

"If Maple's up for it. What do you say?"

"Yeah, I'm down! And I think we're on the same quest."

"We've been playing awhile…so having the Order with us would help."

"Sweet! Mwa-ha-ha, now we don't have to worry about defense!"

"It's a win-win."

"Then let's get going. Change strats to offense only!"

"Yes, don't want to take up too much of their time. Let's move out!"

Clearing a quest with the Order of the Holy Sword and with Maple's impenetrable defense, the Maple Tree pair were now at peak

DPS.

What followed was a stampede, trampling everything underfoot, skills flying and sending *monsters* flying.

The boss was no different.

Even on the tenth stratum, this quest was available to all players. Nothing on it could possibly be a threat to these six players when they let loose.

It hardly needs mentioning whether the quest was cleared.

Maple's new party was far too strong for that to be a concern.



CHAPTER 6

Defense Build and Friendly Relations

With so much to explore, the days flew by. Maple and Sally had learned their share of skills on the way there; the tenth-stratum monsters were tough, but never too great a challenge. They cleared quests steadily, never getting too stuck—by this point, they'd polished off the core quests in the basic first-stratum area.

Naturally, there were still secrets to be found, but those weren't technically relevant to locating the demon lord, so they could wait for another day.

After packing up their book bags, they left the school, heading home.

"Well, Kaede? Can you make it today?"

"Mm-hmm! Heh-heh-heh, I studied ahead just so I could!"

"Wow, nice."

"You in the clear, Risa?"

"I am *so* past any risk of my parents interfering."

"Good to know!"

"Still, there are practice exams coming, so they might tighten the screws a bit."

"Hnggg…then you'll just have to get results!"

"Yup. That should get me some slack."

Nothing convinced like good scores. As long as she impressed, her parents would likely allow her to have fun, too.

"Wanna do another study session? We just bought some good cake!"

"You just want that cake, Kaede."

"I want to share it with you, Risa."

"Well, thanks. I'll be over before it gets stale, at least. They won't

argue if it’s for studying.”

“Can’t wait!’

“Me either.”

They had other plans that day, so the cake would have to wait. They kept walking.

Today they shared the same plan—one for an adventure in the game world.

“Let’s meet up in-game once we’re both home. Felt like we were getting near a tough boss.”

“Woo, I’m hyped!”

Once they got home, they changed out of their uniforms and dove into *NewWorld Online*.

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When Maple got to the Guild Home, Sally was already waiting for her.

“Am I late?”

“I just got here.”

Maple hustled over to Sally, then spotted something unique to the tenth-stratum Guild Home.

“Oh, they’re all connected now?”

“Seems like. Everyone worked hard! We’ll have to thank them later.”

Magic circles connected to the other stratums’ towns. Maple Tree had explored far and wide, but not that deep, and they could now visit any town they chose.

Their guildmates had laid the foundations for them to explore the new map in full.

“So the quest we’re taking on today should bring us to a tough boss.”

“But we don’t have proper facts on it yet?”

The quest name alone suggested it would be a doozy. Last session, they hadn’t had time for that, and so they had left it for another day—they didn’t know the details yet.

“Since you can start in any town, that gives us lots of freedom, but we’re a little short on intel.”

“If the progression were stricter, and we all went the same way, we’d have more to reference, but this time…”

“Exactly.”

“Should we ask for help? No harm in being prepared!”

“I certainly want to win, so not a bad idea. Anyone on your friends list seem like they’re available?”

Anyone Maple regularly messaged was an asset to have around. Maple’s build was game breaking, so her friendships gravitated toward equally broken players. She sent off a message quick and waited for a reply.

“……They’re in!”

“Cool, that should help us handle just about any boss.”

They waited a bit, and soon the circle lit up as two players teleported in.

“Maple!”

“Making good progress?”

“Mai, Yui! Thanks for helping!”

“”Leave bosses to us!””

Maple had gone straight to the twins. It had been a long time since she first scouted them, and now they had the highest attack in the entire player base—not just in Maple Tree. They’d grown into a reliable damage source.

“You two having fun exploring?”

“We’re mostly exploring the third-stratum area with Iz and Kanade.”

“There’s a few hurdles to clear, but if you can pull that off, it sounds like you can use flying machines here, too!”

They only worked on the tenth stratum, but the twins did have boot-shaped flying machines (just like in the third stratum). With those, players could take to the air during combat.

“You made the right choice going after the machines first.”

“We can tell you a fast way to get your own!”

“Great! Those boots really let me pull some crazy combat stunts on the third stratum. Well worth having just in case.”

Areas Maple and Sally had yet to try were filled with delights. It was impossible to have enough time.

"We're doing great, too. Found a new skill."

""What kind of skill?!""

"Um. I can make poison copies of myself!"

""…??""

"And then they explode and poison everything!"

""……????""

"……She's not wrong."

The twins were trying to picture multiple Maples moving around and then exploding, but the best they could manage was all too alien.

"Better to see it an action. Mind helping us with this boss fight?"

"S-sure!"

"We're in!"

Recovering from the shock, they went to accept the quest.

"Oh, *can* you two take this quest?"

It was available to Maple and Sally because they'd cleared several previous quests. Mai and Yui had yet to fulfill any of those prerequisites.

"That should be fine. They might not be able to accept it, but they can tag along and help with the fight, and join in the ultimate battle against the demon lord."

"Really?"

"I swear. So don't worry, just follow your own quests."

Sally didn't elaborate further, but that was enough to quiet Maple's concern. Now they could happily head out to fight this boss.

"But first, we've got to accept the quest!"

Maple and Sally took the twins to the quest center, the same building where they always got quests. They'd walked that way a bunch and would hardly get lost. The same man was standing at the table.

"Welcome again! With your assistance, we have quashed many a threat. We owe you a great debt. But I'm afraid I must plead for your aid once more."

He then told them about a minion of the demon lord running wild

—the greatest threat yet. The quest goal was clear as a bell: Take it down.

"This foe will not be easily bested. We investigated and prepared an item you may find useful. I'm afraid there's not many, but it may turn the tide of battle."

"Thanks!" Maple said, taking the items—three heavy black orbs on her palms, each the size of a baseball.

"We should have more in due time. Come back if you run out."

Sally explained that, in other words, they could resupply, but players could not carry more than three at a time.

"We'll have to use them wisely…"

"And make sure we know what they do!"

"They should counter something the boss does."

"I have faith in your abilities. We'll ensure the other monsters stay out of the area. We won't let them disrupt your battle!"

"Great!"

Beating the boss would clear this quest. The reward: Demon Lord's Mana I. Not a phrase they were familiar with. For now, they left the building, discussing what it could mean on their way to the field.

"I think this Demon Lord's Mana thing is a key item leading to the tenth stratum's super-boss."

"Aha."

"That should make it easier to figure out which quests we've gotta get to."

"Do other areas offer similar items for the last quest?"

"Too soon to say. It seems like this town's got the most players working from it, so other areas are still not well documented."

If you could start anywhere, it made sense that a lot of players went with the place closest to the stratum entrance—one with fewer weird gimmicks.

"So let's look forward to working it out. I think riding Tsukimi and Yukimi around would be our fastest option here."

Mai and Yui were like Maple—their builds were too extreme for them to ride dragons. That being the case, they had to call in their tamed monsters.

“Tsukimi!”

“Yukimi!”

They climbed on the bears and raced out across the field. Mai and Yui put Helping Hands all around them and kept the hammers spinning. Any monsters that approached died instantly.

“This should handle things to our destination.”

“Wow!”

“We’re really good…”

“…at killing monsters!”

They spoke no lies. The toughest of foes could not withstand this hammer whammer—and even the fastest monsters failed to slip through the whirling blender.

The standard monsters scattered around fields were primarily experience fodder and not capable of making their freight train pause.

None of them wanted to waste any time here—they were after a boss and only a boss. And so they charged on across the field to the quest location.

Mai and Yui’s OP stampede carried them all the way to their destination. Before them was a wide, open plain, the grasses rippling in the wind.

No monsters around. No structures of note. No caves or visible cracks (like the one they’d fought the poison blob in).

They looked up, but they saw only clear blue skies.

“Here?”

“According to the map.”

“But…”

“There’s nothing around!”

However, this was clearly the place. The proof came a moment later, when the ground started rumbling.

Darkness started emerging from the ground. It was much like the Dark Rebirth visuals, so they all quickly backed off.

Would something pop out at them? Was this an attack? All they knew was that it was quest related. They braced themselves for

anything.

"……Nothing else?"

"The black stuff stopped."

"I see a light in the middle…is that a magic circle?"

The darkness had stopped spreading, though the edges were rippling a bit. Something magical was giving off dark energy at the center, a dubious invitation.

"Best you put up Martyr's Devotion now, Maple."

"Roger that!"

What followed would not be as easy to deal with as the way in. And as always, Mai, Yui, and Sally could all die to a single blow.

Martyr's Devotion was a vital skill in any battle.

"Just in case, let's check those items."

The disposable items they'd been given at the test center would negate the effect of a specific boss skill.

They were fairly powerful…and they had three of them. Proof this would be one tough customer.

Sally took two of the items, and she left one with Maple. Sally had the best situational judgment, and she often handled item use; Maple kept one on the grounds that she was the hardest to kill, and this mitigated the risks.

Sensing danger, they steeled their nerves. No matter how tough a boss this was, they were pretty strong. No need to spook themselves—as long as Martyr's Devotion kept them safe. They stepped onto the black magic circle.

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Black energy teleported them away, and when it died down and they could see, they quickly looked around.

They were still on a grassy plain. But the blue skies had given way to heavy clouds. The much stronger wind felt ominous.

"Incoming."

Once again, something black spread out across the ground. But this would not transport them elsewhere—it transported in the

monster they were here to fight, the final boss of the quest chain they'd been following.

Spindly, pitch-black limbs like withered branches. A skeletal animal making snapping sounds as it moved. Its ragged cape was red with bloodstains, and a mask covered its face. At the tip of the bone staff it held was a sinister blue fire, the same color as its eyes. That alone was deeply unnerving.

It swung the staff and the inky darkness moved, swirling like a vortex, spreading outward.

"Focus!"

"Yeah!"

""Right!""

The darkness cleared. Even if Maple's skill had not been active, this would have done no damage. That much they knew from the little intel available.

Where had the grasslands gone? They were now standing in the depths of a forest, towering trees looming over them. The boss was gone and they could hear enemies approaching from every direction.

"The forest? Luck's with us; no need to skip."

"All right!"

This boss had an unusual trick. It used a skill to regularly warp them to a new area, with several potential locations.

The quest items allowed them to skip an area if it proved a poor match for the party.

Maple made it so this group could handle most areas. Places normal parties couldn't survive long in were nothing to them. This forest didn't have any tricky terrain; in their minds, it was one of the better options.

A few dozen shadowy humanoid creatures had them surrounded. Their exteriors were darker than the night, their eyes glowing blue like the boss's. They had long arms and nails, and their willowy bodies suggested they were speedy creatures.

And as expected, they began running in circles around the party, their attacks too fast for the eye to see.

Being surrounded meant attacks came from their blind spots—only Sally could react in time. The other three simply soaked hits

from the monsters' claws.

"We're good!"

""Thank you, Maple!""

If the creatures had no piercing damage, there was no need to end this quickly or use their limited skills. True to their appearance, they were fast but not powerful—there was no knockback.

The enemies were attacking in numbers, with constant hits, but with Maple around, they might as well be doing nothing. With safety guaranteed, the party searched for the missing boss.

"Where'd it go?"

"Everything but the boss is an infinite spawn, so we've gotta track it down."

"We can thin them out!"

"So we can see better…"

If these enemies came to them, that was ideal. Mai and Yui got their twelve hammers spinning, pulverizing anything that came near.

The twins did all their level grinding like this, so they were now very comfortable with the process. It wasn't *quite* automatic, but they could keep the hammers spinning and also look for the boss.

"There it is!"

Through the mowed-down monsters, Sally spotted the boss hiding in the trees.

"Mai!"

"Yup……!"

Once spotted, it was *theirs*. Certain Maple had them protected, the twins stopped spinning the hammers and fixed their eyes on the boss.

Paying no attention to the pouncing mobs, they sent a shock wave right at the real enemy.

""Farshot!""

The monsters swarming them shattered like glass. The tree trunks burst at the base, toppling over on the boss itself and flattening it. A flawless ultimate, yet more than half the boss's HP remained.

"We *were* lacking intel, but clearly we can't one-shot this one."

Players that were just as OP had been appearing, but the twins

remained the only players who could easily one-shot a boss without extensive prep work. That was the main reason for the lack of data on this boss's mechanics.

Their easy victory thwarted, they were once again subsumed by darkness.

"We aren't taking damage!"

"Which means…"

Their vision cleared, and they were in a plain white cubical room. The boss was in sight. Mai and Yui reset their weapons.

"Careful, I've got no intel on—?!"

The boss swung its staff, and the party's feet left the floor. But they were falling *toward* the ceiling. Gravity reversed, forcibly moving them to the new "ground" above.

"Whoaaaa!"

"At least Martyr's Devotion didn't soak that!"

If Maple had shouldered the gravity reversal for all of them, Mai and Yui would be left on the ground below.

As they fell, glowing black skulls flew toward them.

Unlike in the previous area, they had no clue what this might do to them and were in no position to fight back. Sally deemed this high risk.

"Maple, let me show you something cool. Leviathan!"

A blue magic circle generated a torrent of water, thick as a tornado. The water at the front formed a dragon's head, and the coiling stream behind it looked like the dragon's body.

This swallowed up all incoming attacks, negating them and bearing down on the boss itself. The boss teleported out of the way, but that gave them enough time to land and right themselves.

"Heh-heh, a solid match for your Hydra."

"Wow, Sally! Water Wielding?"

"Yup, yup."

She'd made such extensive use of it that the skill had leveled up, providing more sub-skills. And using that one here had let them regroup. Best to clear this room and get out. All eyes turned toward the boss, which was floating some distance away, its staff glowing again.

Time to turn the tables—at least, that was the plan. Reality had other ideas.

The gravity shifts came way faster than they'd expected, and the extreme builds at the heart of their strategies couldn't keep up.

"Wahhhh!"

"Maple!"

"We can't get a second's peace!"

"The boss keeps teleporting…and shifting gravity as soon as we land…"

They were being rolled around like dice, and they were in no state to fight.

Sally had adapted somehow and was firing spells at it, but the boss just teleported out of harm's way. As long as Sally handled the boss's attacks, they weren't about to lose, but by the time they won this thing, they'd be so tired it would affect the rest of the battle.

"Maple, Mai, Yui…let's skip this room!"

"G-got it!"

""Please do!""

Sally used one of the provided quest items, and the blank white walls crumbled away, moving them to a different area.

This time they were in a boulder-strewn zone with poor lines of sight. Sally knew this one. Conceptually, it wasn't much different from the forest. Relieved they'd rolled a winner, she nodded.

And then Maple wailed, "Sallyyy!"

A worm had popped out of the ground and was gnawing on her. Trapped in its maw, she couldn't move or attack but this was Maple, so that didn't really matter.

"Sorry, Maple, stay put for now. Mai, Yui, clear out the surroundings."

While the worm was after Maple, the rest of them were free to move. Martyr's Devotion kept them all safe—the rest of the monsters had no skills that could threaten that.

"Just hold on, Maple!"

"We won't take long!"

The twins sprang into action, hoping to free Maple faster.

They started their standard hammer blender, aiming not for the

big worm but for the rocks all around.

Each time a hammer hit a boulder, it crumbled like Styrofoam. The whumps left just dust in the air—the only evidence these things really *had* been boulders.

In a matter of minutes, they'd been reduced to pebbles, and the rocky zone had gone from impenetrable jungle to wide-open prairie.

""All done!""

"Nice. Now go rescue Maple."

Monsters with no unique defense skills couldn't withstand the twins. The hammers went from landscaping to extermination, and only death was in the cards.

Freed from the worm's restraints, Maple was helped up by the twins, and everyone looked around.

The cloud of boulder dust settled, and with the view cleared, they soon located the boss.

Between them and it were a bunch of worms—which would normally have made approaching difficult.

"Maple, Sally!"

"Follow us!"

"Okay! I'll keep you safe!"

"I'll stop it from running once we're there."

Emphasis on *normally*. Mai and Yui charged right through the worms. Unable to withstand a single attack, the worms melted into thin air.

A total massacre. Their kill score was rising with each step. Monsters after the twins' lives were slain the moment they left the ground. As long as the terrain let them compensate for their weaknesses, nothing could slow these two down.

The boss was attacking, but Sally's spells and Maple's guns took care of that—leaving the twins unstoppable.

"Oboro, Binding Barrier!"

Sally locked down the boss for only a moment. But they only needed a moment. As long as the twins got within range, they could end it in the blink of an eye.

""Farshot!""

A second blow. The boss's HP dropped below the halfway mark.

At a glance, it looked like they'd need to land two more hits to win. The design might prevent instant death, but killing it in four hits was still extremely OP.

"All right, keep it up!"

""Will do!""

First they needed a good area. That would make things way easier. And if it didn't…

"……Okay."

Mindful of their remaining skills, Sally put together a plan.

When victory seemed within their grasp, she needed to be extra certain nothing pulled the rug from under them.

And in this party, she had to bear the brunt of the danger assessment.

It was her job to stay calm and make sure no careless mistakes led to their defeat. While the other three were reveling in the action, Sally stayed sharp.

A black aura coated the world. It crumbled and reformed.

It was replaced by a dazzling red. They were surrounded by roaring flames—damage sparks started flying from Maple.

"Glow of Deliverance!"

Maple was taking fixed damage, and for all four of them at once. That meant her HP dropped quickly, and even with the skill's autoheal, she couldn't keep up.

Using an item to bail was an easy choice—nobody, even this party, wanted to fight while taking constant damage from the fires. That would be any party's first impulse.

"Maple!"

"Mm-hmm!"

But intel was the greatest weapon. Sally's eyes were locked on a black glow beyond the flames.

The boss's glow stood out against all this red.

This area was well documented, and critically, she knew the boss stayed put for a set time here.

"Waterway!"

“Full Deploy!”

Sally webbed the twins to herself and swam through her waters. Maple blew her weapons up, flying along below them.

Maple’s job was to keep them all in range of Martyr’s Devotion. Sally’s job was to get the twins up to where the boss was hovering.

Where anyone else would go for the fast reroll, these four stayed put, going for a quick end to the battle.

“If it won’t move, this is easy!”

“Yui!”

Since Sally was just towing them on her webs, they couldn’t move much. Unable to aim their attacks with any precision, they arranged their floating hammers in a box three hammers tall, four abreast.

“”On three!””

Not enough gaps to miss—together, the twins swung the hammers like one big hammer, slamming the boss’s flanks. There was a boom, and it hit the ground below.

“Cool, nicely done!”

Sally landed them safely and released Mai and Yui from her webs.

“That went well!”

“Whew!”

“Thanks. A tricky move, but you nailed it!”

If they’d failed, Maple wouldn’t have lasted much longer, and they’d have had to skip. Thankfully, Mai and Yui had delivered in spades.

“We’ve got two skip orbs left. Keep your wits about you, and let’s land this final blow.”

“Yeah!”

“”We’re ready!””

If Mai and Yui handled it, the next hit would down the boss. The flames vanished, the surroundings went dark…and they were back in the original open grasslands.

The boss reared up from the ground in front of them, and the twins slammed their hammers home, hoping to end it here. The noise was tremendous. They couldn’t even see the boss behind all their hammers—but it phased right through the attack, stepping in

close and generating some magic circles that fired black lasers at them.

"It didn't work…!"

"W-we're sure that hit!"

"Don't worry, it can't hurt us, either."

""Maple!""

As Maple reassured the twins, all around them more enemies appeared, each an exact duplicate of the boss.

"Don't worry, we've got Maple, and this isn't that bad for us. We just have to find the *real* one."

""Right!""

Surrounded by undefeatable enemies, spells hitting them from all directions—

That should have been dire. But if one simply had Maple along, it ceased to matter.

Now they just had to work out where the real boss was. Intangible clones were a headache, but it wasn't all bad news.

"Just do what we do, Mai!"

"I know!"

"I'll do my bit! Commence Assault!"

"Flash Spout!"

They put their backs together, each facing a different direction and attacking dead ahead. Mai and Yui with their hammers, Maple with her guns, and Sally with a spout of water and some items—testing each of the boss's phantoms.

What mattered was not the strength of the blows, but how much range the hits had. Maple sprayed her guns far and wide, filling the air with a barrage until one bullet drew sparks.

"I think I got it!"

They'd figured the real one *would* take damage, and that theory had panned out.

"Superspeed!"

"Come with!"

Sally ran in before they lost track of it. The twins held on to Maple, and she used Cover Move to keep up with Sally.

"Mai, Yui, swing here!"

“”Destroy Mode!””

They started swinging. The hammers passed through several fake phantoms and the real one. A crunch went up from the whirling blender of death, literally shattering the boss.

“We did it!”

That clinched their victory. The twins smiled, Maple and Sally smiled back, and the spreading darkness gave way to the place they’d started in.

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Back on the field after the boss fight, the first thing they saw was a black *object* slowly descending.

When it was right in front of them, it stopped, hovering in place.

“Wanna grab it?”

“Yeah.”

At Sally’s prompting, Maple reached out. The moment her hand touched it, the lump burst, and the quest-clear alert sounded.

Maple and Sally checked, and both their inventories had Demon Lord’s Mana I listed. The description said that by gathering all the pieces of the Demon Lord’s Mana, then using them, they’d open the path to the demon lord.

“Looks like you don’t need to have one for every party member, just have them in a party with the player who uses the item.”

“Then if everyone goes after these, it won’t take that long!”

“If we just wanna get there, then best to work together as a guild, yeah. But if you want to go on your own terms and farm drops, then you’ll have to clear all these questlines yourself.”

Their current goal was to defeat the demon lord before Maple and Sally got too busy to play. Maple wasn’t exactly after the drops. So the fact that they could progress in all directions at once was a huge help.

“I guess that’s enough questing in this town.”

“Pretty much. Like we said before, if we focus on looking for secrets and Easter eggs, we’ll never finish. Let’s leave those for

some other day.”

It was hard to effectively search for things they weren’t even sure were there. And they really didn’t have much time. They had to hope their usual luck would get them something and concentrate on what was necessary to take a run at the demon lord.

“Mai, Yui, you were such a big help! Thanks for coming!”

“We’re glad we could assist!”

“If we’re available, we’re happy to pitch-in anytime!”

The twins had great synergy with Maple. She and Sally would love to have them along for any boss fight.

“Maple, where to next?”

“Good question. We talked about the third stratum. They’ve got flying boots, right?”

“”They do!””

“I’d like to get my hands on those. What I’ve got on can only give me so much air time.”

One Step in the Grave let Sally make platforms in the air. She mixed that up with Water Wielding, Ice Pillar, and Web Spinner, which gave her way more vertical movement than any ordinary player, but nothing like what she’d gotten from the machines she’d used on the third stratum. It could give her a lot more options in future fights, so getting those was a priority.

“We’ve been clearing that area with Iz and Kanade!”

“They can probably give you some good advice.”

“Ooh, that sounds helpful!”

“”Great!””

With their next destination in mind, they thanked the twins…and went their separate ways.

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On another day…

Risa was struggling with her studies more than anticipated and couldn’t log in as planned, so Kaede dove into *NewWorld Online* on her own.

Still, she'd agreed to work on the third stratum with Sally, so she was back in the Guild Home in the first-stratum area, which they'd already cleared.

Her plan was to grind some levels and hopefully stumble on a secret, but before she could head out, the door slammed open.

"Hello! Sally, time for our…huh?"

"Frederica! Sorry, something came up and Sally can't be here."

"Oh…well, these things happen."

Frederica had arranged this duel, but Sally hadn't had time to call it off. Now she was left with time on her hands.

"Uh…oh, so wanna try fighting me? I've never actually dueled you before!"

"Huh? Me?"

"Yup, yup. I know you got that new skill! And I'm supposed to be gathering intel on the both of you."

"I don't know if I'll be any good, but if you're asking, then sure!"

"Cool! Let's go for it!"

It wasn't a pairing one saw often, but they headed for the Training Room.

A few minutes later…

"Insane! Madness! Unhinged!"

Frederica was wailing, a ton of barriers filling the air in front of her, protecting her from a *ton* of monsters.

Glow of Deliverance gave Maple a water-based skill (Ark), and that allowed her to finally make use of Ancient Ocean—a skill she'd obtained back in the second event.

This skill generated fish that sprayed AGI-debuffing water. And if Maple used it, they then fed right into Dark Rebirth.

Since the fish had no attacks, just a debuff, Ancient Ocean generated a *lot* of them. And they then became far too many monsters.

"Hydra! Saturating Chaos!"

"Oh crap! Augh!"





The wall of monster flesh left Frederica no time to attack Maple herself. The moment a barrier gave way, the monsters came flooding in.

"Aiiiiieeee!"

She was crushed beneath a tsunami of monsters, her HP bar *gone*, and the duel was over.

"Y-you all right?"

"Yeah, ain't no way I'm beating *that*."

"Oh…is that so?"

"Absolutely!"

Frederica had fought both Maple and Sally and lost to each. But there was a big difference in *how* she'd lost.

With Sally, the main difference was one of technique. Whichever of them made the tougher, more accurate choices had the advantage. For that reason, one error on either side could flip the battle.

But with Maple, it was simply overwhelming. The engine their builds ran on was not something technique could overcome; her skills were just brutally powerful.

Frederica had no way to beat Maple. There were too many obstacles before she could even begin to corner her.

"Guess I'm gonna have to leave *you* to Pain!"

When it came to off-the-charts power, the Order's guild master delivered. Moving Maple firmly to her "do not fight" list, Frederica nodded.

"Stands to reason you're Maple Tree's mightiest."

"I am?"

"I mean, it's kinda obvious."

"I'm pretty sure Sally's stronger."

"Is she?"

"Yeah! She's really something else."

"If you're that sure, then have you fought her?"

"Huh? No, but…hmm. Still…"

Maple put a hand to her mouth, thinking it over. Her versus Sally…who *would* win? No matter how hard she thought, she couldn't begin to imagine it. She felt sure Sally would move like she

always did and somehow find a way to win…but nothing more detailed came to mind.

"Well, if you ever do fight, lemme know. It'll help *us* plan our strats!"

"Hnggg, then maybe I'd better *not* tell you."

"Ah-ha-ha, exactly."

"Oh, but if you're always arranging duels with her, you should know…"

"…?"

Maple told Frederica how she and Sally might not be able to log in for a while.

"Urk?! If I don't beat Sally soon, she's gonna run away with the victory?!"

"You've fought her more than anyone. She's really good, right?"

"Too damn good. Honestly, lately she's been getting even better!"

"All those new skills."

"Yeah, that's part of it, but there's…an intensity to her now? She reacts too fast when it seems like I've almost hit her."

"Mm-hmm."

Maple didn't really know how their duels went down. Duels were fought in private, so no one else could see.

Maple was well versed in the finer points of the game's combat. Sally largely handled the guild's planning.

For that reason, Maple didn't make a habit of coming up with strategies designed to take down specific foes.

Hearing how Frederica and Sally fought was a novel experience.

"……?"

That reminded her of something from a while back. Just like Frederica, Sally put a lot of focus on planning her way to victory.

Sally—or rather, Risa—had often said as much.

But it had been a long time since she'd said anything like that at all.

"Maple?"

"Oh, sorry, sorry."

"Something on your mind?"

"Mm-hmm, a bit."

"……Well, I lost, and I clearly ain't gonna win. But if it's guild against guild, I'm pretty sure we'll come out on top."

"I'm just as sure! Wait, guild against guild?"

"There probably won't be another before you stop playing…but I figure you can make time for time-accelerated events, at least."

"That might be true."

"Mwa-ha-ha, we'll have you outleveled!"

"Guess I'd better get my defense as high as I can!"

"……I'm not sure you need any more, but suit yourself."

They talked awhile longer about Sally and Frederica's previous duels, enjoying the afternoon.

"Toodles! I'll be back to take Sally down!"

"Bye-bye!"

They'd chatted for a while; then Frederica took her leave. Maple waved good-bye and wondered what to do next.

She'd planned on grinding a bit, but maybe she should try exploring a different stratum some more.

It was clear there were plenty of undiscovered secrets on previous maps, too.

As Maple dithered, a message arrived—which made up her mind. She left the Guild Home, heading to the meeting place where she found the sender waiting.

"Mii!"

"……That was fast. No other plans?" Mii asked, one eye on their surroundings.

Maple hadn't really made up her mind what she wanted to do, so she assured Mii her schedule was open and asked for details.

"You wanted me to help out with something? Oh, the poison boss?"

"Nothing like that, no. I'm not really worried about any bosses at the moment. I just found something I think you should see, Maple."

"Oh? What could that be?"

That alone did not help Maple narrow things down. Mii only said it was somewhere in the first-stratum area, but she hadn't seen

anything that fit the bill following the questline.

"Heh-heh, just you wait and see."

"All right, then!"

"It's not too far. Ignis will get us there in no time."

Mii called her pet phoenix out and Giganticized it, and they flew off.

"So fast!"

"A match for the rental dragons. I leveled it well."

If they trained their pet monsters properly, they became pretty hard to take down. Rarer monsters had especially good stat gains.

Ignis's AGI had shot up with every level, and Mii wasn't wrong—it carried them swiftly across the field, and they were coming in for a landing before Maple knew it.

A dense forest was in front of them. Towering trees, massive trunks—even the *vines* were thicker than their torsos. In places, those vines wound together, forming paths through the jungle.

"Can't fly past this point, so we'll have to walk along the vines."

"Should I put Martyr's Devotion up?"

"Yeah, might come in handy."

"All righty, then!"

This *was* a field, and if monsters spawned on it, Maple's defenses would help.

"Flame Empress!" When monsters approached, Mii summoned fireballs, incinerating them. "These monsters are weak to fire, so I was grinding here and stumbled across our destination."

The mobs there were made of wood and flowers—their elemental weakness was no surprise. Mii's fireballs were one-shotting most of them.

Maple didn't need to back her up with gunfire, so she matched her pace, keeping her safe.

Since they were walking on vines, the footing was not very even—she had to be careful not to fall. One eye on the ground, Maple watched Mii go to town. From vine to branch, from tree to tree, across dangling vine bridges, climbing higher and higher.

"This goes way up!"

"If you fall…well, you'll probably just fly back up."

“I’ve got Machine God!”

“True. Oh, getting close…there!”

Mii pointed. There was a path made of green leaf-shaped lights leading into the air, and white furballs were bounding about. Mii stepped right up onto the path, walking across the leaves.

“Come on, Maple! This way!”

Mii reached out a hand for her. Maple took a brief run and jumped off the vines.

And didn’t go nearly far enough, slipping right through Mii’s grasp.

“Maple?!”

“C-Cover Move!”

The skill yanked her out of free fall, and she landed right next to Mii.

“Th-that was close!”

“You scared me half to death. Maybe you’d better follow me that way.”

“Yeah…”

“Let’s try it out. If we take too long, these lights vanish.”

“Got it!”

Mii jumped, and Maple used Cover Move. On they climbed.

Eventually they reached the very top of a tree, and the leaf-light platforms ahead of them formed a descent. Hidden by the leaves of other trees was an old, withered tree, the trunk long since hollow.

“Not much further.”

“Wow…this is wild.”

The platforms took them in a spiral around the trunk to the ground below. The hopping white furballs that had led them this far began bounding even higher—and made a green magic circle on the ground.

As they watched, the circle generated a door to another world. Wreathed in light, the furballs were transported away.

“Let’s step on together, Maple.”

“A secret area?”

“You could say that… You’ll see once we get there.”

Mii was playing coy, and Maple was getting very curious. Hand in hand, they hopped onto the circle. Green light surrounded them, dazzling their eyes…and when that faded, the sights around had transformed.

A forest filled with dappled light. A gentle breeze rustling the leaves. Several paths were before them, and Maple turned to Mii to see which way to go. Then— “Mrow!”

A cry sounded at their feet. Maple looked down and found a long-haired white cat looking up at them.

Their eyes met, and it bounded toward Maple, landing on her shoulder, then perching on her head.

“Whoa… It’s not gonna fall off, is it?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine…and there’s more coming.”

“Huh?”

“Meow!”

The cat on Maple’s head let out a cry…and the bushes around rustled. More cats came rushing out.

“Wow!”

“Isn’t it great?”

“I’ll say! They’re so cute! Mii, your cat sensor is alive and well!”

“C-cat sensor? Well, I certainly got lucky with this find. Not that hard to get here, either.”

One cat climbed up Mii, and she picked up another. More were milling around her feet.

“……So what sort of secret area is this?”

“……Not sure. A forest cat café?”

“Hmm…”

Mii admitted she’d been here several times but had obtained nothing but spiritual healing.

With the cats following along, she led the way into the woods. Everywhere they went, more cats came out of the brush, following them along.

“Since it’s hidden behind a teleport, there might be some specific requirement to trigger any further events. But I haven’t found a clue

as to what that might be."

"And it's easy to get to."

"Right. Anyone could find it if you follow that path. Still…"

Mii considered it for a moment, then smiled happily.

"Even if there's nothing else here, I'm stoked."

"Ah-ha-ha, true. You've never looked happier."

They walked on to the music of the cats' meows. In time, they saw— "It's huuuge!"

"Wow!"

A white cat, sleepily stretching in the shade. But this wasn't like the cat riding Maple's head.

The scale was totally different.

It was bigger than a house. Bigger than Syrup's giant form.

Each hair on it was longer than the girls were tall.

"Seems like it should lead to something, right?"

"Totally…"

"But I had nothing better to do, so I'm just here to get buried in its fur."

With that, Mii walked over to the giant cat and sank into its side with a blissful smile.

"Me too!"

Maple dove in next to her, into the fur's embrace.

"When this cat wakes up, we're sent back to the original jungle. Until then, we can relax."

They chatted awhile, stroking the smaller cats.

"I'm in the eighth-stratum area."

"Oh yeah? Surprised to hear that."

The eighth-stratum area was a sunken city. Not the most compatible with Mii's fire-focused build.

"Everyone's super focused on exploring, so I figured, best to clear my weakest area while there's tons of helping hands."

"Makes sense."

"But I hear you'll be out of the game for a while? I'll miss you."

"Frederica suggested I could at least come back for time-accelerated events."

"True…hmm. Then I guess our rivalry will live on!"

"Huh? Is *that* what you want?"

"Naturally, I'd prefer to play *with* you. But we don't plan to keep losing."

"Then I'll just do what I can!"

"Yeah. How's the tenth stratum treating Maple Tree?"

"We're all working hard to tackle this demon lord! We've got one Demon Lord's Mana."

"Nice. If you need any help, just say the word. It'd be a shame if you don't make it in time, and I wanna see which of you is the *real* demon lord."

"How so?"

"I mean, the world doesn't need *two*."

"……Am I one?"

"People call you that sometimes. A few of those skills you have *are* pretty diabolical."

Maple's skills and how she used them had earned her that reputation, but it had really taken off lately—largely because of what she'd done in the last event.

"The way you sacked that castle… Wish I'd been there."

Sacrificing players to summon monsters and demolish the castle. That sounded exactly like the sort of thing a game's last boss would do.





"Hope I get to see you do that for *our* side next time. You might mesh well with Marx's summons."

"Yeah, we could make a lot!"

"And we'd like to take advantage of it."

"Mm-hmm! You got it!"

"Thanks. Oh, almost that time."

The cat behind them shifted, stretching, and they both slid to the ground.

The dappled light grew brighter, surrounding them. A low, rumbling meow echoed…and they could no longer see at all.

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On a later day…

Kaede and Risa were walking home from school. Today they planned to start exploring the third stratum.

"You fought Frederica?"

"Yep! My approach worked great. Still…I just let Dark Rebirth and Ancient Ocean do all the work."

"That's a brutal combo…"

Maple had several skills that played into each other. Following Paralyze Shout with a poison attack could also do fatal damage, swiftly eliminating opposition.

"Frederica's not equipped for Dark Rebirth."

Risa had fought her a lot and knew exactly what she was capable of. Without a front-liner, her build could not handle that many tanky monsters.

"……"

If Maple had accepted *Frederica's* duel…

No, even if she hadn't, she'd likely agree if Risa asked. As long as she *asked*.

"After that, Mii invited me to a secret area!"

"Oh? What did it have?" Kaede told her all about the cat cradle. "Interesting. Word of that hasn't gotten around, and if you can get there without a quest, it's likely an Easter egg."

"I thought so!"

"Yup. Mii's probably right—there's another condition. I doubt it's just there for you to play with cats. Still…if there's a skill there, it likely won't mesh well with Mii's style."

"O-oh…yeah…right…maybe not…"

"……? Well, either way, I'll take a look at it myself. It's cool how you're friends with other guilds, and maybe I'll find a way to trigger an event there."

"Okay!"

"And if that makes you stronger, it'll be two birds with one stone!"

"Mm-hmm!"

When their schedules didn't match up, they were going their own ways, grinding levels or searching for secrets in areas they'd already cleared.

And Risa's new goal was the kitty corner.

"But I never thought you'd make so many friends in-game, Kaede."

"Yeah! I'm glad they're all so nice!"

They weren't just nice—they were the best players in the game. Frederica and Mii were just the start. If they were ever struggling, Maple and Sally knew a bunch of people they could call.

"Also, I feel bad about this, but my folks are definitely tightening the screws faster than I thought. I can play today, but you may be left to your own devices along the way."

"Really?"

Risa made a face, nodding.

"My own devices…"

"Yeah. Just have *fun*. That's all I wanted when I invited you."

Kaede and Risa's time limit was coming up fast—if it arrived before they finished the tenth stratum, it would be frustrating. Risa wanted to avoid that if she could.

"I think I'll wait for you."

"Uh…"

"Eh-heh-heh, that's what's fun for me." Not what Risa had been fishing for, but Kaede took a step ahead, turning back with a smile. "And since you invited me, I want us to play together as long as we

can. Okay?”

“Yeah…yeah.”

“Great! And if you put it that way, we’ll have to study together more often!”

“Mm-hmm, I certainly plan to hit the books properly.”

“Excellent news, young Risa.”

“I shall not disappoint, young Kaede.”

Risa shook off her earlier thoughts—they’d been pretty pessimistic and didn’t help much.

Best to have fun with whatever lay ahead. They’d only *just* started the tenth stratum.

“I’ll get a real good score on the next mock exam, just you watch.”

“Good luck! You do great when you’re motivated.”

“Heh-heh, I’m gonna try twice as hard.”

She had no time to fret and worry. Especially when they had the third-stratum area to tackle later today!

Best to nail her studying and her playtime. That way, she need not sweat the small stuff.

“Well, see you in a bit…”

“Yeah! I’ll see you in *NewWorld Online*!”

They went their separate ways, planning to meet up again in-game—as Maple and Sally. For now, they both hustled off toward their respective homes.

AFTERWORD

Hello to anyone who spotted Volume 16 on a shelf. My deepest thanks to anyone who's been following the series all along.

My name is Yuumikan.

Bofuri is now sixteen volumes long!

The TV anime's final episode aired. Did you enjoy it? I certainly hope you did. Personally, I was a lot less jittery this time around. I feel blessed to have had something this remarkable happen to me *twice*.

It was so encouraging, I'm putting even more effort into the novels.

I hope I'll have more good news for you in time.

I'm not done yet, so I hope you'll keep on reading!

Looking forward to meeting again someday—in Volume 17!

Yuumikan

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