
3
Dimension Wave
Author: Aneko Yusagi


3
Dimension Wave
Author: Aneko Yusagi


Dimension Wave
Ex-Santa Hat urged me on impatiently.
"Sit already, Kizuna."
Aneko Yusagi
Illustrator: Ryo Ueda
3


“Crimson Heaven Wheel!”
Shouko and Tsumugi unleashed their moves in tandem.
“Circle Dance Zero Formation: Snow Moon Flower!”


"The summer sun is calling me!"
And with that, L'Arc and Therese headed off to the beach.


Sheryl and Romina
provided support
fire with their bows.


“Pole Fishiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing!”
Therese cheered, her clenched fist thrust into the air.
“Go get ‘em, Kizzy!”
I unleashed a skill to seal the deal, swinging the rod up with all my might. And then...with a great splash, the Dimension White Whale burst from the ocean’s surface.

CHARACTERS

Dimension Wave 3



Tsumugi†Exceed

Kizuna's little sister. Her race is Demihuman, and she is a scythe user who fights on the front lines. Naive and child-like, she only does what interests her.



Kizuna†Exceed

A young boy taking part in the game Dimension Wave. His race is Spirit. Thanks to the mischief of his sisters, he is playing a little girl avatar.



Hakoniwa Shouko

An eastern-style beauty who's a little detached from the world. Her race is Spirit. She fights with a fan as her weapon.



L'Arc

A skilled player whom Kizuna befriended through fish trade. He prioritizes exploration and seems quite knowledgeable about the game.



Sheryl

A girl with a knack for crafting skills. Her race is Jewel. A quiet girl of few words.



Therese

L'Arc's girlfriend. Though she comes off as insincere, she's quite honest... or perhaps chival-rous is the word. She works at a jewelry store in real life.



Dimension Wave 3

Illustrator: Ryo Ueda

CONTENTS

Prologue	Pekkle Pipe
Chapter 1	Low-Grade Ancient Dress
Chapter 2	Dragon Zombie
Chapter 3	Brave Pekkle
Chapter 4	Wrath Pengu
Chapter 5	Root Cause Analysis
Chapter 6	Ninja Redux
Chapter 7	Cordless Bungee Jumping
Chapter 8	Countermeasure Committee
Chapter 9	The Third City
Chapter 10	An Island Unlocked
Chapter 11	Judgment Upon the Scandalmonger
Chapter 12	Pekkle for Hire
Chapter 13	Third Dimension Wave Kicks Off
Chapter 14	Dimension White Whale
Chapter 15	Third Dimension Wave Complete
Chapter 16	To the New World

Table of Contents

1. Cover
2. Color Illustrations
3. Prologue: Pekkle Pipe
4. Chapter 1: Low-Grade Ancient Dress
5. Chapter 2: Dragon Zombie
6. Chapter 3: Brave Pekkle
7. Chapter 4: Wrath Pengu
8. Chapter 5: Root Cause Analysis
9. Chapter 6: Ninja Redux
10. Chapter 7: Cordless Bungee Jumping
11. Chapter 8: Countermeasure Committee
12. Chapter 9: The Third City
13. Chapter 10: An Island Unlocked
14. Chapter 11: Judgment Upon the Scandalmonger
15. Chapter 12: Pekkle for Hire
16. Chapter 13: Third Dimension Wave Kicks Off
17. Chapter 14: Dimension White Whale
18. Chapter 15: Third Dimension Wave Complete
19. Chapter 16: To the New World
20. Bonus Textless Illustrations
21. About J-Novel Club
22. Copyright

Prologue: Pekkle Pipe

"The dungeon's boss has been defeated for the first time, pen!"

As soon as I returned, those words filled my vision in large, floating letters.

Is this an island-wide notice? I wondered. It felt like one of those server-wide announcements you often see in online games.

If the dungeon boss had been defeated, that had to be Shouko and Tsumugi's handiwork, though I had to wonder if it was talking about the Chimera I'd helped defeat.

For now, let's meet back up with everyone.

"Hi honey, I'm home. I just got a notice that the dungeon boss was defeated?"

I spotted Alto in front of the storehouse and called out to him.

"You, huh... That happened yesterday. I'm guessing you got the message now because you just left the dungeon."

"Huh?"

Alto turned to me, his eyes half closed as he asked, "Hey, Kizuna?"

"Yes?"

"It's already been three days since you set out. Mind telling me how many days you spent in that dungeon?"

Erk... I thought I could stay there as long as I wanted. I didn't think it would come back to bite me.

I was starting to feel anxious that Shouko and the others might be furious at me. No, they definitely were.

"Shouko was worried about how long you were taking. But then Tsumugi said, 'Knowing my brother, he probably thinks he can spend as long as he wants in there, and it'll only be a day! He's probably still fishing...' Looks like she was right about that."

My sister's insight was spot-on. With all the time I'd put into that one kingdom life game with an endless mode, this wasn't a big deal for me.

No, I mean, this is Dimension Wave *we're talking about...*

"So, how many days was it?" Alto pressed.

"F-Fifteen..."

“That’s incredible in its own way. From what I heard, the place wasn’t that big.”

“It actually was pretty spacious. There was some impressive verticality.”

As I deposited my fishing haul and all the non-lord materials I’d dismantled into the storehouse, Alto placed a hand on his forehead. Judging by his reaction, he wasn’t treating this as a joke.

So, to summarize, the instance dungeon was able to shorten five days into one outside day—with a minimum of a day passing with each entry. Now that I thought about it, there was no way they’d let me stay indefinitely…for balance reasons. The fish to Energy conversion rates were pretty bad too.

At least I could be thankful that the time flow of the safe areas wasn’t synced with the outside.

“The fact that you’re not lying speaks volumes. I just sent a message to Shouko.”

Oh, I just felt a chill. But I’ll have to give an explanation, won’t I…

Alto, in the meantime, had been managing the Pekkles. Looking closely, I saw that the island’s layout had changed a bit while I was gone. The paths were fully paved and seemed a lot cleaner.

When I was running things, the place had had a village-ish vibe, but now it felt more like a town. That said, it still felt like it was in the middle of development.

“You’ve gathered a lot of Pekkles, I see.”

“Yeah, it just happened. They come up when you’re fishing whether you like it or not.”

“I’m aware. I’ve heard that you can send Pekkle teams into the dungeon and they’ll find more of them. Apparently, no matter what you do, you can gain more Pekkles.”

In fifteen… No, in just three days, Alto had gotten a grasp on all sorts of things. Leaving command of the Pekkles up to him had been the right decision.

“Kizuna!”

Shouko and Tsumugi flew straight at me.

“I-I’m back.”

“We kept waiting and waiting, and you didn’t come back. Since we couldn’t contact you when you were in the dungeon, I was getting worried that you’d gone missing again.”

“S-Sorry.”

Looks like I really worried her.

Since it was an instance dungeon, we were unable to regroup after we'd gone our separate ways. Technically, the underground lake counted as a dungeon too.

"Apparently, he spent around fifteen days fishing in the dungeon."

"That long?! Learn some moderation, would you?!"

"I thought it would just be a day no matter how long I took."

"There are limits."

"I guess going in too deep is dangerous…"

Next time, I should come back after three or four days. I'll have to figure out the cutoff point where it decides that a day has gone by.

"So…"

I pointed at Tsumugi, who was dressed in an unfamiliar outfit. Come to think of it, her equipment was completely different from when I first called her to the island.

"How do I look? It dropped when we defeated the dungeon's deepest boss for the first time. It's pretty nice stuff—it's made battle a lot easier."

"I-I see…"

"You can't imagine how much Energy and experience points we earned on the way to the boss. With that said, my Energy has already reached the cap, so it did not do much for me."

Hmm? Shouko had just thrown out a concept I was unfamiliar with. Lately, I'd pretty much been maintaining my Energy level without gaining or losing much.

"There's a cap?"

"Yes, it seems that Spirits have an upper limit on their Energy. Once you hit that limit, you must go through an expansion to break through it."

"Huh…"

I could see it.

Though Spirits had their disadvantages, they could be the strongest if used right. As long as they had the Energy for it, they could use skills however they pleased. With that in mind, having a limit was pretty much inevitable to keep the power balance. Perhaps that upper limit would increase with each wave.

"We went in blind, just the two of us, but it turned out all right. We were only planning on testing the waters, but the boss's

movements were easier to handle than expected. Shouko tanked, parrying and whatnot, and we managed to power through."

"I've gotten a good grasp of its patterns now, and I'd like to dismantle it next time. Could you join us, Kizuna?"

"Got it."

Dismantling a boss, eh? I'm looking forward to that.

"You cleared the dungeon, right? Did you get anything for it?"

"We did. This, right here. It was in a treasure chest in a room that opened up after we won the battle."

Shouko handed me a flute.

```
Pekkle Pipe
If the lord of the island blows it by the coast, it
will summon the lord of the Pekkles.
```

"What's this?"

"Who knows...? It seems we can't use it, but I suspect you might be able to."

Was it exclusive to me? Was it equipment that could only be used by the leader who kicked off the development plan? And for some reason, summoning this Pekkle Lord seemed to be restricted to the coast.

"Well, the fish that Kizuna stocked up should solve our food problems for the time being. We'll have to focus on gathering other supplies for now."

Based on Alto's report, he'd managed to buy a considerable number of blueprints and supplies at the Pekkle Shop with the money he had on hand. But even that wasn't enough. The main issue was how pricey everything was, apparently.

When it came to constructing the castle and the other buildings, Alto refused to compromise on anything until certain milestones were met. He was a perfectionist, all things considered.

Maybe he was trying to make up for some of the shady stuff he'd gotten up to, but...just how massive of a project was the castle construction?

"We can keep gathering materials daily from the island's mining sites, but we want this done sooner, right? That's how it is."

I see. He's trying to speed this up.

“Aight, I’ll try blowing the flute to see what happens.”

And so, we all made our way to the beach. As per usual, Sheryl was there, working on a ship. Lately, she’d begun to incorporate Machinery skills to craft a fine fishing boat indeed. I myself was looking forward to the day she made a ship with a sonar.

Sheryl paused her work and approached.

“Welcome back…”

It seemed she’d noticed my return.

“Yeah, glad to be back. I’m here to test out this flute.”

“Got it.”

She nodded as I showed her the Pekkle Pipe.

I guess I just…blow it? Whoa! My hands are moving automatically.

“Pen!”

A flock of Pekkles gathered by the shore, dissolving into mist and then…reformed into a single, massive Pekkle. Size-wise, it was about…ten meters tall, perhaps?

“Peeen.”

Flopping down, the massive Pekkle gestured at its back with its flippers, almost like it was telling us to hop on.

We all fell silent.

“Whoa! That looks fun!”

Except for Tsumugi.

“Well, let’s get on, then.”

“Right… They really threw every mechanic they could think of into this game…”

Tsumugi climbed on without hesitation with the rest of us following behind. But Sheryl looked a bit reluctant.

“Is it…a ship…?”

“Hmm… It might be. It looks like I can tamper with its settings like I can with a Pekkle-o-meter. I can even equip stuff on it.”

It was like a giant Pekkle that acted as a boat, but in that case…would that make it Sheryl’s competition? I had a bad feeling about this. But once we were all aboard, I saw a prompt in the corner of my field of view asking if we wanted to set off.

“Wait, can we actually leave the island?”

My heart danced with a sliver of hope as I made my selection.

Then, the massive Pekkle began swimming with us on its back —doing a crawl for some reason.

We could control its direction by pulling on the feathers near its

head, and…slowly, the island grew smaller and smaller in the distance… Eventually, an island came into view…

The same island, that is…

“We still can’t leave! Just let us out already!”

Let me fish up the lord in the Second City!

“Calm down, Kizuna!”

“The speed is good… I can’t be outdone. Hmm…maybe I should modify the boat for a smoother ride.”

Sheryl was watching with the eyes of a true craftsman. I could see her eventually developing a boat towed along by this giant Pekkle… But putting that aside, we returned to shore.

As everyone disembarked, the giant Pekkle dissolved into mist, and all the Pekkles that had formed it scattered in all directions.

“Aha ha ha ha ha! I never get bored with you, bro! I never expected that.”

“Don’t laugh! I’m complaining to the devs!”

They got way too invested in this strange event and item… What exactly do they want from me?

Regardless, that was the end of the experiment.

“Oh, right, I fished up the lord of the underground lake. Sheryl, the lake’s pretty deep, but I think you might be able to dive to the bottom.”

“You’re going again?” asked Shouko.

“Next time, I’ll try to return after five days. Hey, Sheryl?”

“No…”

Sheryl averted her eyes. Did she not want to go? *Hey now… I was sure she was one of my kind*.

“If you can make a diving suit with an oxygen tank to take us to the bottom, we might find the entrance to a new map or dungeon.”

“I understand how you feel, but…”

“Challenging yourself is…important.”

Sheryl did have the heart of an adventurer. She was, after all, someone who shared my ambition of finding out what lay beyond the waves.

Maybe it was just the extended stay that was putting her off.

Chapter 1: Low-Grade Ancient Dress

“In any case, I think we should focus on gathering resources in the dungeon. We can collect them on the island, but there’s a very big difference in productivity.”

“Makes sense. We should get even better yields if we send in more people.”

Suddenly, everyone was staring at my face.

Don’t worry about the fishing. I already took care of that (for now)!

“There were some hidden mining spots on that map, so maybe I should pay them a visit.”

“And you’ll fish another five days on the side, huh?”

Alto, just shut up.

“Before that, could I have Romina look at the lord’s materials?”

“Good idea.”

We made our way to Romina’s workshop.

Oh? It looks like they expanded it... It’s definitely bigger than before. Did Alto do it?

“Long time no see—three days to be exact. How was the fishing?”

“I pulled in a lord!”

“I’m amazed how often you manage to bring in those things.”

“Yeah, you have a point. Kizuna runs into lords so often, you can’t just write it off as him having a high Fishing Mastery.”

“It’s because I’m always testing out new things... Use the right bait and tackle for each fishing spot, and you can hook them surprisingly easily. I’ll have you know I lost to the herring and the catfish countless times.”

Plus, all the epic gear doesn’t hurt.

“I get it—it’s not like you’re always succeeding. It’s trial and error. So, what kind of materials did you get this time?”

I presented the materials I’d stripped from the coelacanth to Romina.

She inspected them, a slight furrow to her brow.

“I see... They have a pretty high rarity. With some luck, we can make some excellent equipment.”

“Who should we upgrade this time?”

I thought about everyone who was on the island.

“If farming resources is the main focus, then maybe Tsumugi?”

“Hmm… I’d prefer to keep my equipment crafted from the dungeon boss’s materials. I think that suits me better.”

That was quite commendable for Tsumugi, who was always thirsting for rare gear. In all likelihood, she genuinely preferred those materials.

Knowing her, she liked that sort of grimdark fantasy stuff…that stuff straight out of a middle school boy’s dreams. Yeah, she was always into that sort of thing.

“Hmm… For Shouko, it would be a backup weapon, or it might turn out a bit better than what she has. How about it, do you want to try something new?”

“No, I don’t have any real issues with what I have right now. I think it would be better to make something for Kizuna or Sheryl. We’re going to be entering the dungeon together, after all.”

“I’m fine…” Sheryl chimed in, holding up her Ahab Spear.

What about armor? I wondered. But it looked like she was already wearing something crafted by Romina.

“Honestly, it may be time to reevaluate your equipment, Kizuna,” said Shouko.

“Sure enough…” Romina conceded. “No offense, but apart from Cerberus Slaughter, you don’t really have anything noteworthy.”

“Well, Cerberus Slaughter is decent…”

“But even that’s starting to feel lacking. Bro, I think you’re going to struggle in the deeper parts of the dungeon.”

“Yes, your sister Tsumugi is already wielding a solid monster-drop weapon. Isn’t it about time you changed up your equipment, Kizuna? And luckily, with the ores and materials from this island, we should be able to make something good.”

Hmm… I guess there’s no way around it.

If possible, I wanted good equipment to be in the hands of a skilled user who deserved it. That was how we’d get the most use out of it, after all.

“In the first place, they’re materials from something you fished up, right? It only makes sense that you should be the one using them.”

“You say that, but my main priority is fishing, and you already

made me a rod. I can't really complain."

"I respect your dedication to distributing gear strategically, but excess modesty can come off as insincere. Just make a compromise this time."

"Fine... Got it."

And so, it was settled: The new gear would be for me.

"Let's start by making you a dress."

"Urgh..."

Just when I'd nearly forgotten that I was playing as a female loli character...I was reminded yet again.

Right. I've got the appearance of a girl right now. A little girl, to be more specific. A very pretty little girl that someone *clearly put a lot of effort into making.*

"Why are you quiet, all of a sudden?" asked Shouko.

"Who knows?" Tsumugi replied with a curious tilt to her head.

I felt a murderous impulse rising in me.

This is your fault! I had zero interest in role-playing as a girl!

"Oh, brother of mine, are you still against wearing a dress at this point? Come on, don't worry. It's not like you have to cross-dress in real life. Just embrace the cuteness here!"

"Shut up! Who cares about cuteness?!"

"I've seen you playing as girl characters before."

"That's not because I want to be called cute! I like to dress them up and admire them. That doesn't mean I want to *be* a girl!"

Surely most guys would understand—sometimes you make a female character in a game, but that's not because you want to project yourself onto her. It's for aesthetics; after all, that character's who you'll be looking at for most of the gameplay... It's not because you want to become her.

"Well, it does feel like a lot of effort went into your appearance, Kizuna..."

"Me and big sis gave it our all!"

"I was planning on playing a macho man!"

I'd originally designed my avatar with a grizzled fisherman in mind...and now, I was stuck with this cutesy little girl look. I tried to ignore it, but with how well suited this avatar's design was for dresses, I'd often find myself equipping them.

"Should I have made it a bit more manly? Maybe we should've gone for that tomboy aesthetic."

“Hmm… I do feel bad for you, Kizuna, but I do have to side with Tsumugi on this one. It’s easier on the eyes.”

“Yippee!”

Romina! I’ll remember this… Don’t think I’ll ever forget it!

“And if you were a rugged macho man, do you think this group would be here right now?”

What’s that supposed to mean? You’re making it sound like everyone came with me because I look like a little girl… This isn’t one of those new-age moe anime. There’s no way in hell I got my comrades by being a cute girl and making cute noises. Someone tell me it ain’t so!

I scanned my comrades, and everyone looked away. All except Shouko, whose eyes remained fixed on me. At least that was something.

“I can’t deny that your appearance made it easier for me to talk to you when we first met,” she conceded.

Sometimes…honest comments can hurt.

Still, there were no real in-game differences between men and women. Lewd stuff wasn’t allowed either; it was all purely aesthetic.

“Ahem… I’ll get started on that dress.”

“Can’t it be armor, or something bulkier?”

“It’s not impossi— Err, well, actually… I can’t.”

“You just rephrased yourself. You can actually do it, can’t you?”

What’s the meaning of this? Why is everyone so intent on dressing me up?

“Now, now, Kizuna. I also quite like your current look, so could you please wear the dress?”

“Et tu, Shouko?”

“You’re mainly a fisherman, right? You’re not a heavily armored warrior. I think a lighter outfit makes sense.”

I could understand the logic, somewhat. Some things weren’t sitting right, but I did follow. Heavy armor added weight and limited mobility. If fishing was the goal, then light equipment would be ideal.

“Luckily for us, the dress…err, cloth armor I can make from these ancient fish materials offers fishing bonuses. You’ll lose those if I make it into heavy armor. Are you sure you want that?”

“Hah…fine. Got it. Just do it.”

“I’ll make you a weapon too. Unfortunately, it doesn’t look like I can make a fishing rod with these.”

I already had the Giant Catfish Rod, so that was fine. It was practically my weapon already.

And so, Romina set about crafting the equipment.

“Huh?!” she exclaimed in the middle of making the dress.

She continued working a while after, but the look on her face wasn’t very promising. She seemed immensely focused, growing increasingly tense as she worked through all the minigame production steps until finally, her shoulders drooped in disappointment.

“Apologies… I made a few mistakes, and it didn’t turn out quite as intended.”

“Romina making a mistake? That’s rare.”

She was the top smith on the front lines, and she’d been forging constantly since she arrived on the island. It was almost unheard of for Romina to fail.

“It seemed manageable at first, but…it seems that my initial outlook was naive. The moment I started, I realized how challenging it would be.”

I could understand the feeling. I’d had my share of overestimating my abilities and failing in other games too.

“As it turns out, these ancient fish materials are incredibly high-level. They’re incomparable to the catfish. A majority of them require more skill than what I currently possess,” Romina explained, staring frustratedly at the dress. “Its true difficulty was only revealed to me the moment I began crafting, and it took everything I had just to keep its shape. If I’d been the one who gathered these materials, I’d be too ashamed to give it to anyone. But these were yours, so have a look.”

“S-Sure…” I said, spreading out the dress Romina handed me. At least it hadn’t disintegrated in total failure.

`Low-Grade Ancient Dress`

It was a dress with some frilly accents and came with a Fishing Power bonus effect. Was the “Low-Grade” part the failure Romina was talking about?

“Even though it’s low-grade, I still can’t equip it…”

My stats fell short of the equip requirements. If this was what the low-grade version was, then just how ridiculous would the requirements for the normal thing be? Based on what Shouko told me, my Energy still had some room to grow. But even then, I'd just barely be able to equip it after hitting the Energy cap.

"Did the failure raise the stat requirements?"

"No…that seems consistent."

"For real… This is way out of my league."

The materials were so rare that the final product was too much for me to handle.

Looks like I'll need to hold off for a bit. And wait, if coelacanth materials are this rare, maybe that means that coelacanths are just that rare. This might not even be the lord; it might just have a really low probability. Maybe a high fishing mastery is needed to even encounter it, or maybe the rate's set so low because you're able to stay on that map for long periods of time.

"Hah…"

Oh, Romina's sighing…she must be really stressing over it.

She had a strong sense of responsibility. I wasn't going to get angry at her for failing. Some might, but I was here to fish. Obsessing over equipment wasn't my forte.

"Don't worry about it. For now, it looks like I'll be able to put it on if I do some heavy lifting. Once you've got the skills, I'll count on you for the weapon."

"Yeah, leave it to me. This is a matter of pride now—I'll make something outstanding, just you wait."

"Wow…so even Romina has moments like this."

"I'm surprised myself. Who knew such a difficult item existed? I'm trembling just imagining how high the difficulty might get in future updates. I'll have to keep honing my skills."

Failure could sometimes reveal new heights to strive for. Games like these tended to get more difficult with each update…so difficult, at times, that new players would be unable to catch up.

While *Dimension Wave* couldn't get new players, there were still players who'd transition to new roles. Balancing the game to let them keep up was essential.

"All right, we'll have to make some compromises on the gear, but how about we start preparing for the dungeon?"

"Wait, Kizuna. I know this won't exactly make up for the failure,

but I do have a weapon I want you to take," Romina said as she handed over...a Miraka Bow and a quiver full of arrows.

"A bow?"

"Yeah, you're not exactly built for combat, right? I thought you might have a hard time fighting alongside Shouko and Tsumugi. If you want to focus on support, then picking up a bow isn't a bad idea. What do you think?"

A bow, huh... I remember hunting being one of the Cal Mira development tasks. It might not be so bad, hunting with the Pekkles. If I learn how to set traps too, I'll be able to secure food even when fishing's not an option.

Rather than beating up monsters to get stronger, I wanted to set pitfalls and other traps to procure meat. Dismantling would be a useful skill there too... *Yeah, sounds like a plan*.

"Learning magic is another option if you'd prefer that. I can make you a weapon for spellcasters."

"Hmm..."

Magic, huh... You need to meet so many conditions to learn it. I'd rather invest in hobby skills like fishing.

Besides, magic would incur a heavy Energy burden, both with the use cost and the passive cost to maintain all the required skills. All things considered, a bow seemed more manageable. Trapping seemed fun, too, and it wasn't entirely unrelated to fishing.

"If I have to choose between magic and bows, I'll go with bows. Let's stick with that."

Magic would be appealing if I wanted to focus on it, but for now, I was a hobbyist. It was unnecessary.

"Huh? It looks like I can already learn bow skills."

I'd somehow managed to meet the conditions with my life of pure fishing, even though I'd never used a bow before.

Is it an offshoot of some other skill I already know?

"When we were fighting on the ship, didn't you use the ballista with Sheryl? Maybe it's from that?"

"Oh, I see."

If it also boosted my ballista proficiency, that wasn't bad either.

I'll go right ahead and learn it, then... Let's put just a few Ranks into some bow skills.

"I just need to draw the string and fire the arrows, right?"

I'd never held a bow in real life. But, like Fishing Mastery, I

assumed it'd add an accuracy boost once I picked up the skill.

"That's pretty much the gist of it. I think you can pull it off. There's no friendly fire in this game, so as long as you've got arrows, keep shooting."

So I don't have to worry about hitting Shouko or Tsumugi.

"They might not do any damage, but there's still some knockback, so don't go too crazy."

"Let's keep that in mind and work on it."

And so, we set off for the dungeon to gather resources. It was finally time to grind out some levels—or rather Energy.

"I'll tag along this time. If you need anything, just give me a holler. I can adjust your equipment however you like."

Romina and Sheryl both decided to join us.

Under Shouko and Tsumugi's guidance, we started out by heading straight to floor eighty. I felt a bit tense, seeing as I'd already found myself pretty helpless on floors twenty through thirty.

"They might look the same, but the monsters here are way stronger. Be careful," warned Shouko.

"At floor sixty, the level curve kinda flattened out, though," Tsumugi added.

"Yes, yes."

"Bro, just support us from the back."

"On it!"

I stayed back, peppering the hordes of monsters with arrows while Shouko and Tsumugi fought. Sheryl, as per usual, used her harpoon to spear from midrange, keeping a good buffer zone between her and her enemies.

Rather...Shouko and Tsumugi might be too used to this. They're just mowing down the monsters here.

I could really feel the difference in our instinct for battle; our reaction speeds were beyond comparison.

As I continued sniping from as safe a vantage point as possible, I eventually unlocked Bow Mastery and immediately picked it up. I could just unlearn it later if I didn't need it, and as its level rose I could see my damage going up. The bow felt lighter in my hands too.

"I do appreciate the support fire, Kizuna. Though...you seem more alive when you're using a lure," said Shouko.

She's talking about our battle with the Chimera. I managed to create an opening by reeling in the snake head.

"Fighting with a lure? Hmm…"

"I was just snagging it and pulling it around. It's pretty different from archery, so don't worry about it too much, Romina."

"You sure? It's not something I have experience with, so I can't get too deep into it, but…once we can leave this island, I'll be on the lookout for an expert."

I'm actually pretty grateful for that. For me, fighting with lures makes me feel more in my element.

We chatted and fought, and once I'd stored up enough Energy to equip the Low-Grade Ancient Dress, I promptly put it on.

"Wow, that gothic design really suits you!"

"Now look here, Tsumugi. There's nothing flattering about hearing I look good in a dress."

"Oh, come on… You're secretly happy, aren't you?"

Shut it… Having my real little sister around is a curse. I don't get how some people can find sisters cute. Why did I even let her into the party? Oh, right. She sneaked on board without asking.

Well, whatever. That was all in the past. And I was the one who'd summoned her to the island. That didn't mean I wouldn't argue, though.

"I could wear something more practical like overalls. I am a fisherman, after all."

"No way! That's such a waste! You finally look so cute!"

"Can it!"

"I think overalls wouldn't look too bad either…" Shouko chimed in.

"Are you talking about waders?" asked Romina. "As far as I'm aware, equipment like that isn't available yet."

"Waders?"

"I'm pretty sure that's what you're imagining when you're thinking about fishing overalls."

Right, those rubber ones that fishmongers wear, the ones that go all the way up to the chest, and they are fine with getting wet. So those are called waders? I never knew.

"I'm sure Kizuna would be wearing them right now if they were available."

"You can't! Don't waste such a pretty face."

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s the kind of thing you’d see in a slice-of-life anime, but it’s too early for that!”

Don’t use me to imagine some slice-of-life! What? You mean an anime where girls fish while wearing waders? That probably exists already…

“Enough chitchat; get back to fighting!”

“Okaaay. But bro, looks do matter. Be careful about that. A girl’s got to care about appearances.”

“I haven’t given up on being a guy!”

For some reason, my eyes were drawn to Sheryl. I got the feeling she was smiling. Did she find something remotely endearing about that exchange?

“Animation. Slice-of-life. Right here.”

Oh…so that’s what it looked like to her. I won’t dive too deep into it. Let’s get back to the Ancient Dress. I wonder what Shouko thinks about it…

But before that…I noticed my Energy had reached its cap, and a new skill—Energy Limit Break—had appeared. For now, I could Rank it up to II, so I decided to pick it up.

I couldn’t really get around obtaining it, given its effect, but the mana cost was absurd.

“I don’t wish to take part in any arguments, but it does look good on you, Kizuna.”

“Uh-huh…”

Shouko and Sheryl both offered some compliments. I didn’t care much about my appearance, so it didn’t do much for me.

Hmm… It does give a boost to fishing.

The boost was Fishing Power +50, as it put it. I didn’t know how effective that would be. I’d have to test it later.

“So, how good is this gear, really? It’s way better than anything I’ve ever equipped before, but relative to everyone else…”

The Low-Grade Ancient Dress was around five times better than the gear Shouko had given me.

“Do you want to try taking a monster attack? You took a hit back there, didn’t you?”

“Yeah… It was pretty painful.”

Even though I’d been firing arrows from a safe distance, I still got hit occasionally. Considering we’d gone past the eightieth floor,

the monsters' attacks were no joke. Though I'd lose a bit of Energy from the encounter, I wouldn't know how much the damage would be cut unless I gave it a try.

Just like before, I took a charging attack from a Citrus Jelly. It made a sort of squishy, squelching sound.

The damage was...surprisingly low!

I whaled on it with Cerberus Slaughter until it was down, the Energy I received outweighing the damage and putting me at a net positive.

"Wow!"

"Amazing! I barely feel a thing! I can straight up violate those small fry!"

"I get that it's impressive, but Kizuna..."

"Bro, did you have to put it like that?"

"Shouko, how about you try fighting with this on? You can practically ignore the monsters here—wouldn't that be much more efficient? I'll wear what you're wearing."

"Umm, that's an appealing offer, but you should continue using it. My gear has decent defense already."

"In fact, isn't it weird that you were stuck using old armor for this long? And you call yourself a gamer?"

Urgh... With Spirits, the Intermediary Stones and Energy scaling makes damage calculation a lot more complicated than it has to be! In the first place, the stuff Shouko gave me was already pretty good. And also, I'll feel way stronger if I upgrade it all at once instead of making little changes here and there!

"It did hold up when we were fighting on the ship...but the difficulty has spiked to a point that the gear from back then is struggling."

"That's the downside of jumping straight into a hard area, I guess. But does it really matter if I was managing anyway? I guess you can say that's one advantage that Spirits have."

"Uh-huh..."

"If we don't have to focus on guarding Kizuna anymore, then we can push forward and attack more aggressively."

"But big bro, I think you get it already, but you won't get out with only a scratch or two if you just stand there against a boss."

"Right. Even if the armor is strong, it's not that strong. Look out for yourself."

“I know already!”

And so, we pressed further into the dungeon. Eventually, we arrived at the hundredth floor. A massive door with an air of solemn majesty stood before us.

“The boss is just beyond here.”

“It revives every time you enter the dungeon, right?”

“Correct.”

“Incidentally, what sort of boss is it? I couldn’t really tell from Tsumugi’s equipment.”

Her scythe—which seemed to be made of some black obsidian material—did pique my interest. From what I’d seen, it seemed to pack quite a punch…

“It’s a Dragon Zombie. It’s pretty big, so even someone like you should be able to hit it from afar.”

Chapter 2: Dragon Zombie

“Hey, Tsumugi. Why are you being so antagonistic toward me?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it’s because of all the shots you’ve missed so far? Even when you’re so accurate with a lure.”

Urgh…she has a point. Most of my support fire is missing its mark…

Perhaps it was unavoidable; my mastery level was still low. This was where my jack-of-all-trades build was beginning to rear its head.

But a Dragon Zombie, huh? That sounds pretty strong. We’re probably going to win, but it’s still frightening to think about.

“Now, now, it’ll be dangerous for you and Sheryl up close, so please keep your distance and attack from afar,” said Shouko.

“Okay…”

Sheryl switched to a bow that she’d also received from Romina.

“It’s a boss that even we took a good amount of time to take down. So please be careful. Taking a hit from that thing is no joke.”

“G-Got it.”

Shouko held up her Giant Catfish Fan and steadied her breath.

“Then…let’s go.”

With that, she placed a hand on the heavy-looking door and pushed. We stepped into a somewhat large chamber, about the size I’d imagine for the arena of an underground fighting ring.

And at the very center…there was something swarming with so many flies I couldn’t even make out its general shape.

Shouko and Tsumugi held out their hands, signaling for us to stand back as they swiftly raced forth.

Then, suddenly, a black smoke erupted from that insect-covered thing. The swarm dispersed, the smoke condensed, and there was the pitch-black corpse of a dragon covered in an oozing, tar-like substance.

The beast rose slowly.

“GAOOOOOOOOOOO!”

I instinctively clapped my hands over my ears to protect myself from its fearsome roar. Its presence was immense… In a console game, this would have been the perfect place for a cutscene.

The boss's name was simply Dragon Zombie. Just looking at it, I knew it was leagues above us...but Shouko and Tsumugi had supposedly managed to defeat it together. Its body spanned at least ten meters from head to tail. With that bulk, it would be difficult for my arrows to miss.

Is this really going to be all right? I wondered as I took the first shot.

Watching from afar, I was starting to see its attack patterns.

After raising its head high, it would launch into a bite, slam, and breath attack. If it spread its wings out, it would soon disperse foul miasma with its wingbeat. And if it started wagging its tail, what came next was a slam and then a spinning blow...that seemed to be about it.

The breath attacks were the only ones that could reach us from afar.

"Hah! Wild Dance Fourth Formation: White Feather Reversal!"

Shouko skillfully took on her counter stance again and again, parrying its blows while Tsumugi leveraged each opportunity to get in a swing of her scythe.



Just how difficult would it be to dodge all of that? Between attacks, Tsumugi was glugging down potions to maintain her stamina…

“Hey, c’mon, people! Keep those bullets coming!”

“You mean arrows?” I retorted while doing as instructed. I tried to maintain as much safety as I could while peppering the Dragon Zombie with attacks.

I was, but… What was this feeling? This felt like when Tsumugi and Kanade forced me to play that monster-hunting game. Kinda like…fighting DoS or G-rank monsters with weak gear.

“Death Step!”

Tsumugi unleashed the same technique she’d used in the wave, a flurry of four consecutive slashes that echoed through the chamber. Each hit landed on the Dragon Zombie’s massive body with a dramatic damage effect.

“GAOOOOOO!”

Oh, looks like that aggroed it. The Dragon Zombie turned its focus onto Tsumugi. And this time it was Shouko’s turn to take advantage of the distraction and unleash a skill.

“Circle Dance Zero Formation: Snow Moon Flower.”

Snow formed around Shouko, a crescent moon appearing behind her as cherry blossom petals scattered through the air. *Now that’s an effect! It really fits her graceful appearance and her dance-like fighting style!*

It’s amazing! So flashy and cool, I can’t help but admire it!

And the damage effects echoed all around the Dragon Zombie’s body, again and again.

“Wow! You’re killing it, Shouko!”

“K-Kizuna, if you could stop admiring me and help with some more support fire, I would very much appreciate it.”

“Oh, right!”

So Sheryl and I continued firing countless arrows from the rear, but…after around ten minutes, I found myself being targeted by the Dragon Zombie and began hightailing it, waiting for it to switch targets.

With the distance between us, its journey toward me gave Shouko and Tsumugi ample time to beat the daylights out of it, returning aggro to them.

“Hey, you two…how long is this going to take?”

“Umm…”

“We haven’t even got it down to two-thirds, bro. At half health, it enters phase two. It sets up some kind of field where the area glows bluish. Then, it adds earthquakes to its attacks. Luckily, Shouko can nullify them.”

Ick…still a long way to go. I recalled the boss we encountered when we first met Yamikage. That one had us whaling on it and whittling it away for quite a while too.

Just how tough is this thing? Can I ignite it if I lit an arrow on fire or something? I wondered as I reached a hand back and…found nothing.

“Gah! Out of arrows!”

“Apologies. It seems we used up more than expected.”

“Get some from Sheryl!”

There was some distance to Sheryl…and judging by her and Romina’s quivers, they didn’t have many to spare either. *Drat…isn’t there anything else I can do to contribute? Just firing arrows won’t get me anywhere.*

Sure, Shouko and Tsumugi—skilled as they were—could keep fighting without making a single mistake, but me? I always had to fear the moment I slipped up. This was a dungeon that was supposed to be challenged with a far bigger team, after all.

The way Shouko and Tsumugi could steadily rack up damage to take it down was amazing; it wasn’t like there were any special gimmicks like there had been on the ghost ship. Sure, perhaps we could take it down in one fell swoop with the Energy Blade…

And fighting with a bow wasn’t bad either… But if we kept it up like this, then it was only a matter of time before Sheryl ran out of arrows too.

All right… I got it!

I took out my fishing rod, equipped the Lure of Light, and with a snap, sent it flying at the Dragon Zombie’s head.

“Using a lure again?”

“I have a feeling something interesting might happen with Kizuna’s lure.”

“Hey, I don’t know if I’ll live up to your expectations, but this is more like me.”

Oh, what a nice smacking effect! I thought as the Dragon Zombie staggered back.

“Ah…the rod you’re using is made of the same Giant Catfish materials as Shouko’s weapon, right? And that Lure of Light has a light attribute. It might do some good damage to an undead monster like the Dragon Zombie.”

What’s this? A new skill besides Hate & Lure just popped up! Let’s get it right away! Aiming with a lure is usually troublesome, but with a big target like this, it might just work out!

“Lure: Double Needle!”

This time, there weren’t any flashy effects. Just a twang, and then the dragon was hooked.

It’s not an offensive skill?

“A-Anyway, let’s attack!”

Shouko unleashed a skill on the Dragon Zombie, creating an even stronger damage effect than before—one which caused my hook to pop out.

That’s a long cooldown.

“Don’t tell me…”

“Yeah, it might be a skill that boosts the damage of the next hit.”

“Hmm…so that’s what combat with a fishing rod looks like. Not too shabby.”

So it boosts damage as long as the hook is stuck in, huh?

I kept casting from a distance, continually chipping away at the Dragon Zombie. But thanks to my Fishing Mastery and my attack power being boosted by my lure’s light attribute, I was gaining more aggro, and I was being targeted more often now.

Shouko and Tsumugi would seize each moment to shift from a more defensive approach to an aggressive, relentless assault.

Oh, Lure of Light…you’re coming through in all sorts of places. Long live the light attribute.

Eventually, the field around us took on a pale blue glow, making it clear we were entering phase two. The ground trembled and shook, making it hard for us to even stay on our feet.

This is going to be a tough one.

But that wasn’t all—the Dragon Zombie added a new attack where it flapped its wings and spewed a poisonous breath all around the stage.

“Seismic Sealing Blade!”

Shouko turned her fan into a sword and stabbed it into the

ground…and immediately, the tremors died down, making it easier to evade the poison.

“This will nullify ground-based attacks for a limited time! Now’s our chance!”

The Dragon Zombie, after using such a powerful move, was left wide open. It was almost like it was screaming at us to attack it right now.

Usually, the earthquake would have rendered us immobile, making the attack window a lot shorter. But thanks to Shouko’s anti-quake equipment, we had some breathing room.

“Kizuna! If you could!”

“You got it! Lure: Double Needle!”

I lodged the hook in near its throat as Shouko charged up an attack.

“I’ll sync up with her, bro! It looks like we can take it down easier than last time.”

“Circle Dance Zero Formation: Snow Moon Flower!”

“Crimson Heaven Wheel!”

Shouko and Tsumugi unleashed their moves in tandem, followed shortly by Sheryl, who had somehow closed in without me realizing it.

“Bomber Lancer!” Sheryl cried out.

And Romina soon followed up: “I’ll have a go too. Bone Crush!”

We fired off everything we had, weakening our foe as much as we could before its attack animation ended.

After that, it was mostly busywork. Though the Dragon Zombie grew more vicious as its HP dropped, Shouko and Tsumugi were able to keep it under control.

I managed to mitigate some damage with my Ancient Dress. At one point, it nearly slipped off and left me naked… *Wait, I should rephrase that if I don’t want to come off as a pervert.* My Energy nearly dropped low enough to auto-unequip it. That’s all. It wasn’t ripping or giving any more fan service each time I took damage.

And even if I do strip, surprise—still a guy here!

“GYAOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Finally…after a conspicuously loud roar…the Dragon Zombie collapsed in a cloud of dirt.

“Phew…that went quicker than last time. You actually helped out for once.”

“You could have ended that a few words earlier.”

“A solid victory with minimal losses.”

“V…” Sheryl declared victory in her own way.

“I’m just glad we won. You’re all quite reliable.”

A few items spilled out of the Dragon Zombie.

Umm… Rot Dragon Core and Cursed Sword Wrath Blade?

The equip level—or rather Energy—requirement was pretty high. The specs seemed to match that.

“It dropped the first time we beat it too… Guess it has a decent drop rate?”

“You had Romina reforge it into a scythe, right?”

“I was able to use it as a crafting material.”

“We don’t have any party members who main swords, after all. And no shield user to make use of the Chimera Viper Shield either.”

“Both would go to big sis if she was here.”

“Yeah…guess so.”

Kanade doesn’t really go for the quirky weapons. She can pull off a lot of them well enough, but ultimately, she sticks with straightforward weapons like swords. Well, we can decide what to do with it later.

“Aight, let’s get to the dismantling.”

“Counting on you, bro!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

And so, I began taking apart the Dragon Zombie.

Now that I’m thinking about it, how do you even go about dissecting something that doesn’t exist in real life? I wondered. For the time being, I sliced open its belly with Cerberus Slaughter and began separating the meat from the bones.

Perhaps because the decay had gotten pretty far, the carcass had softened up quite a bit after the battle. But this was still a dragon, and its materials seemed tough.

```
Rot Dragon Bones, Rot Dragon Fetid Meat, Rot Dragon
Reverse Scale, Rot Dragon Core, Rot Dragon Wing
Membrane, Rot Dragon Horn, Rot Dragon Fang, Rot
Dragon Skull, Rot Dragon Bone Marrow...
```

This felt like gathering materials in a hunting game.

“Okay, dismantling complete.”

“I’ll look over what we can make with the new materials later.”

“Please do.”

As I surveyed the field after the battle, I noticed a door... *Was that where they found the Pekkle Pipe, perhaps? I guess we can take a look, then wrap up the expedition.*

“There’s still a path ahead, so let’s check it out just in case. There might be another treasure chest.”

“Got it.”

We stowed our weapons and continued forward.

Chapter 3: Brave Pekkle

Opening the door beyond the defeated Dragon Zombie, we found ourselves in yet another room. At the center of it was a rather imposing symbol.

Does that mean this is the end goal?

“This is the bottom level, I take it?”

“Yeah, as far as I know. If we figure out the trick here, we might be able to go farther down, though.”

“Look over there.”

“Hmm?”

My eyes followed Shouko’s outstretched fingers to a set of two doors.

The first was adorned with a very flashy, unmissable keyhole, while the other was firmly shut without any clear way of opening it.

“Neither of them will open,” she explained.

“Maybe we have to trigger some sort of flag to get them to open up?” Tsumugi added.

“You mean, like, we have to build the castle first?”

That sounds about right…

“For the one with the keyhole, we obviously have to find a key somewhere. It might be in the castle.”

“Can we open it with Machinery?”

“That could work. We might need a crowbar to pry it open, or it might actually be a sliding door.”

Mean-spirited puzzles like that weren’t completely off the table. This game did love to throw unexpected interactions at us, like hooking enemies with lures and whatnot.

Speaking of keys…

“Oh yeah, I got a key when I fished up the Lord of the underground lake.”

“And you’re only saying that now, bro?”

“It goes both ways, sis.”

You never told me there was a door that needed a key. Some gamers we are.

“Ha ha ha, you really are sisters.”

Romina, this is nothing to laugh about.

“Now, now,” Shouko calmed me. “Kizuna, why don’t you try out the key?”

“Try it,” said Sheryl.

“Of course I will. I wonder if learning lockpicking would let us open it even without a key…”

I took out the Key of Ancient Legend, jammed it into the keyhole, and twisted it. I could feel the bolt unfastening… The key dissipated into beads of light and vanished. The door slowly opened at my gentle push.

“What could it be?”

The torches in the room burst to light, illuminating this new chamber. The room I gingerly stepped into was laid out almost exactly like the previous one. This time, it was a complete dead end, with no apparent way to progress… The back of the room was decorated with four emblems, each seeming to resemble a weapon. There was a sword, spear, bow, and…shield?

Each seemed to be associated with those same food sources I’d picked from before, with the grand mural depicting nuts, meat, and the like. The one associated with fish seemed to be the shield. And smack-dab in the center was an unmissable treasure chest.

“Is this a treasury, perhaps?”

“Looks like it. I wonder if it’s got anything fun like that Pekkle Pipe.”

“Some good equipment wouldn’t hurt. And hopefully it’s not stuff that we can’t use.”

That key had come from a super rare coelacanth whose materials even Romina struggled to use. It wouldn’t have been surprising if an incredibly potent weapon awaited us.

“All right… I’m opening it.”

“Yeah.”

“Go ahead.”

“Treasure hunt…”

If a mimic pops up, I’m never going to forgive management until the day I die.

I timidly placed a hand on the treasure chest and lifted the lid.

“Peeeen!”

The moment I heard the voice, I instinctively found myself half

squinting, staring tiredly at the Pekkle who popped out. Shouko, Tsumugi, and even Sheryl looked rather disappointed.

What, a Pekkle was the big prize? I thought. Still, given how over-the-top the room was, it had to be there for a reason. I examined the Pekkle, hoping there was something special about it.

"You did well to obtain the ancient key and defeat the Dragon Zombie to release the seal on me, pen!"

Oh, this one has special lines. Umm…

The one who popped out of the chest was a Pekkle equipped with a shield embedded with a roundish gemstone.

"My name is Brave Pekkle, pen! It is my pleasure, pen!"



“Brave Pekkle?”

“Pen!”

As soon as it finished speaking, it turned and made off just like any other Pekkle.

No further explanation, I guess.

“What was that about?”

“Is it different from the other Pekkle?”

“Brave…courage.”

“Hmm…well, whatever. For now, let’s check the other door, and if there’s nothing strange about it we can leave. We’ll figure out the Brave Pekkle once we get back…”

“Hokay.”

“Right. Since it’s a Pekkle, let’s tell Alto about it.”

Managing the Pekkles was Alto’s job.

But finding a single Pekkle after all that fanfare… I grumbled to myself as we investigated the rest of the room. But with no further discoveries, we quickly made our way back.

†

“Brave Pekkle is a Pekkle among Pekkles, pen! He is the Pekkle who will save the world, a special Pekkle unlike any other, pen! Releasing his seal will greatly aid in our development plan, pen!”

As soon as we returned, Santa Hat Pekkle approached me and began jubilantly spouting incomprehensible lore. Seeing as there was so much unique dialogue surrounding that Pekkle, there was no doubt it was something special.

But honestly, leave the world-saving to the players… It’s a game, after all.

I set Alto’s place as my first stop.

We reported on everything that had gone on in the dungeon and checked the Brave Pekkle’s status on the Pekkle-o-meter while we were at it.

“About that Brave Pekkle that appeared on your return,” said Alto. “Its specs are astounding, I’ll give it that.”

“Yeah, for sure.”

We’d only just obtained him, but even in his initial state, his stats were higher than the other Pekkles all across the board. He wasn’t a jack-of-all-trades like Santa Hat either; his base stats were

all so unanimously high that he could do pretty much anything to perfection.

Maybe it was because he was a “hero.” When it came to RPGs, a hero usually meant an all-rounder.

“You can give all sorts of things to Brave Pekkle, pen! Little by little, he grows stronger with every item, pen!”

“What?”

“An NPC you can strengthen by giving items, huh…”

“However, Brave Pekkle is a defense specialist who can’t attack, pen! Keep that in mind, pen.”

To summarize: Brave Pekkle was unique among Pekkles, with incredible base stats in all aspects. What’s more, he could continue to grow by giving him items…equipment, materials, you name it. They would all boost his stats very slightly.

“Yes, it looks like Brave Pekkle has some special command options…though with you being the leader, Kizuna, he will prioritize your orders over all else.”

“You can still control him with the Pekkle-o-meter, right?”

I checked his status again. It came with special commands—compounding, cooking, crafting, and enchantment—by default. He was clearly different from the other Pekkles.

“Pretty much. For now…let’s try assigning him to the ‘command’ setting.”

Through the Pekkle-o-meter, we issued an order for the Brave Pekkle to take command. Immediately…the stats of all the other Pekkles rose by about fifty percent.

“Amazing… It even adds a proficiency gain boost to the other units.”

“That’s incredibly powerful.”

“Yes…I’d say so. That Pekkle is so versatile, I’d even call it unnatural. Are you sure this guy wasn’t the intended reward for clearing the dungeon?”

“Well, he was behind a door that could only be opened with a key I had to fish for.”

“Meaning the reward matches the difficulty level… It’s good that we’re making progress.”

“All thanks to my fishing, right?”

I had to give myself some credit; otherwise, I’d just be a relatively useless tagalong.

“Yes, it’s thanks to you, Kizuna,” Shouko acknowledged me.

And Tsumugi chimed in, “You should learn some humility, bro.”

“I helped with the dungeon exploration, didn’t I?”

“Oh, on that note,” said Alto, “did the boss respawn?”

“We got a load of Dragon Zombie materials! Thanks to my dismantling!”

By this point, even I could tell I was starting to sound annoyingly full of myself. Oh well.

“Just how much would this be worth if we sold it to the front lines… But that can wait. Maybe Romina can make something out of it now?”

“Of course!”

We left Alto behind and went to find Romina, who had returned to her workshop. She looked very satisfied as she took the Dragon Zombie materials.

“Sure, I watched you dismantling the thing on-site, but now that I’m looking at them, this is some nice stuff. This time… As I recall, Tsumugi wanted some equipment made from it, right?”

“Yeah, you got that right. From what I can tell, this is going to make fighting in the dungeon a lot easier.”

“I’ll give it a try, then. Should be easier to work with than the ancient fish materials.”

With that, the materials we brought in were turned into equipment for Tsumugi. This resulted in a set of black armor with a curious luster. My sister immediately donned it and struck a pose.

“Wow! Amazing! It’s way tougher than the last set!”

“Glad to hear it.”

The armor had a skirted design and quite a refined look too.

“I would have customized it to make it a bit more stylish, but that’ll take a few more materials. For now, it’s nice, simple, and practical.”

“Got it. C’mon, bro. We need to go and get more, she said.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Well…I do want to raise my proficiencies a bit. It’s not all bad. With that said… I’m starting to miss fishing.

“I’m glad you didn’t run into any issues this time.”

“About that—Kizuna, you remember those Orichal Ores and Starfire Gems you brought me…? The processing difficulty startled

me.”

“Kizuna is always a step ahead.”

I’m not trying to be…though this does remind me of the empty can business, so I can’t exactly deny it.

“I did manage to process them, but the next steps are still tricky. If you could get some more of those Rot Dragon materials, I think I could grind out some good experience.”

Romina was always coming through for us. She was practically our personal blacksmith at this point… I was a bit worried I’d end up asking her for free gear even after we left the island. But good fences made good neighbors, as they say. I’d need to be mindful if I wanted to continue to get along with her.

“Tsumugi, Shouko…make sure you pay her with the gold you’re making in the dungeon. If we start expecting her to work for free, we’ll be no different from the frontliners.”

“Yes…you’re right. We can’t take advantage of her goodwill forever.”

“Yeah, I get it.”

“You’re the ones giving me so many high-quality materials. I’m practically begging you for them…”

This is to draw the line. Growing too complacent will just cause issues down the line. From now on, I’ll give her grouper—the best catch on the island. Though I’m already doing that pretty often.

“I’m already getting rewarded, you know. Handling these high-difficulty materials is letting me rake in proficiency…but I do appreciate the thought.”

“So, back to the Orichal Ore, Starfire Gems, and Ancient Fish materials—they’re tough to work with?”

“That’s right. Or at least, I’m not skilled enough to do it yet.”

“Don’t worry. Those dungeon monsters are easy pickings.”

For Shouko and Tsumugi, anyway.

I was hanging on thanks to my Low-Grade Ancient Dress…but I was far less reliable than those two.

“Next, it’s Sheryl’s turn. Some armor wouldn’t hurt, would it?”

“Uh-huh…”

*Well, Sheryl’s also a crafter, so she can just help out when she has the time…*or so I thought when I noticed her eyeing what was left of the Rot Dragon Skull, Bones, and Wing Membranes.

“Do you want to use them for a ship?”

“Uh-huh…”

“Fine. Let’s head in again after we get some rest.”

“Hooray!”

Honestly, just one more trip for me. Then I’m going back to my slow life.

When all was said and done, we geared up once more and set off for another dungeon run.

At this point, it was just routine—defeat the Dragon Zombie and head back. Along the way, we did some excavation in the dungeon to gather building materials. There were no rare drops this time.

Sheryl and Tsumugi seemed to be cranking out levels left and right.

Our next set of Dragon Zombie materials went to Sheryl, and whatever she didn’t use went into making equipment for her. As for the materials that didn’t mesh with anything else we needed, Romina used them to craft herself a new set of smithing tools.

After these repeated dungeon runs, I decided to bow out of any further trips to focus on fishing, hunting, and raising my swimming skills on the island.

From what Alto had told me, the Pekkles were working a lot more effectively now that the Brave Pekkle was around.

“Let’s freaking go!”

With my Giant Catfish Rod, reeling in groupers had become a lot easier.

Plus, Romina had crafted me some hooks from the Dragon Zombie’s fangs, boasting boosted durability… The only flaw was that they sometimes left a bit of poison on the fish. And at night, they only seemed to attract Bone Fish.

Yeah, maybe I should stop using these hooks.

For hunting, I picked up Trap Mastery. At first, it only let me create pitfalls exclusively for monsters, but repeatedly using them in the hunting area let me boost up the skill.

One day, I went diving with Sheryl to look for shellfish. When I told everyone about the clam soup I’d made by the underground lake, everyone wanted to try it. I suspected there would be clams in the sea too, and I took the dive.

Shouko kept telling me that I couldn’t spend all my time fishing

and that maybe it was better to branch out. And by the end of it, I found out that *abalone* could be harvested on Cal Mira Island.

We had a barbecue and enjoyed them together. The delicious meat had such a satisfying bite to it! Yeah! This was the good life!

†

Around four days went by.

"Hmmm..."

Romina stood in her workshop, arms crossed as she stared at an Orichal Ingot.

She'd managed to craft a prototype gauntlet which—according to Tsumugi—turned out to be an outstanding piece of equipment. However, creating even one success had required countless failures...apparently. Meanwhile, Shouko and Tsumugi were practically diving into the dungeon every day.

"Aren't you going to make something out of it?" I asked.

"The process is pretty difficult, and our stock is running low... Kizuna, could you mine some more for me?"

"I don't mind, but...that stuff isn't exactly common."

I'd gone down to the underground lake with Sheryl after that, hoping to do a bit more exploration. Unfortunately, we didn't manage to make much headway, nor could we excavate much ore.

"They seem to be fighting just fine with the condensed Miraka Crystal gear and the Dragon Zombie gear, so do you really have to fixate on it that much?"

"Say what you will, but just like you have your pride as a fisherman, I have my pride as a blacksmith."

Fair enough... I nodded, just as Brave Pekkle waddled over.

"What are you doing, pen?"

Brave Pekkle seemed to run on a different AI than the other Pekkle units, and you could converse with him to some degree. Perhaps he'd even be able to provide some useful hints.

"We're kinda stuck since crafting stuff with this Orichal Ingot is too hard."

"Got it, pen."

Suddenly, a help icon popped up in my field of vision.

Hmm? This is a list of...what he can make with the materials I've got using the tools in the workshop.

No, give me a hint. I didn't ask for this!

"What's wrong?"

"Uh, it looks like Brave Pekkle wants to craft something."

"Hmm… I was probably going to break the ingot anyway. Why don't we see what he can do?"

"If that's okay with you…"

With her permission, I took the ingot and looked through what could be made with what I had on hand. *It looks like Orichal Ingots are best suited for accessories… Oh, right, Brave Pekkle does have that special craftwork command. Then it makes sense he can make more varieties of accessories than armor.*

"Then…"

I instructed him to make an Orichal-Starfire Bracelet.

"Got it, pen."

Brave Pekkle positioned himself in front of the workshop's anvil and began tinkering with something or other.

"Well, I might as well use the remaining ingots to give it a shot too," said Romina.

As I watched the Brave Pekkle at work, it became clear that his craft involved intricate detailing.

"Erk…failure!" Romina stared mortified as the ingot she was working on disappeared right before her eyes.

It's that difficult, huh…

"Finished, pen!"

Brave Pekkle sprang up and handed me a bracelet.

`Orichal-Starfire Bracelet +2`

As for its stats… What in the…? It's supposed to be an accessory, but it's got better defense than some armor! And you can even raise its defense higher if you inject it with mana. And let's not overlook that Intermediary Stone Auto-Energy Regen (Weak) effect it's got.

When I handed it to Romina for her to get a better look, she raised her eyebrows a bit.

"If an NPC can craft something like this, then what am I even doing? As much as I hate to admit it, I still can't make something on this level."

Whoa…she's giving some honest praise. If it were me, I'd probably just get envious instead.

I could imagine myself screaming, *You call that game balance?!*

"I have an easier time with materials from this island, pen."

"Looks like it doesn't all come down to skill. He gets a bonus for Cal Mira's native materials."

"So it seems... But what do we do with this accessory?"

Giving it to Shouko or Tsumugi was probably our best bet. They were still gathering resources in the dungeon, and this could boost their efficiency.

As I thought over the bracelet, Brave Pekkle brought up a new menu—an enchantment list.

"Wait, come to think of it, he had an enchantment function too..."

"That feature hasn't been implemented yet... He seems to possess some skills a tad ahead of schedule."

Working with what I've got on hand, it doesn't look like he can give any notable enhancements... Oh? A Drain Booster option caught my eye. The materials it required were Vampyre Fish and Bone Fish...

This might be a good way to get back in Yamikage's good books after we've kept her out of the loop for so long. And it'll be a good experiment too.

"Let's go with this one."

"Got it, pen."

Brave Pekkle took the Orichal-Starfire Bracelet +2, placed his hands over it, and began looping through some work-like motions.

"Looks like he can do whatever you put him up to."

"He's the hero of the Pekkles, after all."

"At this point, do you really need anyone else if you've got Brave Pekkle?"

"Hey, don't be like that. It looks like he can only make accessories, you know."

A little time passed before... "Finished, pen!" Brave Pekkle cried out.

Thus, an Orichal-Starfire Bracelet +2 (Drain Booster) was completed. Its base stats had fallen slightly when compared to the unenhanced version... A way to balance it out, perhaps?

But whatever it was, I planned to let someone else use it until we reunited with Yamikage. Then, I could give it to her as a present.

Though honestly, even if Santa Hat gives me another recruitment screen right now, I'm not sure if I'll call her up. We've already finished clearing the dungeon, and we're not at a dead end.

"How frustrating this is. All right, I should stay up all night grinding my skills!"

Romina was burning with a peculiar competitive spirit. Then again, Shouko and Tsumugi were regularly bringing her high-quality materials. Considering what was to come after the next wave and next update, it wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

"Keep raising your skills…and by the time we leave this island, you'll have all the frontliners astounded."

"Perhaps. Well, I had rivals among my fellow crafters, and I'm proud of the moment I outpaced the others to become the number one crafter. I could even turn the tables on those fools."

Romina turned to me.

"In fact, I could proclaim myself to be your party's exclusive blacksmith. It'd be a good way to silence them and stop any funny business."

"If that's what you want for yourself…I don't mind. Just keep in mind, we like to take it slow. I don't plan on giving up that stance after this, and we could slip up at any second too. In the first place, we're not aiming to be the best."

Yes, in the end, we'd only ended up on what seemed to be the game's frontmost line by sheer coincidence. We were doomed to slip up and fall behind again before long.

"No problem. You're already letting me do whatever I want. I'm fine if you'd just let me borrow the name."

"You mean a position where you can transfer over as soon as you find a group you like… That might be for the best."

"But I do think you have some good talent on the team, Kizuna. Shouko and Tsumugi would be able to distinguish themselves, even on the front line. And Yamikage—if you look at her results in the waves—is no slouch either. You even have Alto. You're surrounded by comrades like that when all you want to do is fish… Honestly, it's a bigger feat to track you down and make contact than anything else."

With Sheryl being a shipwright, whether she was famous or not didn't really matter. And as for the ship she was customizing on the island looking more and more like a pirate ship… Let's just not

think about it.

I was technically the leader of the bunch, and maybe reaching me was…surprisingly difficult. Well, I already knew what was ahead of me once we left the island—more fishing. My life was starting to feel like that of a hermit living secluded in the mountains…

Yeah, let's not think about that either.

"That aside, Brave Pekkle does good work. How about we have him make some accessories for Shouko and Tsumugi while he's at it?"

In the meantime, I can gather the necessary materials.

"Huh?! Good god, quit dumping annoying jobs on me, pen!"



“Umm… What?”

My head snapped toward Brave Pekkle.

What I saw there wasn’t the slightly absent-minded, lovable Pekkle face I’d come to expect. Instead, I was met with the sharp glare of a foulmouthed Pekkle.

I checked a few more times.

That’s strange… It’s still Brave Pekkle, but he’s acting completely different.

“Hey.”

While I was baffled by the sudden change, Alto walked over to me.

“Kizuna, did you give Brave Pekkle any orders?”

“Huh? Yeah, I told him to make an accessory.”

“As I feared.”

“You know something?”

“Yeah… Brave Pekkle is incredibly versatile, but he does have one major flaw.”

Alto pointed the Pekkle-o-meter at the incredibly disgruntled-looking Brave Pekkle, ordering him to move elsewhere.

“Ordering me around left and right like you own me? I’m not your slave, pen!”

Even the way he walks is full of attitude… And that line kinda stung! It feels like he’s speaking on behalf of all the Pekkles out there.

“His stress gauge fills up ridiculously fast. If you want to assign him any task, you need to keep a close watch on him or his stress will skyrocket in no time.”

“What… I never knew he had a flaw like that.”

A part of me felt like a hero should be more resilient than that, but this was a very game-ish drawback they’d given him. Still, it was reasonable enough.

“Urgh… If I gave him an order and forgot about him, I can imagine things spiraling pretty quickly.”

“No doubt about that. And once his stress level crosses fifty percent—as you’ve seen yourself—his attitude gets blatantly worse. He’s got a pretty unique AI.”

What exactly were they going for here?

“Maybe there’s some sort of backstory to it. From what I’ve gleaned so far, we might be able to learn more if we build a library.”

“I’m not sure if I want to know or not.”

“Well, even if you don’t assign him to anything, Brave Pekkle still boosts all the other Pekkles’ abilities by twenty percent. The best way to lower his stress is to just leave him alone.”

So he’s valuable just by existing, huh? What a tricky Pekkle to manage.

It seemed like having someone like Alto—who could properly oversee the Pekkles in their entirety—was practically essential.

“By the way, the castle construction is about one-fifth done.”

According to Alto, there was still a long way ahead.

“So, you had Brave Pekkle make an accessory, right?”

“Yeah, this one right here.” I showed him the Orichal-Starfire Bracelet.

“Ha ha ha, that’s the sort of thing that could put Romina out of business.”

“Alto… Haven’t you learned your lesson yet?”

Romina had begun cracking her knuckles. It looked like the second round of The Merchant of Death versus The Blacksmith was about to begin.

“Is the Drain Booster for Yamikage, perhaps? No, knowing you, Kizuna…you just whipped up whatever you could with what you had on hand. And then you thought, just maybe, you could use it to make amends with poor Yamikage.”

A few words too many, my good Alto. I decided to play along.

“Brilliant deduction, my boy.”

His face turned bitter.

“And where exactly is Yamikage right now?” he asked.

“I dislike shrewd merchants like you.”

“Can’t you joke around *without* making it look like you’re about to shoot me with your bow?”

Not that it’ll do any damage even if I do.

“Enchanting hasn’t been implemented yet, but I had the Brave Pekkle do it anyway.”

“I see… Still, next time you want him to make something, could you consult with me first?”

“Got it.”

“And Romina, I know that you’re focusing on raising your blacksmithing skills, but aren’t you neglecting the basics? Despite everything, your strength stat still plays a big part. Maybe Shouko

and Tsumugi can help you train?”

“Point taken… Maybe my level’s what’s preventing me from getting better. It could be worth a try.”

And so, our grand plan to mass-produce broken accessories was put on hold for now as Romina set off to aid our two-girl fighting force in their dungeon efforts.

†

A few days later, Alto approached me.

“Kizuna, do you have a moment?”

“What’s up?”

“It’s about the island. As the development drags on, there are more and more things piquing my curiosity.”

The island’s development was progressing at a smooth pace. With Alto managing the Pekkles in my stead, the place was almost unrecognizable. The area around the pond where I caught the catfish was now fully paved, with what was once an untamed pond in the wilderness now looking more like an urban fountain. There were countless vacant houses as well. But why were so many houses being built in the first place?

“This is just my conjecture, but my guess is that this is meant to be the Third City.”

“Hmm… What’s your basis for that?”

“You must have realized it too, Kizuna—the number of vacant houses. While some of them are managed by Pekkles, there are facilities like Romina’s workshop that are clearly meant to be run as player shops. And they’re not even optional. They’re considered essential facilities.”

Essential facilities referred to buildings that had to be constructed to progress. In other words, when the Pekkles would come up and badger us about “build this many of such-and-such, pen,” it definitely felt like a game mechanic.

I felt a growing urge to mouth off at the developers who thought it was a good idea to have the players build the city for them. But including this kind of system was an interesting choice. The concept seemed a bit different from the online games I was familiar with.

Perhaps it was only possible because the game managed its

players at every step from start to finish.

"There are also plots of land where you aren't free to build houses. The space has been secured, but you can't build on them."

Alto took out the map to explain.

Land that couldn't be used freely. The obvious assumption would be that it was reserved for some future events.

"Additionally, I was forced to install docks along the coast and construct houses there. Most of those are vacant too."

"For player housing, I'm guessing?"

"It's no surprise, with rental workshops all over the place."

"Well, it is the Second Life Project. It makes sense."

"Not to mention this place has a strong 'island resort' sort of vibe. The beautiful blue beaches here will be a lot more appealing to most people than the coastline of the First City."

Well…this game was originally marketed as a way to enjoy a second life in a digital world. Being able to freely buy houses and take it easy on the beach seemed to be in line with that.

I didn't really understand why we were the ones creating that environment. Still, the idea of "city development" was an appealing one, and there were quite a few games to back that up. Honestly, I was enjoying it quite a bit.

"Either way, it's all going smoothly. The castle will be completed eventually, and I'm curious to see what happens then."

"I can't wait to leave the island."

"You're saying that after dragging everyone else here? Well, whatever."

And so, we chatted and spent some time together.

"Well'n, I'm off to go fishing."

"Same old, then. Break a leg."

I parted ways with Alto and headed to the beach to cast my line. As I sat there, staring into space…suddenly, what looked like a staticky, degraded scene from an old film reel was projected in my field of view.

"Wh-What?"

I felt the same sense of weightlessness I felt when I used a Return Transcript. *Am I being teleported somewhere?*

A faint whir, like a film being wound. Accompanied by a mysterious, old-timey countdown: 5… 4…

I had enough time to open the menu and adjust my equipment,

so I readied myself for battle just in case.

2… 1…

Then came a sound like shattering glass, similar to whenever the waves broke out. My vision cleared up.

This is…a hill along the coast. I've been here before. It's an open space on the edge of the island.

"Kizuna."

"Bro."

Shouko and Tsumugi were right next to me.

"Wh-What just happened?!"

"What is this?"

Alto looked surprised and confused. Romina tried her best to assess the situation.

"Wow."

I couldn't quite tell if Sheryl was surprised or just spacing out. But she did speak up, for what it was worth. She was still holding a mallet, having presumably been summoned in the middle of shipbuilding.

Was everyone on the island forcibly warped here?

"What's this, all of a sudden?"

29 : 24

A mysterious timer—ticking down—appeared in my field of view.

It had probably started at thirty minutes, but it was hard to act when no one knew what was going on. I scanned the area again… Right in the middle of the field, Brave Pekkle was floating horizontally as though he was lying on a bed of air.

Is he unconscious? This is pretty surreal.

Chapter 4: Wrath Pengu

“Brave Pekkle?”

When I pointed Brave Pekkle out to the others, Shouko shifted her eyes to Tsumugi.

Tsumugi stuck out her tongue and gave an embarrassed laugh. Almost an admission of guilt.

What did you do, oh sister of mine?

“PEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE—”

Brave Pekkle clawed at his chest and let out an anguished scream as a black aura erupted from him. The aura engulfed the small, feathered creature, forming a sphere around him.

And when the sphere shattered, a monster emerged. It resembled the Karma Pengu... No, it was more like the Dragon Zombie had sprouted feathers. It was cloaked in dark flames with several sinister shields floating around it.

Its name... Wrath Pengu.

“Grrrraaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

With a powerful roar, Wrath Pengu charged at us. Its hostility was palpable.

“Alto, Romina, fall back!”

Shouko stepped out front, bracing herself for the Wrath Pengu.

Wrath Pengu raised its shield high. Then, suddenly, a single black birdlike— *What? It just summoned a pitch-black bird monster, but it’s completely different from a Karma Pengu!*

It kinda...reminded me of a fat bird monster from an old game.

Its name was...Dark Filolial.

“Kweeeeeeeeeeeeeh!”

Dark Filolial darted toward Shouko with incredible speed. For a moment, its figure seemed to blur—then, in the next instant, multiple attack effects popped up all over Shouko’s body.

“Erk... I-It’s fast!”

As Shouko barely managed to fend off its attacks, Tsumugi swung her scythe at the Dark Filolial.

“Shouko!”

Almost like it had seen her attack coming, Wrath Pengu moved

out in front of Dark Filolial to block the strike. A sharp metallic clang filled the air.

“Hard! It’s super hard—I can’t even scratch it!”

Snapping back to my senses, I drew my bow, taking aim at the Dark Filolial monster.

“Calm down and take formation!”

“I-I know.”

“Battle isn’t exactly my specialty.”

I was too busy to pay much mind to Alto. Just as I released an arrow, black flames erupted around Wrath Pengu, scorching his surroundings.

`“Self-Curse Burning!”`

Big, dramatic text appeared to announce the name of the move.

That’s one massive AoE! I thought, reeling back. Shouko and Tsumugi, who were fighting in close quarters, were scorched badly by the flames.

“Yipes! That smarts! What is this?! It’s really painful!”

The pain she was talking about was probably the damage indicator. While the game did simulate pain when you took hits, it wasn’t actual pain—it was closer to that reflexive “Ouch!” you mutter when you take a hit in a console game. Tsumugi, being an intuitive sort of player, often reacted like that.

“Kh…”

Matching pace with Wrath Pengu, Dark Filolial crossed its wings and moved behind Shouko in an instant. What followed was a breakneck barrage of eight rapid strikes.

“Th-This is…harsh!”

Refusing to give in, Shouko struck Dark Filolial with her fan.

“Circle Dance Zero Formation: Snow Moon Flower!”

Petals danced through the air as she unleashed a powerful move. But Wrath Pengu got in the way, circling in front of Dark Filolial and deploying a cage of interlocking shields around the both of them to block the attack.

The coordination between these monsters is way too polished!

“But I won’t let a chance slip by!”

Tsumugi used a recovery item to heal her wounds.

“Everyone! Cover me!”

“Of course!”

“Uh-huh.”

“Sheryl, going off the strength of its attacks, you need to stay at range. Romina, I need your support too.”

“Got it.”

We all began moving as instructed. I hadn’t really received any orders, so I continued providing support fire with the bow. I was ready to switch to using a lure depending on the situation.

“What do you want me to do?” Alto asked.

“It’d be a huge help if you could throw around some recovery items.”

“This is an emergency. I guess I don’t have a choice.”

It seemed Alto wasn’t completely out of the battle. It would certainly be helpful if he could place some recovery items around at convenient locations.

“Shouko, Wrath Pengu’s defense is too high—there might be a gimmick to damage it. Let’s focus on taking out Dark Filolial first.”

“Understood!”

Even as we discussed tactics, the situation was shifting from moment to moment. The enemy shields dispersed the moment Shouko’s attack ended, and Sheryl, Romina, and I were ready with our bows to bombard our exposed foes.

We all locked on to Dark Filolial.

We did, but no matter how many arrows we shot, Wrath Pengu would intercept them, preventing any of our shots from reaching their mark.

“Dangit! Get out of the way!”

I fired and fired, and each time, a shield would materialize out of nowhere to block the arrow. To make matters worse, Wrath Pengu even caught one of my arrows with a flipper mid-flight and tossed it aside with disdain. It was almost a demonstration of how futile our efforts were.

As for Dark Filolial, this bird was incredibly nimble, and even Shouko and Tsumugi had their hands full trying to land their attacks.

“Ah! Again?!”

What’s more, when an attack seemed like it would go through, Wrath Pengu would reposition itself to block the blow, making it

an even more grueling task.

Again came Self-Curse Burning, with the same dramatic text effects, engulfing us in scorching black flames.

“Urgh, now I’m pissed! Move, goddammit!”

Since Tsumugi was growing more and more irritated, I tried giving it some thought on my end. This was an enemy that required some tactical thinking, unlike the straightforward attackers we’d faced before. It reminded me more of the Soul Eater fight.

“Haaaaaaaaah! Circle Dance Rupture Formation: Tortoise Shell Cracker!”

Shouko created some distance and unleashed a long-range attack. At first, it seemed just as ineffectual as the other attacks, but then—Wrath Pengu staggered... *Did that do something?*

“I see... Techniques that ignore defense seem to work.”

“Huh? You’re really using that? Isn’t the damage output pretty low, though?”

Tsumugi seemed to have some idea of what she’d done as she turned her gaze to the Wrath Pengu. By the sound of it, she had a somewhat effective move that required high proficiency to master.

“Looks like it’s my turn to shine.”

With my Lure: Double Needle amplifying the damage, a somewhat effective move could become a little more practical.

However, we would soon realize the price of using a defense-piercing attack. We were about to learn it firsthand. Now that Shouko had managed to get some damage through, Wrath Pengu was glaring daggers at her, its flippers held high.

“Th-This is...”

And then, the same barrier of shields it had used to block Shouko’s attacks was deployed again—around Shouko this time. She was trapped inside.

As Wrath Pengu made a motion as though it was clenching a nonexistent fist, the shields inverted to face her, triggering a massive damage animation.

Words floated across our field of view.

This is some production value!

“Foolish sinner! May thy sin pierce thy flesh in this maiden’s cold embrace! May even thy screams be

swallowed whole as you suffer in anguish! Iron Maiden!”

These cut-ins are so annoying when they’re being used by the enemy!

Behind the shield cage that trapped Shouko, an iron maiden—an infamous torture device—manifested, its doors opened like a sinister maw, aiming to envelop the cage in its entirety.

“Not on my watch! Take this!”

Tsumugi used some sort of skill as she swung her scythe at Wrath Pengu, but it didn’t even flinch.

And wait, I don’t think you did any damage. It might be invincible for a short period of time.

“Kweeeeeeeeh!”

“Seriously, get lost!”

Dark Filolial attacked her in the meantime. We tried disrupting it from afar with a barrage of arrows but fell short of landing anything decisive.

Hmm? Wait. Can I hit the Iron Maiden itself?

Switching to my fishing rod, I cast it with a meaty snap, using the Lure of Light like a weight.

There was a satisfying clang; I could feel some damage being dealt… That much was all well and good, but before I could follow up, the Iron Maiden had completely engulfed the shield cage that Shouko was trapped in.

A deafening crack filled the air as the Iron Maiden crumbled to bits.

“Kyaaaaaaah… Khh…”

And there was Shouko, who had somehow managed to escape. She looked determined to fight on, but it was clear she’d sustained some heavy damage.

“Are you okay?!”



“Okay…is a strong word… I’ve taken a lot of damage.”

“This is way harder than it has any right to be…” Tsumugi chimed in. “They’re so annoyingly coordinated, it’s almost like we’re doing PVP in a completely different game.”

“It seems to be a classic tank and DPS combo.”

I had to agree with Alto’s analysis. That was exactly what it felt like: Dark Filolial was the core of their offense, while Wrath Pengu soaked up the hits. And if you managed to damage the tank, you’d be met with a powerful counterattack skill.

Usually, fights like these could be trivialized by defeating one of them and breaking the synergy, but therein lay the problem. Wrath Pengu was the boss, and Dark Filolial was the lackey. There was no way to defeat the foe that actually took the hits.

Wrath Pengu’s defense was so absurdly high that regular attacks seemed to do nothing. There had to be some kind of gimmick—some way to get past its defenses. Maybe defeating its minion would weaken it.

But while we wanted nothing more than to take down Dark Filolial, Wrath Pengu kept getting in the way.

“Regardless, Wrath Pengu is the bigger threat! Shouko, Tsumugi! Concentrate your attacks on it!” Alto shouted.

“That’s easier said than done…”

Shouko could thankfully use an attack that ignored defense, but she needed to hit Wrath Pengu himself, not his shield. And unfortunately, Wrath Pengu was very good at blocking.

“Oh, for crying out loud! This monster is such a pain! Hyaaah!”

Tsumugi was struggling to keep up with the Dark Filolial.

“Even though it’s fast, it doesn’t seem to have much health! We’re almost there! We can take on Wrath Pengu after that!”

Oh? Dark Filolial is almost down?

But the moment that thought crossed my mind, Wrath Pengu unleashed a spray of light toward Dark Filolial. Suddenly, Dark Filolial’s health went back up by a large margin— *Hey, that almost topped it up*.

“You’re kidding me! Sure, I get that enemies can use healing abilities and spells and so on, but there’s something wrong with giving them healing this good!”

Who are you even complaining to, Tsumugi?

I understood what she was getting at. It reminded me of the

last boss of the second installment of a famous RPG—the God of Destruction who could use full-recovery magic at random. That was infuriating.

"This might be their way of telling us to target Wrath Pengu instead," suggested Shouko.

We kept up our attacks, chipping away bit by bit. We'd gotten Wrath Pengu's HP down to around seventy percent when the timer ran out.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

A massive black flame arose with Wrath Pengu at its center, burning everything around us. A wide-ranging AoE erupted, and the entire battlefield was engulfed in fire. We'd overstayed our welcome.

"Whoa!"

"Eep!"

"Waaaaaaaah!"

"Nooooo."

"Erk... So we ran out of time."

The black flames incinerated us, freezing our avatars in place even though we hadn't run out of HP...and when I came to, we were all lying on the nearby beach. I checked my status and saw I still had my Energy.

So that was just to boot us out.

With that said...how had it come to this?

"Urgh... The sudden fight caught me off guard," I muttered to myself, sitting up on the sand and processing what we'd just gone through.

Looking at the hill where Wrath Pengu had been, I saw ominous, swirling clouds looming over the area.

And...backtracking a bit, that was Brave Pekkle, right...?

Alto checked the Pekkle-o-meter and suddenly clutched his head in despair.

"Brave Pekkle is gone! I'd managed to enhance him to the point where just having him around boosted all the other Pekkles by fifty percent—double that when commanding!"

That's incredible. When did you have the chance to do that?

"I'm not exaggerating when I said he had become the cornerstone of our development plan! There are buildings we can't even construct without him!"

The stat boost must have been insane!

"Does that include the castle?"

"Of course it does! Castle construction has to be put on hold for the time being! I can't stress enough how urgently we need to rescue Brave Pekkle!"

Just then, Santa Hat Pekkle arrived. Again, it was like he had been waiting for this exact moment.

"When Brave Pekkle is exposed to a special item, he will turn into the monstrous Wrath Pengu, pen. He then retreats into his domain where he can only be challenged once a day, pen."

So it's an event with a daily limit?

"Now then... Shouko, what's the damage?"

"Umm... To be honest, the losses I took are no joke. I'll need to focus on recovering my Energy for the time being."

"You were taking hits left and right, after all."

"Yes... The damage from the Iron Maiden was especially severe. I would have died if I was hit a second time."

That much damage, eh?

Toward the end, Wrath Pengu had tried to trap Shouko in that cage of shields again. The technique was so fast that only Shouko or Tsumugi would have been able to avoid it. The fact that they could feint out of it was our one saving grace.

Was this game designed with such insane reflexes in mind?

"When Kizuna attacked the Iron Maiden, it definitely seemed to do some damage," Alto pointed out. "So even if it does activate, it must be possible to interfere and stop it. Wrath Pengu stops moving when it happens, so as long as we watch out for Dark Filolial's movements in that time frame, we might be able to destroy it."

Yeah, that sounds like the intended strat—to have everyone work together to save a captured ally.

Considering that every player on the island had been summoned, the boss was probably designed with cooperation in mind.

Chapter 5: Root Cause Analysis

“Now then,” I said, “the most pressing issue would be to figure out why and how this happened to prevent it from happening again.”

Before the battle kicked off, Shouko had been looking at Tsumugi. Knowing Shouko, she wouldn’t have done that without reason. In other words, it was safe to assume that Tsumugi was the cause of all this. After all, she’d always been both a mood-maker and a troublemaker, this hopeless little sister of mine.

“What? You’re saying it’s my fault.”

“I can’t think of anything else.”

“I don’t think so. I just did it because I thought it was some sort of event.”

Oh, what a slip of the tongue. What did you do?

“And that’s what led to this, right?”

I could accept her explanation of it being event-related. Clearly, this whole phenomenon had been essentially set up on the system side of things.

“Who could’ve expected it’d trigger a hidden boss flag? I sure didn’t.”

“Please stop explaining it in a way that only the two of us would understand,” Shouko chided her.

Sheryl, Alto, Romina, and I were crossing our arms and glaring at the girl. And picking up on the shifting mood, Tsumugi began to explain.

“E-Err, I showed it to you, right? Romina? You know, that doll with the red hair I found in the dungeon today.”

“Yeah, I remember that. What about it?”

“Well, when we passed near Brave Pekkle while holding the doll, Brave Pekkle began to act strangely.”

Let’s try reconstructing this based on Shouko’s account.

Apparently, they had found a red-haired doll in a treasure chest in the dungeon. It didn’t seem to have any real purpose, and it was classified as a collectible—quite the curious item.

Shouko and Tsumugi had returned with it and—seeing as it was

such a cryptic pickup—decided to discuss it with everyone at a later date. That was supposed to be the end of it.

But on the way back, Tsumugi had noticed Brave Pekkle staring hard at the red-haired doll.

Maybe it's an item that can raise Pekkle friendship levels? she'd thought. And so, she had arbitrarily decided to hand over the doll…which Brave Pekkle proceeded to swat into the dirt.

"Don't show me something so filthy, pen!"

For the record, Alto had been very careful in keeping track of his stress level. According to him, he was practically at zero. Up until the point where he was given the doll, he'd been speaking his usual dialogue lines.

"This *has* to be some sort of event…! I might get to learn a fun new technique!" she had proclaimed.

And so, she had persistently kept showing the doll to Brave Pekkle. At times, she had quite literally shoved it into his face, rubbing it against his cheek.

Based on Shouko's testimony, she had gone at it for about ten minutes. Even when Shouko had tried to stop her, she'd made up all sorts of excuses and reasons to go on.

Eventually, the doll let out a creepy laugh and took on a sinister smirk.

"I was laughing at how Brave Pekkle started using the doll as a punching bag…and then suddenly, the event triggered! Out of nowhere!"

Tsumugi insisted on her innocence, but she was essentially confessing— *This is clearly your fault!*

"What you did was outright bullying. You're not getting up to any funny business at school, are you?"

"My head's always full of games, so I'd never bother with anything so boring!"

"I-I see…"

Her reasoning was oddly convincing, but I was left feeling quite uneasy. I was also finding myself genuinely worried about her future. She didn't bully because it was boring? What did boring mean to her, exactly?

"By the way, just before the fight started, Brave Pekkle's stress gauge spiked at a staggering rate," Alto confirmed.

So showing him something he hated caused his stress to skyrocket,

huh?

Judging by what Santa Hat said, the red-haired doll was presumably the cause. *You're forcing us on another unnecessary detour... All right, there's something I've been considering for a while. Now's as good a time as any to do it.*

"Tsumugi... Come here for a second."

"What's up?"

I took her hand, walked her to the bridge that went over the river, and...tossed her off of it.

"Orah!"

"Hey... Brother... Help me!"

Drat, she's persistent! She had grabbed the edge of the bridge and was stubbornly dangling off of it. I stomped on her hand and finally kicked her off, sending her plummeting into the water below.

"Waaaaaaaaaahhh..."

"Whoa..."

"Public execution."

Hey, you're making me sound like the bad guy here, Sheryl. Call it just punishment.

We were all living together—stuck in the same boat. That meant there had to be consequences for such selfish behavior. Even if it was just a game.

This is why the life-forms known as little sisters are so... I will never understand the little sister lovers out there. What's so cute about a girl this dumb?

Even Kanade—our older sister—had more awareness than this. Sure, she was a bit airheaded, but at least she didn't cause any damage. If only Tsumugi were a graceful, kind, and thoughtful sister instead.

Maybe if she were a meek little sister who'd play farming games with me... Too bad sisters like that don't exist.

This was one of those so-called idealized fantasies a brother had of his sister. Wishes that could never come to be.

"Have you no mercy?"

"With that said, it wouldn't have been right to let her off scot-free...but it's also partially my fault for not trying hard enough to stop her."

"Shouko, you... Well, you already suffered enough damage.

Don’t worry about it.”

Shouko was the one who’d lost the most in the battle. And to be fair, falling off the bridge would only deal a bit of damage. As a non-Spirit, Tsumugi wouldn’t get any penalties.

Now then, to the beach.

†

“*Hack! Cough cough*...”

Tsumugi coughed and sputtered as she washed ashore, having been swept away by the current.

“Another three times should do it.”

“I’m sorry, bro! Please forgive me!”

“What good does apologizing to me do?”

At least offer some apology to Shouko after she lost so much Energy.

Even if it was a game, I couldn’t overlook the sort of play style that ruined everyone else’s enjoyment.

As for me leaving Yamikage by her lonesome self...that was a different matter. I planned to accept full responsibility and punishment for that when the time came.

“Umm, sorry, NPCs!”

“Now you’re just doubling down on the joke!”

I did recall setting up pitfalls for villagers and shoving them off bridges in *Animal Cr*ssing*. That was when it felt like I’d caught a glimpse of the darker impulses a game could bring out.

“Now, now... We might get something good if we can overcome this event, so how about we leave it at that?”

Shouko stepped in to stop me, so I reluctantly dropped the idea of punishing her further. The person most impacted was willing to forgive her, so that was enough.

“Fine... You better say thank you to Shouko.”

“Yeah!”

“So anyway, according to Alto, the hole left by Brave Pekkle’s absence is a big one. I think he’ll come back if we can defeat Wrath Pekkle, but how are we going to do it?”

“We can challenge it once a day, with a time limit of thirty minutes for the battle.”

With only one entry per day, we’ll have to wait until at least

tomorrow.

"Shouko. How long will it take to make up for the damage?"

"If I were to rush into the dungeon right now and if I fought my heart out… It would take around two days to recover. That is how much was taken away."

She really took a beating… It takes a lot for Shouko to suffer that much damage.

"We should hold off on another attempt for now. Wait, do you reckon it'll forcefully summon everyone on the island again?"

In that case…this might be like the wave bosses, where you need an army to chip away at them.

That meant it would be impossible with our current numbers. With that said…we did manage to stack up a bit of damage. Seeing as we'd taken off around a third of its health, it wasn't as strong as it seemed.

This was a fight we could win if we took our time—the problem was the time limit.

"There's still a lot we don't know about the mechanics since we only fought it once," Alto said. "But seeing how I wasn't targeted for the most part, the AI doesn't seem to go after noncombatants."

"There's also a chance it doesn't attack unless you enter a certain range."

At the very least, it seemed to have a very low probability of targeting Sheryl, Romina, or myself.

"Other than that…" Shouko thought for a second. "The Dark Filolial's attacks were vicious, but Wrath Pengu rarely ever attacked us directly."

"Really? It let off that Self-Curse Burning attack a few times."

"But didn't you notice the conditions for it to use that attack, bro?"

"Well… It did seem like Wrath Pengu relied on counters."

Dark Filolial handled the offense while Wrath Pengu devoted itself to defense. And if it did ever take damage from an attack, it would scorch the whole area with its Self-Curse Burning counterattack.

It reacted to all high-damaging techniques, working with Dark Filolial to create a solid defensive formation.

And then, when the opportunity arose, it would seal its foe in a cage and use its finishing move, Iron Maiden. Iron Maiden took a

fair bit of time from invocation to execution, and it likely had a high cooldown or some other restriction.

What an irritating fighting style.

“About that technique… It didn’t activate when I used Circle Dance Rupture Formation. And when you were providing support fire, it never used Self-Curse Burning, although it did grab an arrow once.”

Ranged attacks didn’t activate it… I’d figured as much. And Shouko’s defense-ignoring attack was also effective. It was clearly a defensive enemy, so maybe they left a few weaknesses to exploit.

“I don’t know how its behavior will change if we all swarm Dark Filolial and take it down quickly, but maybe we can melt down those sturdy defenses!”

Indeed, enemies with outrageous defense did tend to lose a bit of durability when their minions were defeated. The troublesome part was that Wrath Pengu itself possessed what seemed like healing magic. This made it hard to take down Dark Filolial.

“Even if you do defeat the Filolial, there’s a chance it’ll just be summoned again after a set time. Challenging the fight again to test out some theories isn’t a bad idea, but going through that song and dance again and again will be exhausting, and especially hard for Spirits like us.”

Take Shouko, for instance. It was going to take some time before she regained her full strength.

“Right now, we have two options. Either we let sleeping dogs lie—we stay away and keep up the construction projects without him—or we bolster our forces and try again.”

That was when Romina raised her hand. “Are there any attack methods we haven’t tried yet? Or, to be more precise…well, it depends on the sorts of attacks Shouko’s techniques cover.”

“Meaning?”

“Unconventional attacks might work…like poison, paralysis, or petrification, for instance.”

“If we’re going off gaming tradition, they usually don’t work. Especially against bosses.”

It was a long shot. I wasn’t hoping for much. In Western games, sometimes even final bosses were susceptible to status effects, but Japan-produced games often even had minor bosses be

completely immune. I didn't know what standard this game followed; that required some experimentation.

"Since defense-piercing skills work, it's not entirely out of the question."

"Other than that… Right. There's definitely one more attack method we didn't try out."

"And what's that?"

"Magic."

Oh… Well, yeah.

Neither I nor Shouko nor Sheryl nor Tsumugi could use magic. We were all about going crazy with weapons. Meanwhile, Romina and Alto were out of the equation. They were a merchant and a crafter; that was just how it worked.

In fact, I was on their side too. I was a semi-production unit, if I had to describe myself, although my production was mainly through fishing.

"Maybe we could use tools that trigger magic effects?" muttered Alto. He seemed to have some knowledge in the field, but the troubled look on his face didn't make the idea feel too promising.

Even if we ignored the cost, we had no guarantee if it would work. Nor did we know if we could make anything strong enough to be useful.

"Got any ideas?"

"I do have a bit of knowledge on toolmaking, but I'm not confident I can craft something effective. If anything, Sheryl's Machinery might be our best bet."

Sheryl shook her head.

"Bombs."

"Bombs?"

She nodded. Did that mean she didn't recommend it?

"Not magic."

"So you're saying they do physical damage, so it's pointless."

"Uh-huh."

Hmm…

"Would a Molotov cocktail count as magic…?"

"Even if it did, would it work on a foe who counters with fire?"

This is hard. I mean, there's a limit to what we can make with the materials on the island.

Maybe there would be an event to craft countermeasure items now that they were lost. That seemed plausible enough.

"Even though we've come so far, our lack of a magician is finally becoming a problem…"

"You're completely ignoring Yamikage, aren't you?"

"Well, if Santa Hat Pekkle speaks up, I do still plan on calling her."

Ever since Alto arrived, that Pekkle had done nothing but provide the occasional explanation. At best, he'd throw out his usual stock phrase of "Pekkle is not a monster, pen!"

It wouldn't be strange for him to show up any day now. After all, it was the perfect time for a hero's dramatic late arrival.

"If I recall, Therese was also a magician. If you want to maintain Yamikage's infamy, calling her would also be an option."

"Calling her out of nowhere and tearing her away from L'Arc sounds dangerous. Like, wouldn't he charge at me screaming, 'You took Therese away from me… I'll never forgive you!' or something?"

L'Arc came across as an incredibly sociable, dependable big brother type, but Therese was a bit…maybe just a little…overwhelming.

I could only call people to the island one at a time, so one of them would have to suddenly disappear. Whoever I called would probably be angry at me too.

"Therese does speak like that from time to time, but she is capable of acting like an upstanding adult when push comes to shove," said Romina. "For some reason, she becomes stiff and formal when talking to me."

So they're acquainted with Romina too? Those two really get around.

"They've got the aura of two former-delinquent lovebirds. I could see you summoning one of them as a joke, Kizuna."

"I'm not heartless enough to break up a happy couple."

Though…the temptation is there. For a laugh.

"Those two enjoy searching for hidden events, so I don't think they'd be too upset if you dragged them into this. They're good at looking after people too."

Come to think of it, Alto was trying to pawn Yamikage off to them.

"There's a high chance that they were the next people Yamikage

turned to…”

I couldn’t deny how appealing this all sounded.

“Still, let’s not turn this into outright bullying,” Shouko restrained me. “Let’s go with Yamikage, okay?”

“I guess so.”

We’ll start with Yamikage. Then, if I can call someone else afterward, I’ll consider L’Arc or Therese.

“We can make up for it with tools to some degree, but this is quite the muscle-brained formation we’ve got going on.”

I couldn’t really argue with Romina’s assessment. We tried to be creative with our tool sets, but it was true that our attack options were limited.

She went on, “Kizuna, have you ever considered learning magic?”

“Seeing as I haven’t built any proficiency, it’ll probably be a huge detour… Shouko, how do you even learn magic?”

“If you raise your proficiency with a magic weapon like a staff, you can eventually learn it.”

Regardless, it’ll be hard to suddenly use powerful magic in our current situation. From what I’ve learned so far, Spirits have a decently high affinity with magic. After all, they can spam spells as long as they have some Energy stored up. But we don’t just need any magic—we need something strong enough to break through those powerful defenses.

“Has no one here picked up any magic?”

“I can use some low-level healing magic for emergencies, but that’s about it.”

Hmm… That’s a merchant for you. He’s learned enough recovery spells to turn a profit.

Not that I’d ever seen him use magic before, so his proficiencies were probably low.

“Kizuna, you once had Brave Pekkle craft a powerful accessory, didn’t you? How about using that to learn magic?”

Right, the Orichal-Starfire Bracelet +2. I gave it to Shouko and Tsumugi since it had good stats.

“It’s enchanted with Drain Booster. If Yamikage shows up, she’ll be able to make the most of it, Alto explained.”

“So then it’ll be better to hold off until Santa Hat gives the signal… Meanwhile, let’s use the island’s resources to appease…

Ahem, ahem, have some equipment ready for her when she gets here?"

"Why does that sound so calculated?"

Well, what do you want me to do? With Yamikage, we'll gain more attack options.

Yamikage was the only person I knew who could use powerful magic—a different sort of strength than Shouko and the others. And she could even use AoE magic...though it was limited to only Drain.

Going off the formula so far, we'd always been able to summon extra help whenever a problem arose. That was why I wanted to summon our hero, Yamikage.

"Yammy's a Spirit, after all. I'm sure she has some incredible stats."

"Pretty much."

She specialized in magic and was strong enough to consistently claim high rankings in the waves. In fact, she was strong enough that people had begun calling her "the Admin's Favorite Toy..." No, wait, that was just me. Everyone else was calling her "The Reaper."

"If our only other choice is to recklessly charge in and exhaust our resources, then calling for her might be the better option," said Shouko. "Let's go with that plan. If that fails, we can just come up with something else afterward."

"Got it."

"It might slow down development progress, but fine."

"Finally Yamikage's turn, huh... I wonder what she's doing right now..."

Yamikage... I haven't seen her for a while now. It's been about a month and a half.

"It might be a bother to her, but we need Yamikage. Though I guess Therese would work too."

"Kizuna, I don't think you would have the right to complain if Yamikage pushed you off a bridge."

Maybe so. If that happens, I'll take it without protest.

Chapter 6: Ninja Redux

And so, our slow life on the island resumed… *But seriously, Santa Hat, say something already!*

Nothing notable happened for the next three days, though ominous clouds continued to linger over the island.

This is unsettling. And there's those crack patterns that appear during the waves… Maybe this looks like an SOS signal to the people out there.

"Ask the question already!"

"Pekkle is not a monster, pen."

"That again?! Is that the only response you have when I yell at you?!"

"Hurry up and defeat the Wrath Pengu, pen."

"I'm trying to call someone for that!"

"Hurry and finish the castle, pen."

Oh, for crying out loud! You're so annoying! Stick to one order, would you?

Hurry this, hurry that, just how impatient are you?

"Hurry up and let me summon someone, pen!"

"Kizuna, calm down! Mimicking Pekkle-speech isn't going to accomplish anything."

"Bro has his childish moments."

Shut it! You're the one who caused this!

"Romina! Did you finish making that outfit Yamikage might like?"

"Of course I did. I crafted a shinobi set I'm sure she'll love!"

Following my instructions, Romina put together some equipment for Yamikage.

Oh… Very ninja-esque. It even has chain mail and tabi socks.

"I had to remake it a few times before it rolled the right bonus stats for a magician like her. Just wearing it should make her several times stronger."

"It even comes with a ninja hood… All that's left is a scroll."

Her concept of a ninja leaned more toward ninjutsu—the kind you'd imagine with fire and water techniques. In other words, it

was straight out of an anime; not a stealthy *T*nchu*-style ninja. This was the right call.

"We can't forget about the Orichal-Starfire Bracelet either."

"Right. And an Intermediary Stone for Spirits."

"Yamikage… So essential, yet never called upon… Is she lucky or unlucky? It's hard to say."

"Part of Yammy's appeal is her absence."

The day wore on, and just as the sun had begun to set…

"Is there any—"

"Let's freaking goooo!"

Rata-tat-tat. My feet tapped the ground in a little celebratory dance, causing Shouko to back away.

"You don't have to be so weirded out. It kinda stings."

"Then maybe you should learn to restrain yourself. For someone who was waiting so eagerly, you sure spent a lot of time fishing."

"I was stocking up on grouper for Yamikage to eat."

"Didn't you grill and eat some last night? Maybe you should consider learning magic yourself, Kizuna."

Well, it's an option. I get that.

But as a production character, I hesitated to get too involved. Learning magic down the line wasn't an awful idea, but it was a pretty big burden—in the Energy sense.

I'd have to downgrade my other abilities to learn it.

I was getting a boost from proficiency as well, so downgrading wasn't too hard of a hit to take, especially given my play style. But my fishing skills had started to prove useful in combat.

"You heard her. We're going with Yamikage."

I copied her name from my friend list and pasted it into Santa Hat Pekkle's text prompt.

"Understood, pen. I pray that you meet them soon, pen."

With his usual line, Santa Pekkle waddled off.

"Well then, Yamikage's set to arrive tomorrow."

A devious, scheming look crossed Alto's face.

It suits him perfectly. In the Merchant of Death sort of way.

"And naturally, you're going to welcome her exactly how you did with me, right?"

"No? I was just planning to greet her normally."

"What's the point of bullying her even more?"

Alto glared at us, his sharp eyes filled with open discontent.

What? What's he got to complain about?

"I refuse to accept that I'm the only one who gets the rough welcome."

"Blame your shady merchant RP."

"Uh-huh… Yammy is innocent."

"I agree with Kizuna. You brought that on yourself."

"But still, it's unfair! I demand equal treatment and equal rights! Otherwise, I'll abandon my work and mass-produce Karma Pengus!"

I struggled to understand what he was so caught up on, but he refused to concede a single step. He was even tacking on a ridiculous threat.

He's really holding a grudge…even though it's his own fault.

"Mark my words! I'll remember this, even after we leave the island!"

"You're threatening us just to gain allies, Alto?!"

"Heh… Yes, I *do* need an ally, don't you think? One named Yamikage, perhaps?"

Are you a demon… No, a Merchant of Death indeed.

But Yamikage was so afraid of ghosts. Will she really be all right? I mean, Alto was scared of ghosts too, but… You know. And I highly doubt that's enough to get Yamikage on your side.

Perhaps he simply didn't want to be alone in his misery. He wanted another victim.

"Hah," I sighed. "There's no way around it. For Alto's future peace of mind, Yamikage's just going to have to put up with it."

"Congrats, Kizuna! We're getting a new ally!"

"Don't say that line! And for the record, the protag ends up slaughtering the trashy ones in the sequel. She fights back and survives."

"What awful people."

Yeah, I think so too.

Thus, we started preparing for Yamikage's welcoming party.

†

Don-doko-don-doko-don-doko-don.

Just as we'd done for Alto, Shouko and I drummed out a

bouncing rhythm. Back then, Shouko had lacked motivation—this time, she was somehow even less inclined.

"Ya-hah!"

"Ya-hah."

"Ah-hah."

"Wheee."

Alto was the only one with any real energy. Everyone else's half-hearted participation was almost palpable. This was a rehearsed dance routine... *Wait, who was that? Who's out there shouting "Wheee?"*

"Put more oomph into it! The welcome I got wasn't this pathetic!"

"That's because a lot of people had a bone to pick with you. Don't you think you deserved it?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm the Merchant of Death, right? Well, the Merchant of Death doesn't go down that easily! If you want some reflection, it's going to cost you."

Ah, Romina just let out a sigh. Alto had a decently selfish side to him, though maybe that was just when he was dealing with us.

That aside, he'd finally begun to take pride in his Merchant of Death persona.

"Let's not scare Yamikage too much, okay? She hasn't done anything remotely as terrible as you have. In fact, she's a decent person."

"Right, right. Yammy is an honest kid who's good at playing along with the bit."

"Uh-huh..."

"Though she has a self-proclaimed communication disorder."

"Grr...not a comrade in sight?! Oh, how much better it would have been if Kizuna were the one we were welcoming!"

Ah, Romina just gave me a subtle nod as if to say, "Yep, that checks out."

Am I that kind of person? Well, I'm a bit scummy. I'm aware of that.

But if this were Tsumugi instead of Yamikage...I'd be in the same high spirits as Alto.

That's the family bonus.

"Yes, if it were Kizuna," said Romina, "I might have been a little motivated."

"I'm all in for pranking my brother!"

“Uh-huh.”

Hmm… I might have some things to reflect on too.

I nearly said, “The same goes for you, my sister!” but I decided to keep my mouth shut.

“Given how things have been recently, I can’t exactly deny it.”

“Well…”

“Now, everyone. Let’s begin!”

“May the curtain of mischief fall upon the darkest shadow!”

Sheryl. Why do you only get so eloquent at times like these?

And so, Alto approached Yamikage’s motionless (already photographed) body as she lay on the beach. The petrification was dispelled.

“Wh-Where am I?! A beach?!”

“Ya-hah! Ally-ally! Ahn-tye-Kizuna-yu-nyon!”

Why me? Romina’s the one who summoned you. Quit trying to build up a scapegoat.

“Hiho-hoh!”

“Ha-ho-ho!”

“Uh-huh-huh!”

From what I could see through the meager gaps in the leaves, I could tell that everyone apart from Alto was going through the motions with far less enthusiasm.

“W-Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! What are you going to do to me?!”

Oh no, Yamikage’s completely forgotten about staying in character. And there she goes—bolting off at an incredible speed!



“Joyn-da-yu-nyon! Hot-pot-hot-pot!”

Alto took the lead in ushering Yamikage toward the boiling cauldron, but Yamikage was no fool.

“Th-That’s right! I daresay, a Return Transcript!”

Maybe she’s not actually that panicked. She’s back in character.

And just like Alto had, Yamikage found herself back on the beach.

“M-My spawn was reset, I daresay!”

Predicting that she would use the transcript, Alto was already waiting for her.

“Run-run-no-work!”

Like that, Alto and the others gave chase as Yamikage fled.

However...

“At times like these, I daresay retreat is victory! Vanish!”

With a puff of smoke, Yamikage slipped away and hid with a Concealment skill.

She was fully back in ninja mode.

“Hyah!”

But Tsumugi quickly knocked her out of stealth.

“Wait-wait! Chase-chase!”

Hmm, Alto’s the only one lagging behind. Yamikage’s stats are just too high.

In our group, only Shouko and Tsumugi would be able to match Yamikage at full speed.

“For now, I must assess the situation, I daresay!”

Now with some breathing room, Yamikage continued running and running, her eyes carefully taking in everything around her. It was at that point that Tsumugi and Sheryl finally got somewhat serious, positioning themselves strategically.

It’s understandable—when you see how slippery she can be, it makes you want to corner her.

“Urgh... Drain, I dares— I can’t target them?!”

“Settle-down!”

“Grab!”

“Hey! I daresay, cease! Is this some sort of event?!”

“Pekkle is not a monster, pen.”

They’d finally managed to capture her, a well-worn Alto now guiding her toward the campfire they’d set up in advance. Unfortunately, the atmosphere was utterly destroyed by a working

Pekkle that just so happened to pass by.

It was a little surreal how laid-back the Pekkle could be despite the situation.

“Out-get-out!”

“Got it, pen.”

The Pekkles had been forcefully repositioned with the Pekkle-o-meter, but their numbers had grown quite a bit… Development had progressed considerably from the time we’d summoned Alto, and the island’s buildings were now visible even from the beach.

It felt far more like a tourist area now…

“So it is finally my turn?! A-Anyone?! I daresay, is anyone there?! Save me!”

Yeah…I’d say it’s about time to end this.

But just as I was about to wrap up my drumming…

“Hide Behind leads into… Shadow Dash, I daresay!”

Again, Yamikage used a spell and a skill, moving herself through the shadows to circle behind Alto and run away.

So many new skills one after another… She’s not half bad.

“How should I put this? Yamikage handles herself very well.”

“Yeah. She seems pretty calm, all things considered.”

“But she is calling for help now and then. I do think she’s somewhat rattled.”

Well, she wasn’t like Alto—a man who possessed no combat prowess whatsoever. Back when I first met her, she’d been on the run from the Dark Knight Lizardman, so surely she was quick on her feet.

She seemed to pick up movement and evasion skills, making her even more ninja-ish.

Alto… Did you ever consider how difficult it would be to catch and scare Yamikage?

“Graaah! No-moa-mista-nice-gai!”

Oh, looks like he’s not playing around. Alto pulled out a Molotov cocktail, throwing it to cut off Yamikage’s escape route. Of course, players couldn’t harm one another, and Yamikage would be able to pass straight through it. But its appearance packed a punch, as she instinctively dodged the flames straight into a dead end.

“Kh… I daresay, is this where I fall?!”

“Heh heh heh heh! Yu-nyon-yu-nyon!”

Was he trying to invite her into the victim union? If so, he was

having the opposite effect.

"But giving up here would besmirch the shinobi name! Now! I daresay, tell me what sort of event it is already!"

Hmm…

She saw right through us.

It was effective when she'd just gotten up, but there was no way to fool her once she was fully alert. Especially when our methods were so crude.

"Ahem… Alto, can we just call it your loss already?"

"D-Dang it…blasted ninja! You play dirty! You ninja all play dirty!"

Exhausted, Alto slumped to his knees in defeat. *I think she's way cleaner than you, personally*.

I didn't know what drove him to go so far, but maybe he was just really into the bit. He was doing a merchant role-play, after all.

"Th-That voice?! Kizuna?!"

From the shadows of the leaves, I emerged with Shouko and called out to Yamikage.

Of course, Tsumugi and Sheryl also dropped their disguises and changed to their normal clothes.

"Wh-What is this?! I daresay, what's going on?!"

"Well…to tell you the truth…"

I explained everything to Yamikage, everything from my initial stranding to our current predicament. As a result, Yamikage let out a voice more astonished than I'd ever heard from her.

"You're terrible! Terrible, I daresay! To treat me as an afterthought is far too cruel! I daresay, you must understand just how much I have suffered because of you!"

Yamikage began to throw flimsy tantrum punches at me. *What are you, a child?*

Actually, her real age was a mystery since she was a video game character, but her behavior was exactly that of a child. Watching someone taller than me throw punches like a brat was almost too much to bear. *From now on, I'll treat her like she's my junior.*

"Yamikage, how have things been for you lately?"

"Absolutely awful, I daresay!"

Yeah, as I suspected. Yamikage began an explanation—or more of a stream of complaints.

She'd been working with Shouko, only for Shouko to one day vanish without a trace and cut off all contact. Then, she sought

refuge with Sheryl, only for Sheryl to disappear. Desperate, she turned to Romina only to face the same outcome there. By that point, bad rumors had already started to spread about her, and people had started to keep their distance from her on the streets.

On top of that, strange players had started picking on her, making things even worse. Her high rankings in the wave were backfiring, with people accusing her of cheating and forcibly booting people she didn't like from the game.

That's just ridiculous. Let's report those jerks to management later.

Sure, the way they designed the event did encourage misunderstandings, but still.

No, wait. We couldn't even access the game until it kicked off, so how are you supposed to cheat it?

In any case, her story was pretty much identical to what I'd heard from Alto.

Chapter 7: Cordless Bungee Jumping

"So, what happened after Alto disappeared?"

"I—I daresay, I knew I could no longer rely on anyone! When I wasn't hunting, I shut myself away in the inn! Can you imagine how terrible and apologetic I felt when Sir L'Arc came to me and said, 'I'm gonna prove to everyone that you're no reaper!'"

Oh... So it's come to that. Looks like I really have to apologize.

I hadn't driven Yamikage into a corner out of malice, but it still ended up that way regardless. Games were meant to be enjoyed—that was my personal creed. Just like how it had been with Tsumugi, I couldn't overlook a play style that ruined everyone else's enjoyment. Even if it was coming from me.

It made sense that she'd picked up new spells and skills. Yamikage hadn't been slacking off in her training. Despite her difficulty with communication, she had nerves of steel.

But she still managed to go hunting... I probably have L'Arc and Therese to thank for that. They may seem flippant, but they're good people. I should thank them when we meet again.

"I started having nightmares, I daresay! All of a sudden, I was a body double overusing the letter 'Z' and following some shady-looking hero, I daresay! What even is my reality anymore?!"

"What are you even talking about?!"

This is bad. Her isolation's gotten so severe she's starting to hallucinate. Maybe she has it worse than I thought... It was no wonder L'Arc couldn't leave her be. He had a good heart. And honestly, even I'd find it hard to ignore her at this point.

"Milord, it feels like it's been years since I last saw you and the others, I daresay!"

"That's definitely just your imagination."

It had been about a month and a half at most. Those fifteen days I'd spent in the underground lake did not count.

"And were you always like this? Get your character sorted out."

"To think that loneliness could drive someone this close to the edge..." muttered Shouko.

"Even when she was with L'Arc and his party," Tsumugi muttered

back.

Yamikage's situation was worse than I thought. For now, I needed to help her get her life back on track.

"Anyway, Yamikage, we've finally managed to summon you to the island. Sorry for calling you out of the blue like that." I lowered my head and offered a sincere apology.

"I daresay, I'm more frustrated that you *didn't* summon me!"

"Sorry, seriously sorry. If I can offer an excuse, it's because of those Pekkles that I summoned Romina by accident instead of you. So let's just agree it's the Pekkles' fault."

Shouko gasped. "After all this, you're really trying to shift the blame?!"

"Looks like we have to push him off the bridge." Tsumugi nodded.

Are we really doing that? I mean, if that's what it takes to be forgiven, then sure. But honestly, I'd prefer not to. I'd already fallen off that ledge more times than I could count... *But Alto, if it comes to that, you're going down with me. You're just as responsible for cornering her as I am*.

"It's bad for my heart, I daresay! Just last night, a huge hand erupted from the floor and tried to grab me in my sleep, I daresay!"

What kind of event is that? The devs have a real mean streak. And now, it feels like that's going to be blamed on me too.

Look, I understood that some things were my fault. But that horror event definitely wasn't designed by me; I was innocent.

"In a sense, this may be another bit of mischief from management. The members who cleared the event go missing one...by...one, and finally... Something like that."

"I think the flags were a tad too arbitrary, if you ask me."

I had to agree with Romina's retort. If anything, it would have been better if they'd restricted the event only to the party that cleared the ghost ship.

"Maybe they were worried a lone wolf player might clear it? Like, they wanted to attract players who'd be suited for the development."

"I mean, just looking at Kizuna's party, there are plenty of players who would've failed miserably."

Yeah, point taken.

Still, it would've felt more natural for all the players who took part in the Limited Dimension Wave to work together on the island's development. It was like a long-term quest with a single goal… Why did they split everyone up?

I mean, even if they had to scatter us, they could've at least had us start in different locations and gradually meet up as we cleared different quests. There were better ways to go about it.

"This sounds like the kind of thing the devs would defiantly brush off by saying, 'That's the Second Life Project experience.'"

It was scary just how believable that was. Was this game really okay?

Then again, there were plenty of games centered entirely around PVP. It all depended on whether the game design philosophy aligned with player expectations. If it was simply called a feature, there wasn't anything else to say about it. I could only pray it didn't veer into false advertising.

"Anyway, to atone for the fear we've caused Yamikage, I think some offerings are in order."

"Wh-What do you mean, I daresay?"

Alongside Romina, I handed over the custom set of equipment we'd crafted specifically for her.

"Wh-What is this?! Just by equipping it, I daresay, my stats have nearly tripled from what they were before!"

Well, we did cram a lot into it.

According to Romina, it only seemed extraordinary because the base stats for gear were still pretty low at our point in the game. She predicted that those numbers would start scaling exponentially from here on out.

If her weapon previously had an attack power of 30, and her current equipment gave 90, that was definitely a threefold increase, right? But even if that was how it looked at the start of the game, it wasn't uncommon for games like these to end with 2,500…no, 400,000 attack power weapons.

"Lord Kizuna, I daresay, there must be some ulterior motives behind giving me something this good!"

Wow, she's really on guard.

She was no fool—Yamikage. But then again, she went and equipped them all anyway.

The equip requirements were pretty high…but it looks like she's

stockpiled quite a bit of Energy. I used to think we were on the same level, but is that the twist? Is she actually a player on par with Shouko?

"Congrats, Kizuna! We've got a new comrade who really gets it!"

Alto was sticking up his thumb. *Do you like that meme or something?*

"Should I be happy she's sympathetic…or should I lament how we got to this point?"

That stung a little, Shouko.

"I can't wait to see just how strong Yammy's become. Right, bro?!"

True enough. If her stats are that high, we might be able to easily overcome the challenge we're facing right now.

But why did this sister of mine sound so condescending about it?

"Yamikage," said Romina. "This Cal Mira Island might be a detour from the main quest, but it's definitely farther along than the areas where the frontliners are fighting right now. That equipment is the result of everyone's hard work. Would you consider helping us out?"

"Now that I'm getting a good look… I daresay, everyone's equipment has changed. Is there really something you need me for at this point?"

"If things had been different, I would have called for you earlier in place of Tsumugi."

Of course, I explained in great detail why I chose one over the other and what the situation had been like at the time. I made it very clear just how logical my decision had been, and yet, I was somehow coming off as even scummier than before.

Yamikage looked incredibly conflicted…but I opted to ignore it.

"I get it, I daresay…but I'm genuinely happy to be part of the group again after the ghost ship scattered us."

All right, I managed to convince her… No, I'm not trying to be scummy. That's not my intention. I just want everyone to get along.

"I daresay, I feel like I can do anything right now. Milord, what would you have me do?"

"Yeah, for starters, I want to take care of a secret boss that appeared because of Tsumugi's screw-up."

"A secret boss? What an exciting development, I daresay!"

I pointed at the airspace above Wrath Pengu's domain. And

Yamikage, realizing the gravity of the situation, gulped and nodded.

“And so, we welcome our long-awaited reinforcement—it’s time for Yamikage’s debut battle.”

“Incidentally, when are we doing the penalty where we push you off a bridge, I daresay?”

Tsk! She remembered!

I went through with it, of course. A good bit of cordless bungee jumping.

“Yahooooooo!”

And Alto too, of course.

“Wh-Why me—waaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

And Tsumugi while we were at it.

“I get it, but cut me some slack already—waaaaaaaaaaah!”

Thus, the masterminds all disappeared in the waters beneath the bridge.

†

3… 2… 1… The countdown would begin when we accessed a glowing orb in front of Wrath Pengu’s domain. The rematch was about to kick off.

Just like last time, it seemed like it would start the same way—essentially a cutscene with Brave Pekkle floating in the air.

“Oh right, I skimmed through a book called *The Legend of Brave Pekkle* in the library we constructed.”

“The library that was somehow full of books the moment we finished construction?”

“The collection is limited for now. According to the librarian Pekkle, books can be found all over the island—buried, fished up, or in the possession of certain Pekkles.”

What’s with that esoteric system?! Are we going to find more mysterious documents?! I could already imagine books being fished up in the same way I could haul in Pekkles.

“When you pick up a book, it automatically gets transferred to the library, so don’t worry.”

Wouldn’t they be sopping wet, though… Well, it’s a game, so I guess it’s fine. If we’re nitpicking, monsters dropping equipment doesn’t make sense either.

“Anyway, let me explain the info I’ve gathered.”

“Go ahead.”

“The hero can apparently mutate under the weight of their karma, and they often take on names associated with the seven deadly sins when they do. The book strongly advised against it, but if it’s an intentional event, there’s bound to be a reward.”

“Hmm… So Brave Pekkle’s wrath wasn’t strictly caused by a high stress level, then?”

“So it seems. To Brave Pekkle, that red-haired woman seems to be a detested enemy. It’s a doll of a pretty wicked woman, as far as the lore is concerned.”

“The doll laughed right before the event triggered, right?”

That was creepy as all heck. So the root of the curse wasn’t Brave Pekkle, but the red-haired doll.

“There were some hints in the book too. After observing Brave Pekkle, you’ve seen a few flaws, right?”

“Hmm… He’s way too skilled, but if you send him into the dungeon, he has absolutely no attack power.”

He was a Pekkle that only worked when he had allies. That was why his fighting style was like that.

“Indeed, Brave Pekkle is a shield-bearing Pekkle that takes on attacks for the rest of the party. He likely has a decent resistance to magic too. But there was a monster compendium in the library that included some countermeasures.”

So the library collects and stores monster data too?

“Does that mean it’ll be the same, even with Yamikage?”

“Not quite. From what I read, the boss is slightly more vulnerable to magic. For close quarters, using defense-ignoring skills or percent-based damage is recommended, but at range, magic attacks supposedly work better. All attributes except fire should fare reasonably well. Beyond that, we’ll have to experiment.”

“Got it! Aight, everyone. Let’s do this!”

Everyone nodded. We took our positions as previously discussed. We had planned for a ranged strategy.

The Spirits formed a defensive line, stationed to endure Dark Filolial’s fierce offense while concentrating attacks on Wrath Pengu. Tsumugi would avoid provoking Wrath Pengu as much as possible while keeping Dark Filolial occupied.

Using this plan, we could separate our two foes. Shouko, Yamikage, and I would continue chipping away at Wrath Pengu from afar as Sheryl and Romina provided support fire with their bows. If Wrath Pengu attempted to unleash the Iron Maiden, we'd all rush to destroy it as soon as possible.

With the strategy set, we entered the battle once more. Tsumugi immediately engaged Dark Filolial and lured it away. Then, we swiftly took formation in front of it to ensure Wrath Pengu couldn't protect it with its shield.

Close quarters were a no-go. We attacked while maintaining as much distance as possible.

"Drain, I daresay!"

Splat! A strangely flashy effect burst out of Wrath Pengu as Yamikage's magic hit its mark.

I looked to see that its HP had dropped even more than when Shouko had used a defense-ignoring attack in our last fight.

Putting it in numerical terms, if Shouko's attack had reduced its HP by half a percent per hit, Yamikage's magic seemed to deal around one percent.

"It's not very effective, I daresay…"

But Yamikage still considered it a failure. Evidently, our foe possessed high magic defenses. If I had to make a guess, it was only thanks to Yamikage's specialized equipment that we were getting this much of an effect.

"But this equipment is incredible, I daresay! It's boosting all of my magic! Now, Circle Drain, I daresay!"

This time, she targeted Dark Filolial and Wrath Pengu at the same time. Thanks to the spell's high homing ability, she seemed to land it effortlessly.

"And another, I daresay!"

Forming a ninjutsu seal with her hands, Yamikage struck Wrath Pengu with an orb of light. This one didn't seem to deal too much damage, but she continued invoking the same spell in rapid succession to make up for it.

Wrath Pengu was starting to struggle, focusing all of its efforts on healing Dark Filolial.

This just might work!

"I'm not gonna lose this time! Crimson Heaven Wheel!"

Tsumugi unleashed a relentless barrage of scythe swings at

Dark Filolial, that alone shaving down its health by a considerable margin. However, the monster's speed posed a challenge. If it seriously tried utilizing its superior mobility, it would easily break through our encirclement.

When that happened, whoever it aggroed to would have to run and pull it away again.

"It's going well! Let's take it down at once! Circle Dance Zero Formation: Snow Moon Flower!"

Shouko fired off a big move, and Wrath Pengu reacted by fortifying its defenses; it deployed that cage of shields around itself.

Seizing on the opportunity, Yamikage cried out "Bloody Rain, I daresay!" the very instant the shield cage wore off. A crimson downpour began falling over Wrath Pengu.

"Peeeeeeeeeeh?!"

The sizzling sound of burning flesh filled the air as smoke rose from its body.

So it's like a powerful acid rain. That's definitely dark magic.

Attribute-wise, it didn't seem too effective, but Yamikage's equipment was all top-class. She could output enough to forcefully tear through that magic resistance.

"'Tis a spell that deals continuous damage and lowers defenses with a rain of blood, I daresay."

"Just what we needed!"

The moment Shouko said that, Wrath Pengu and Dark Filolial both charged in tandem—straight at Yamikage, who posed the biggest threat.

"Kweeeeeeeeeeehhh!"

"Whoa! It's too fast, I daresay!"

With a rapid eight-hit combo, Dark Filolial burst through Shouko and Tsumugi's interference, landing a solid hit on Yamikage. Without pause, Wrath Pengu followed up by trapping her in a shield cage and invoking Iron Maiden.

Yamikage had been captured mid-cast. Her superior equipment spared her from a fatal blow, but she still took significant damage.

"You're in the way!"

"You think we'll sit back and take it?! Crescent Sickle!"

Tsumugi brandished her scythe sideways, taking a mighty swing that sent a crescent-shaped slash flying at Dark Filolial. It

pierced through her foe and flew straight toward the Iron Maiden behind it. There was a metallic *clink* as the projectile dissipated on impact.

"We're not done yet! Circle Dance Second Formation: Blizzard!"

With her twin fans, Shouko unleashed a storm of petals that sliced into the torture device.

Now it's time for me, Romina, and Sheryl!

"Lure: Double Needle!"

I hurled my lure at the Iron Maiden, hooking it as I waited for the special arrows Romina and Sheryl had stocked up on for this moment.

"Let's go!"

Along with Alto, Romina and Sheryl had managed to craft bomb-tipped arrows. Though they had a shorter range, they did pack a punch.

The moment of impact was followed by a thunderous boom, which caused the Iron Maiden to shatter to pieces.

"Phew! I daresay, I thought I was done for!" Yamikage explained as she escaped from the shield cage.

With Energy levels rivaling Shouko's, a single hit wouldn't have been enough to kill her, but it would have been harsh. But now wasn't the time to think about that.

"You okay, Yamikage?!"

"The equipment you gave me is so high-spec that it's not an issue, I daresay."

That's good to know. She's the latest addition to the battlefield, but she's already the most capable. Color me envious.

In a lot of modern games, early characters often struggled to keep up with power creep and eventually fell behind as the story progressed. I couldn't help but wonder how *Dimension Wave* handled it.

"All right! We've neutralized the Iron Maiden! Time to go on the attack!"

"On it!"

As planned, we continued chipping away at Wrath Pengu and Dark Filolial.

"This sensation... There is no doubt about it," Shouko muttered, seemingly catching onto something.

"What is it?"

“Now that Yamikage has joined, Wrath Pengu’s defenses have increased slightly since our last engagement. I believe its stats change based on the number of participants.”

I see. So it would have been a lot stronger if we had more. This battle was designed to be impossible to overcome with sheer numbers… That’s troublesome.

But whatever. Victory is in sight! I thought, just as Wrath Pengu’s health dipped below the halfway point.

“It…hopped on?!”

Indeed, Dark Filolial broke through, and Wrath Pengu mounted it, zipping around the battlefield at an incredible speed.

Dang! That’s fast! And for some reason, it’s not attacking anymore.

“Is it…stalling out the time limit?” Shouko suggested.

The clock had ticked down to around eighteen minutes.

To think it would run when backed into a corner…

“What an irritating fighting style! But tracking and trapping is my specialty! Instant Pitfall!”

That was where the skills I got from grinding out trapping came in handy.

In an instant, I installed a number of holes in strategic locations to corral them.

“Kweh?!”

Dark Filolial’s leg was caught in one of the traps, causing it to momentarily pause.

“Now! Bind Lure!”

My lure snagged Wrath Pengu. Despite its desperate resistance, it couldn’t get out as long as the lure held true. I reeled it in to limit its range of movement.

“Oh… Incredible work, I daresay!”

“That’s bro for you. I didn’t think trapping techniques would come in handy here!”

“Now’s your chance! They’ll bolt again the moment this skill wears off!”

“I get it, I daresay.”

“Here I come!”

And like that, I contained Wrath Pengu with my traps and my lure, which narrowly allowed us to continue dealing damage…until at long last, its HP went down its final tick.

“Peeeeeeh…”

“Did we get it?”

“Not if you say stuff like that.”

As we exchanged the obligatory banter, the black flames surrounding Wrath Pengu began to contract, and the black shield the monster possessed shattered, leaving behind Brave Pekkle’s original pristine shield.

Dark Filolial dissolved into shadow before dispersing into nothingness.

As Brave Pekkle collapsed with an elaborate animation, the once red and cracked sky returned to a brilliant blue. It seemed there wouldn’t be a clichéd revival after all.

“I’ve seen this sky so many times before, but now it feels so breathtaking,” Alto muttered as he stared out into the endless blue.

“Looks like we did it…”

Good grief… What a ridiculous secret boss.

It was far beyond the Soul Eater, and even more of a challenge to take down than the Dragon Zombie. I mean, it was more than what we could overcome with just Tsumugi and Shouko’s knack for battle. Even using the Energy Blade would have been…nearly impossible. Even if it could work, that was something we had to save as a last resort.

“Now then, the boss is down. How about we dismantle it?”

“You mean dismantle Brave Pekkle?”

Hmm… Come to think of it, there’s no corpse. It’s just Brave Pekkle. For such a tough boss, it doesn’t look like we’re going to get any materials from it, I thought as I approached the fallen Pekkle and found something lying nearby.

“Is that another one of those mysterious red-haired dolls?”

I moved closer to inspect the source of all this trouble… *What’s this? A stuffed toy?*

“Oh, how cute! Is it a tanuki plush? Or maybe a raccoon?”

The plush lay there next to Brave Pekkle, its design hard to pin down as either tanuki or raccoon. It was somewhere in between. In any case, I picked it up.

```
Raph Plush
Accessory Exclusive to Brave Pekkle.
```

A plushie resembling someone precious to Brave Pekkle.
As long as this plushie is around, Brave Pekkle will never succumb to wrath.

An accessory? Oh, there's some text attached.

Brave Pekkle suddenly sprung up, looked at me, and said, "I feel refreshed, pen!"

Refreshed... Refreshed, huh...

"You made quite a mess, you know."

"Don't show me that woman ever again, pen!"

So the AI is set to remember.

Then, Brave Pekkle began staring at the stuffed animal in my hands.

Rubbing it in his cheek right now would be the perfect way to bring things full circle.

"Hey, hey! Get a load of this!"

I shoved the Raph Plush into his face.

Brave Pekkle followed it with his eyes but didn't seem particularly bothered.

"Kizuna..."

"I daresay, you never miss a chance at irony, milord."

"Is it because you're sisters?"

"It runs in the blood."

Ah, everyone's looking at me funny. I just thought it would be comedic. As Tsumugi's brother and all.

"Kizuna, what is that plushie?"

"Going off its description, Brave Pekkle won't develop wrath as long as he has this equipped."

"Then why don't we equip it and see?"

"Hmm? Sure."

I handed the plushie to Brave Pekkle. He gave a gentle smile and, after giving it a strong hug, strapped it to his back.

"Oh..." Alto gasped. "Brave Pekkle's stats and skill levels just went up by thirty percent. That's some powerful exclusive equipment."

"I daresay, is this the reward for the event?"

"It doesn't feel like it was worth it..."

I mean, yeah, getting Brave Pekkle back is reward enough, but…

"Don't be daft! Brave Pekkle's return more than justifies it!"

Well, as long as Alto's happy with it…

"Now! How about we get back to work?! As for you, Yamikage, I think it would be good for you to experience the strength of this island's monsters firsthand in the dungeon."

He'd done nothing but watch during the battle, but now Alto was putting on the face of a leader.

Well, I did leave everything Pekkle-related to him.

"I already experienced enough in that fight, I daresay…"

"Now, now. I'll be your guide," Shouko said as she began to show her around the island. Yamikage had become an instant hero—granted, her efforts certainly deserved it.

"Yammy, let's go to the dungeon together. It'll be a breeze with you around—I'm sure of it!"

"Have fun. I'll be doing my own thing over here."

"Kizuna, you really take things at your own pace."

"That doesn't sound like a compliment."

"It's not. You're going to go fishing again, aren't you?"

"Of course. I'm aiming for the deep waters offshore this time."

Let it not be forgotten that I joined this game because I wanted to fish. *It'll be amazing if I can get a marlin. Maybe I should ask Sheryl if we can get things set up for trolling.*

"That sounds like you. Let's go fishing together sometime."

Now that you mention it, with everything that's been going on, I haven't had much time for fishing lately. Though knowing Shouko, she's probably just trying to be polite.

"Well, you heard us. Romina, Sheryl, Alto—let's all get back to business as usual. Maybe we can start working on the castle again."

"Right… It's about time for me to hone my skills, and I'd like enough strength to do some worthwhile enhancements. There's so much to do it's almost overwhelming."

"Uh-huh…"

And so, we all went back to our respective jobs.

Incidentally, we quickly found out that the plushie dropped by Wrath Pengu was an exceptional item. Based on Alto's calculations, in addition to increasing all stats by thirty percent, it halved the rate at which stress accumulated. Additionally, when

stress approached seventy percent, it automatically activated a safety measure that put Brave Pekkle in a dormant state. As an added bonus, it even reduced the stress gain of other nearby Pekkles.

Just how incredible was that, you ask? Well, we could have Brave Pekkle craft and enchant an accessory, and he'd still be able to take command for a little while after that. The speed of the castle construction apparently doubled.

Brave Pekkle even got around to cooking the occasional meal for the other Pekkles. These meals not only reduced stress but also provided substantial, temporary bonuses. Even players could get boosts from his meals, which was frankly amazing.

As for downsides, Brave Pekkle only rarely made food intended for players. But still, this was quite the reward.

†

Late at night, I found myself night fishing. Same as usual.

Shouko had been with me not too long ago, but she'd left once she got sleepy. There wasn't much I could do about that—she was quite the popular one, and always busy. Between dungeon diving with Tsumugi and assisting with the castle construction, she was earnestly putting in a lot of effort. It was no wonder she was tired. I was the one who'd suggested she get some rest.

Just as it had been while I was fishing by the underground lake, I quite enjoyed thinking over various things as I cast my line into the water. It wasn't that I felt awkward or weary when I was with Shouko or the others—in fact, it was the opposite. I liked being with everyone.

But there was a unique enjoyment to be had in fishing alone, listening to the sound of water in solitude.

"You're the same as ever, I daresay."

"Yamikage, huh."

I turned to find Yamikage standing behind me. Seeing her out alone this late was rare...or maybe it wasn't. Perhaps the night was the proper domain of a ninja. It'd been night, too, when we first met, so perhaps she was naturally nocturnal... She did tend to tuck in early nowadays.

"What's wrong? Can't sleep?"

“I waz… Err, I *was* exploring, I daresay. I am still a newcomer to this island.”

At this hour? Maybe it’s something she doesn’t want to talk about. If it is—I’m fine with that.

Even though her mental state should have been back to normal, she still seemed a little confused.

“You’re scared of ghosts, but you’re fine with nighttime, I see.”

“Because there aren’t so many people at night, I daresay.”

So it’s not just ghosts. You’re scared of people too.

Despite everything, maybe she really did have social anxiety. Come to think of it, I’d heard that even shut-in NEETs weren’t afraid to head out to the convenience stores at night. Maybe the same was true for Yamikage.

“Fair enough… Want a midnight snack?”

This was a good chance to show off the Culinary Art skill I’d grinded out at the underground lake, though I only had fish to work with. Hopefully, she’d be understanding on that point.

“Then, I daresay, I’ll take you up on that offer.”

“Got it. Give me a sec.”

If I had any grouper, I’d have made it into a hot pot. Unfortunately, my grouper stock had run dry, so it would have to be something else.

And so, I settled on grilled fish. Thankfully, the Culinary Art skill gave a massive boost in this game, so even something as simple as grilled fish could turn out to be exceptional, though I still had to take cooking time, ingredients, techniques, and a few other things into account.

“Again, sorry for calling you over so late.”

“I daresay, I’ve already heard your apology.”

Right, the cordless bungee jumping. The one where I dragged Alto and Tsumugi in too. Well, I don’t mind those kinds of joking apologies too. It feels like the kind of thing where you can laugh it off with your friends.

“I’m sorry for digging it up again. But I really wanted to apologize properly.”

“I have already forgiven you, I daresay. In the first place, how could I chastise you so harshly when you were simply using what the system gave you?”

Tsumugi’s red-haired doll incident was also something

determined by the game system, so I couldn't be too harsh on her either. Testing out various things when presented with an unusual situation was second nature to a gamer.

"If anything...I daresay, I was scared that you had actually been banned."

"Yeah...point taken."

"So seeing you safe and sound is a relief, I daresay."

Hmm...? For some reason, I'm feeling some deeper meaning to those words.

And yet, nothing felt off when I repeated what she'd said back to myself. I had to be imagining it.

"But, I mean... There should be a few things you can't just forgive even if it's a game, right?"

"That's exactly why I was so scared, I daresay..."

Yamikage should have been the one bringing her grievances to me. But from her position, it made sense if she was scared that those strange rumors had been the truth...

"For my part, I'm just glad that everyone I called to this island turned out to be a decent person. You included."

I'd started with Shouko and ended at Yamikage. I was lucky that they were all adaptable enough to handle the sudden changes. In fact, they were able to find enjoyment in these unforeseen developments.

This game took on a form a little different from most, and we all had our individual play styles that we refused to give up on. But everyone still forgave me. For that, I was blessed.

"You're acting strange, milord."

"Well, I'm sorry if I don't look like the type to get sentimental. Here, take it," I said as I handed over a freshly grilled fish.

Watching her start on the midnight snack, I got back to fishing.

"I daresay, is today one of those days for having deep conversations?"

"Hmm? Well, we're out here, surviving on a southern island, and the moon's beautiful. There's nothing wrong with having one of those days, right?"

"I daresay..."

Perhaps influenced by my mood, Yamikage began to settle into an air of calm tranquility.

Honestly, her usually being such a high-energy ninja character

meant I couldn't even begin to predict where things would go from here.

"I—truth be told, I was in a foul mood when I started this game, I daresay."

"Hmm… And why's that?"

"I daresay, the person I was supposed to play with had urgent business and couldn't make it."

"Ah, yeah, I can see how that'd leave a bad taste."

Getting stood up like that… Does that have anything to do with her anxiety?

If I were playing with a friend and they broke their promise at the last minute, I'd probably feel the same… The game wasn't cheap to play either. Canceling because of an urgent matter? That was unthinkable from my financial situation.

If it were me, I'd show up even if it killed me. I mean, sure, I tried to sell the participation rights at first… But that was a different matter. At the time, selling it to pay for a vacation didn't seem like such a bad idea.

"But now, I'm having fun, I daresay."

"I see. That's good to know."

"I like fantasy games, I daresay. Even more when they have magic."

"I get the feeling."

"I daresay, I despaired when I learned that Spirits were considered a weak race."

"Same… That said, you must've put some thought into combo-ing a Spirit with Drain."

Initially, I thought of Drain as a typical low-tier RPG spell, but it turned out to be surprisingly effective. Of course, other attribute spells had a higher base output, but pairing it with the Spirit race brought out its true potential.

Yamikage's high Energy reserves allowed her to use a supercharged Drain that practically made back its cost while also dealing massive damage. She probably had to prioritize Mana Production over Energy Production to make it work. It was the kind of strategy that wouldn't bear fruit without careful consideration given to race and skill synergy.

"Stepping off the beaten path was the hard part, I daresay."

Every online game had its standard party setup. The more role-

focused the game, the more rigid those setups tended to be.

This job needs this skill and this equipment. Invest all your stats into so-and-so—something like that… And sometimes, players would get pushback for deviating from those standards.

In *Dimension Wave*, the meta mostly revolved around skill composition. Part of it was understandable, unavoidable even. Considering efficiency and all that. And taking that into consideration, both Yamikage and I were quite estranged from the standard builds.

“Don’t worry about it. I know I shouldn’t be the one telling you this, but in a game, the player who has fun is the winner. And for what it’s worth, I think your play style is great.”

She had a Drain… Or rather, she had a dark magic and stealth skill-based build. It had that edgy middle-school-delusion vibe that made it a joy to watch. Even though it seemed like a joke, it was actually practical too; it had the kind of coolness that made me want to cheer her on.

“I daresay, that’s one thing I like about you, milord.”

“Right?”

It was far from an original take, but I didn’t think it was a wrong one. Having a min-maxed build could be fun, and having a joke build could be fun too. With so many different genres of games, it made sense that there’d be countless ways to enjoy them. In that regard, this game had a pretty broad appeal.

Some games immediately patched out anything that deviated from the developer’s intended experience. But here I was, doing surprisingly well with a fishing-focused build. In fact, I was almost doing too well—to the point it was a little scary.

“Living…with someone else in a game world isn’t so bad, I daresay.”

“Yeah…I heard that’s something unique about the VR experience.”

It was the kind of sentiment we could only feel in an environment so distinct from reality. And this game was part of the Second Life Project. Our long-term login session added a sense of adventure—there was just something about it.

Well, considering how much money went into operating the game, it had to at least be entertaining. Or else what was the point?

“I could never get into VR games because of my constitution.”

“I see… So you have brain wave idiosyncrasy, milord? Then, I daresay, is this your first VR game?”

“Pretty much.”

I didn’t expect her to know the technical term.

“Well, I’m enjoying it. I might not find another game like this one once it’s all over, so let’s keep having fun together.”

“Yeah… Playing with you’s a lot of fun, Kizzy.”

Just like that, her tone had suddenly changed completely… *Hearing someone who usually role-plays revert to their natural speech can be a bit jarring*.

Moments like these were also part of what made online games special.

“Th-Then I shall return to the world of the shinobi, I daresay!”

“Wait, why are you the one getting embarrassed?”

“V-Vanish!”

Yamikage used a stealth skill to disappear from sight.

“If you can’t sleep or you get bored, feel free to drop by again. I’ll at least keep you company.”

There was…no response.

She probably cared more than she let on. With her self-proclaimed communication disorder, that was the kind of thing that would bother someone like her.

I know it’s a bit late, but…she’s seriously calling me Kizzy in her head, isn’t she… I remember hearing her say that before. Maybe it’s best I sit her down and explain the part about me being a boy in real life again…

For now, I should get back to fishing…

And so, the night quietly wore on.

Chapter 8: Countermeasure Committee

Now that the incident with Wrath Pengu had been settled, we all went about doing our own thing until…finally, the construction of the castle was complete. It was a Western-style castle on a high hill, visible from anywhere on the island.

A building so big I had to crane my neck back to take it all in… I couldn't even begin to guess how much time and money it would have taken to construct something like this in real life. Starting around the time it was nearing completion, I would often find my mind wandering. Its sheer grandeur gave me a lot to think about.

Passing through the gate, visitors were immediately greeted by a large garden, and entering the castle beyond that, they found themselves in a grand hall adorned with a luxurious chandelier hanging from the ceiling. There was a stairway leading to a second floor and hallways extending toward guest rooms.

The castle even included barracks where knights and soldiers would likely stay, a fully stocked dining hall, and more. Moreover, Cal Mira Island had natural hot springs, and a large, scenic, open-air bath was stationed where it got ample sunlight. There was even a massive swimming pool. With facilities this lavish, the place felt more like a luxury hotel than a castle.

The list went on—a collection room, a theater, a library, an armory, a smithy—so many facilities that just listing them out felt tiresome. This was on top of a church and some administrative building whose purpose was as of yet unclear.

The top floor featured a terrace with a splendid view, and within the castle grounds was a tower that contained a round-table conference room.

But that wasn't where we gathered—instead, we all found ourselves in the throne room.

There were two thrones. One was the right size for a person to sit on, while the one beside it was smaller.

"You did well, developing this island, pen!" Santa Hat Pekkle declared, addressing the members who'd gathered from all across the island. We players were far outnumbered by Pekkles.

“It is all thanks to your efforts, pen! A completion ceremony is in order, pen!”

“So we’re finally done, huh.”

Now that it was over, it felt like it had gone by in the blink of an eye. Eventually, Santa Hat removed his Santa Hat and… *Wait, did he just drop it? Don’t throw that away. That’s your whole identity!*

Or so I thought. But then, he pulled a crown from who-knows-where and placed it on his head.

“It is high time I changed my class, pen!”

Did he just say “I”? Didn’t he always refer to himself as “Pekkle”?

He proceeded to sit on the smaller throne… *A class change? Are you telling me he’s the king now?*

“It looks like Santa Hat was promoted into a king. His stats have gone up by quite a bit.”

“I see.”

For some reason… I felt compelled to pick up the hat he’d discarded.

“I daresay, what do you need that for?”

“Dunno. Just felt like it.”

It seemed to be equipable.

“The port has already been built, pen. With this, we can finally restore our connection with the outside world, pen!”

Oh? Does that mean the issue of us being stuck here’s been resolved? It’s been a long time. I want to hurry up and find new fishing spots in new lands.

“And now, it’s time to talk business, pen! The island lord holds most of the rights to the island, pen. That includes the right to welcome future visitors and collect a share of the money they spend on island facilities, pen.”

“Say what?!”

Alto’s eyes lit up. *A share of the money, huh…*

“But first, even if it’s only temporary, the lord and his comrades should establish the island’s first guild, pen. Now come, sit on the throne, pen.”

Santa Hat—no, ex-Santa Hat—beckoned toward the throne. I was the one who’d started the island’s development, so he was probably talking about me.

“A throne…”

“Kizuna, I remember how you were sitting there cross-legged,

watching everyone else work on the construction," said Alto. "You even brought out a wine glass and snootily sipped from it."

Drat, he saw that? That's pretty embarrassing.

"Were you pretending to be some evil overlord? The way you stroked that fish statue was a bit much."

"That was—"

After I had seen that there was a throne, I had sat on it and pretended to be king a few times. After all, how many opportunities would I get to sit on a throne? At most, I could maybe get a chance if the family headed down to the Happiest Place on Earth.

I'd wanted to stroke a pet like a cat and act like a grand old villain, but the Pekkles were the only animals around. And so, I'd ended up placing a suitably sized fish figure (that I'd managed to fish up) on my lap instead.

"You did it too!"

And it wasn't just Alto either. I was well aware of Tsumugi and Yamikage sitting on the throne when they thought no one was looking.

"W-Well…"

"I was just doing the 'Laugh while looking out over the lowly masses' thing you were doing, bro."

"What sort of villainous lord are you?" Shouko retorted, her eyes shifting between me and Tsumugi.

This is a misunderstanding! We just like to mess around; we're not serious about it!

"You're imagining it, I daresay! It doesn't even feel as comfortable as the CEO's chair!" Yamikage added.

Now, Yamikage, you're making it sound as though you've sat in a CEO's chair before! I can't even tell if you're joking or not.

"A power struggle within the royal family."

Sheryl says some incomprehensible things now and then.

Was she talking about me and Tsumugi?

"Regardless, you wouldn't catch me dead petting a fish!" Alto reiterated. "Unlike you, Kizuna!"

"That's the hill you want to die on?!"

"Hurry and sit, pen."

Ex-Santa Hat urged me on impatiently. As an NPC, he wasn't exactly flexible.

“Yes, sit already, Kizuna. Otherwise, the event won’t progress.”

Oh for crying out loud. Begrudgingly, I sat as instructed. The moment I did, a system message popped up in my field of view.

```
Territory: Third City, Cal Mira
Revenue, Pekkle Management, Facility Expansion
Requests, Population, Lord Delegation, Trade
```

There were various options, though most of them were grayed out.

“First, you must decide on the guild name, pen.”

“By guild, you mean the sort you find in online games?”

“Sounds like it, judging by what ex-Santa Hat just said.”

“Oh, come to think of it, we don’t have those yet.”

Maybe it was a feature added thanks to the players’ efforts or something like that. One of those system updates.

“I think you should be the one to decide, Kizuna,” Shouko said.

“All right, inputting…Yamikage and Her Merry Friends…”

“I love it! That’s my brother for you!”

But while Tsumugi enthusiastically agreed…

“Rejected, I daresay! Why are you using my name?!”

“Why, of course, because we owe our victory over the Wrath Pengu to you.”

I tried gazing out into the distance, putting on a pensive face as I said it. It was one of those things. The hero always arrives just in the nick of time.

I mean, she had quite a bit of main-character energy. These days, protagonists were more about being the unsung heroes supporting everyone from the shadows rather than being the shining champions of light.

“Don’t make me the representative just for that! I daresay, you should be the headliner, milord! You deserve it far more than me.”

“Aww, don’t be like that. Everyone else is fine with it, right? We’re good with Yamikage, right?”

“Huh…?”

“It’s quite a…quirky guild name.”

“Are you really going to go with that for what’s presumably going to be the first guild on the server? There’s no competition

for the name, so you could aim for something better."

Everyone's a critic. Well, it's not like I was serious.

"Being written off as a merry friend is a bit much..."

Even Shouko seems against it... All right, fine.

"Then how about we compromise with something like the Dimension Wave Countermeasure Committee, or the Cal Mira Fishing Association?"

"The former one isn't bad, but you would be the only member of the latter one."

"Hmm... That's only if you don't count the Pekkles."

The Pekkles did eat fish, after all. They were still being sent on fishing missions for the purpose of securing the food supply, so our fisherman population was actually quite high, though they were more a *flock* or a *school* than a guild.

"Do you not feel sad, saying it like that?"

"Well..."

I certainly wasn't proud, counting NPCs and all.

"Then taking it a little seriously, Dimension Wave Countermeasure Committee."

"Being completely honest, I don't think it's the best. But I am fine with it."

"I daresay, can it be changed later?"

"It can, pen. Guild name changes and overlapping names are allowed, pen."

Ah, ex-Santa Hat responded. I guess we used one of the right keywords. But wait, is it really okay to have overlapping guild names?

There were plenty of games that didn't allow do-overs once the name was decided, but it seemed *Dimension Wave* wasn't one of them. Now, if only they allowed us to change avatar appearances too...

Chapter 9: The Third City

“All right, I’m finalizing it…”

I entered “Dimension Wave Countermeasure Committee” as the guild name and confirmed it.

“All players summoned by the island lord have been added to the guild, pen,” ex-Santa Hat Pekkle proclaimed as what looked like glowing Return Transcripts materialized in front of us.

```
Territory Return Tome
Allows return to the guild territory. Nonconsumable.
Non-storable.
```

“Even if you leave the island, please come back anytime, pen. The Pekkles will always welcome the island lord and his comrades, pen.”

“So this is basically a tool to return to Cal Mira, right?”

Cal Mira was essentially the guild’s territory, after all… Did that mean there were similar events for places outside the island too?

“I’d imagine so. But…that’s handy. A transfer item with infinite uses will be very convenient.”

Alto seemed to be especially drawn to how *free* it was.

“Also…here’s an additional reward for the island lord, pen.”

“Hmm?”

Ex-Santa Hat extended a flipper toward me, and a new system message popped up.

```
Extra Skill: C’mon Pekkle Acquired!
```

What’s with that name?

“You can summon Pekkle whenever you want, pen. If you need anything, they’ll assist, pen.”

No…honestly, I don’t think I’ll be needing any Pekkle.

“And since it’s already unlocked, I can do this, pen!”

C’mon Pekkle has been upgraded!
The skill has turned into C’mon Brave Pekkle!

My eyes turned to Brave Pekkle, who was keeping a low profile in the throne room. He saluted as if to say he was always ready to answer the call… *Can Pekkles even be used in combat?*

A quick check showed they now had proper stats listed. As expected, Brave Pekkle had higher stats than the rest of them—though only in defense.

“Apart from that… I would like the island lord to give me a name, pen.”

“You’ve always struck me as a Santa Pekkle, so Santa Pekkle it is.”

“You’re just going with that? I feel bad for him. Why don’t we give him a proper name?” Shouko chided me.

Well, even if you tell me that… I’ve always been the type to stick with the default names in games… Okay, then Fat Pe—

“Then why not Pioneer Penguin, I daresay?”

“Imagine yourself in his shoes, being called that. Besides, that’s just describing his nature as is!”

“Then Dark Pekkle, I daresay? Or maybe King Pekkle?”

“King Pekkle works.”

“But we’re still being overly literal!” Shouko protested.

“The King of the Pekkles…” Alto mused. “Well, going off Kizuna’s gaming habits, I’m glad he didn’t pull out something like Fat Pekkle.”

That had been my first thought, but it didn’t fit since he wasn’t fat… Maybe I could fiddle with his body shape later. Rather, the Pekkle I could summon with the flute was fatter.

“Isn’t there anything more stylish?” Shouko pleaded. “This is the child who used to wear a Santa hat, so something like Gift, perhaps?”

“Or just Santa Claus?”

“Then Chris, from Christmas.”

“It doesn’t match the tropical vibe, but it does match the Santa hat.” Shouko seemed satisfied.

“Jesus Christ.” Sheryl suggested an outrageous name of her own.

Unfortunately, “He’ll never live up to that name. So no.”

In the end, Santa Hat Pekkle's name was set as Chris.

"Got it, pen! I will call myself Chris from now on, pen!"

Wow, his pronunciation even matched ours perfectly. Not bad, Chris.

"Now, the development phase is complete, pen! Let's go, pen!"

To where?

`The Third City, Cal Mira, has been unlocked, pen! In Cal Mira, you can create guilds and hire special training NPCs called Pekkles, pen! Access Cal Mira via the exchange ship at the port in the First City, pen!`

The announcement appeared as a global message viewable by all players on the server.

So I was right after all.

"This really was a city-unlocking quest," I muttered.

A bunch of new help topics had been added to the list. These included explanations of the guild system and directions on how to create one. It also included a section on how to employ Pekkles and how to raise them.

To establish a guild, players needed to apply at the reception desk in the castle on Cal Mira and pay a fee. As a prerequisite, the person forming the guild needed to possess their own home that could house more than three players.

A…personal home… Did we have something like that? I mean, I could see Romina or Alto having one. Does it mean the buildings we were using as housing? I checked and saw that our guild base was set as Cal Mira Island itself.

Was all of it considered our base? Maybe it was because the system recognized it as my territory. Additionally, the castle was tagged as my personal home…quite the extravagant home I'd gotten myself.

"The guild is going to get livelier from here on out."

"Yeah, I'll bet."

We'd been forced into doing development work on a mysterious island only to discover it was actually a city-unlocking quest. A part of me struggled to accept it; another part of me questioned if it

was worth it. But I couldn't complain too much.

Still, the idea of strangers trampling all over the paradise we'd built left a sour taste in my mouth. It felt like...yes, territorial instinct. Hearing that unfamiliar players would be coming to the island gave me the uneasy feeling of someone intruding on my turf. I'd wanted to leave the island so badly, but now that I could, the thought didn't excite me as much anymore.

Was I just being a contrarian?

"Kizuna, isn't this what you've been waiting for?" Alto asked me. "The chance to leave?"

"Yeah, but... Hmm..."

Now that it was possible, the prospect of leaving felt oddly underwhelming.

For now, I'll watch the newcomers arrive from the castle and see how it goes from there. Either way, I doubt my fishing life will change too much. And, once things settle down, I'll head to the Second City for some fishing!

"Yeah, whatever. Let's prepare for our new visitors...or not. Yeah, let's just take it easy."

"You're as consistent as ever, Kizuna," Shouko muttered with a mixture of exasperation and trust.

And with that, the day came to a close.

Chapter 10: An Island Unlocked

The next day brought a whirlwind of activity.

“So this is the Third City, eh?! We’re first!”

“Wait, there are already people ahead of us. Where’d they even come from?”

First off, players started arriving on the island. They’d packed themselves onto boats to get here. Of course, apart from the NPC-operated exchange ship, it also became possible to reach the island on player-crafted ships.

Excited about the new city, the players roamed the island and its surrounding areas, checking out the new equipment and nearby hunting grounds.

“Wow, everything’s flying off the shelves. The massive stock I prepared is already gone.”

“Look, it’s Ms. Romina! What a shrewd businesswoman! She’s already got a shop over here!”

“She’s reopening?! I’ve been waiting for this!”

“Everyone, if you see anyone acting rude, make sure to call them out!”

When it came to equipment, the Pekkles’ shops and Romina’s shop were equally bustling. According to Romina, even the gear she considered failures were selling like hotcakes. It was apparently quite the spectacle.

And Romina’s fans were overjoyed to reunite with her. For the time being, it seemed like they’d step in to handle any rude customers.

“Oh, if it isn’t the little lady.”

“Wow, it really is. We were so worried, you know! Where have you been? I just saw Yamikage earlier too.”

While I observed the frenzy at Romina’s shop, I turned to find some familiar faces—L’Arc and Therese. Despite the rough vibes they gave off, they were friendly and easygoing.

“Been a while. Shouko was worried about you, and Yamikage was too… I’m guessing it was some sort of quest?”

“You got that right. Good grief… We were all trapped on this

island. It was a real pain, I'm telling you."

"Man… That sounds like one crazy quest. You coulda brought me along for the ride."

Yeah, I'd heard that L'Arc and Therese were the kinds of players who focused on hunting down and clearing in-game quests.

"Yeah, that's the thing. Whoever we summoned would just disappear without warning, and we could only call them one by one. I was seriously panicking when I accidentally called up Romina."

"Oh, so Romina was a mistake?"

"That's right… I put Yamikage through a lot because of it."

"Well… How should I put it, it was like a horror movie was playing out. I noticed a strange message on the secret quest board in the First City before I headed over here—something about the Curse of the Ghost Ship taking Yamikage."

"That's right, Yammy was really spooked, you know."

"That's a thing?"

L'Arc nodded. *Hmm… So progress in* Dimension Wave*'s hidden quests actually gets recorded and displayed.*

"As I said before, you could've called us over."

"I mean… I thought it was a bad idea to call only one of you. Didn't want to eat up the precious time you have together."

"Oh, you're so considerate, Kizzy! You didn't want to cause any trouble for us!"

Therese seemed genuinely touched, her energy high as usual. *Yeah. I made the right decision, not calling them.*

"Nah, we don't mind that sorta thing." L'Arc grinned. "Honestly, missing out on something this interesting is my bigger regret. We cheered you off when your boat left, but now I kinda wished we'd tagged along. Right, Therese?!"

"Totally! L'Arc disappears without a word sometimes, so I've learned not to stress over it."

Oh, how open-minded. It's a little reassuring, knowing they see it that way. In fact, I quite admire their approach to just enjoy everything.

"By the way, you know that accessory Yammy was wearing? Do you know if it's sold somewhere around here? I could tell it was incredible!"

"Oh, that was a special order; not even Romina's place has it.

You looked after Yamikage from what I've heard, so I could arrange a custom order for you."

Therese seemed interested in the Orichal-Starfire Bracelet Yamikage was wearing.

"For realsies? You're the best, Kizzy! I get picky about gemstone accessories, y'know."

"I-I see."

"Therese, ease up a bit. The little lady there's struggling to keep up; you'd better talk to him in business mode."

"Aww..." After a flash of discontent crossed her face, Therese turned back to me. "Fine, fine... Ahem, is that really all right with you?"

Therese abruptly switched to a formal tone, with even her demeanor becoming oddly polite.

So this is what Romina was talking about.

"Kizuna, would you be so kind as to tell me how exactly Yamikage's accessory was fabricated?"

My mouth was agape as I pointed at Therese in surprise, looking back at L'Arc, who was clearly holding back his laughter.

"I'm creeping him out, L'Arc! I knew this wasn't the way to do it."

"He's just shocked by the contrast. When she's with friends and family, Therese talks the same way she did in school. But she's like this when she's on the clock."

"Umm... You're talking about real life, right? You sure you should be telling me that?"

Whether it came down to in-game etiquette or just morals, discussing personal details in-game was generally frowned upon. It could cause unnecessary trouble and wasn't the sort of thing to just bring up unless you really trusted the other person. The fact that I was related to Tsumugi and Kanade and that I was a guy in real life—those things were still within reason.

"Nah, no worries; that's not enough to identify us. To be more precise, I work at a jewelry store. It's perfect for me because I love looking at gemstones."

Wow...sounds like an expensive hobby.

"Bet you're thinking it's an expensive hobby. Naah, it's not like that. It's the raw stones I'm really into. I've gone super deep in the mines to excavate them too."

Huh? Therese mines? I thought her hobby was cooking. Maybe she

just has a wide range of interests.

"Therese. You'd better explain it in business mode so Kizuna here can get it."

"Yeah, yeah... Ahem. To put it simply, I am not interested in lavish, expensive things like diamonds, platinum, and gold. Rather than that, I appreciate the craftsmanship a master may put into honing a single piece, and the unique appeal that can only be found in the raw materials... I can enjoy a peculiar stone, even if it is not particularly valuable."

I couldn't conceal my shock at how polite and easy to follow Therese's manner of speech had become. It was far easier to deal with her like this than when she was in her casual state.

Later on, I heard that Therese had a conversation with Shouko in her polite mode, and apparently, it was incredibly smooth and businesslike, thanks to both of them speaking so incredibly formally. Before, Shouko had been at a loss on how to deal with all Therese's energy.

"That's why I went with this character concept, you see. I chose the Jewel race and designed it with the image of an anthropomorphized alexandrite in mind."

Oh, so that's why her avatar is like that?

"Alexandrite..."

"That's right. It's a stone that changes color when the light hits it. L'Arc suggested it, saying it fit me perfectly."

"Oh..."

I could see it. With how Therese shifted back and forth between her polite and ex-delinquent attitude, it was like she was alexandrite personified.

"I even added a gimmick where my hair changes color when I use magic!"

Wait, you can add stuff like that when designing appearance? The only additional thing I messed with was the motion settings... Well, not that it mattered after my sisters changed everything anyway.

"There are even characters whose hair turns blond when they power up," said L'Arc. "You get the picture."

Ah... So the devs put it in for that anime gimmick.

"That's a pretty elaborate thing to throw in there."

"I know, right? Cool stuff. So, getting back on track, how did you get the accessory? Is it from a quest?"

“There are…too many people here. Even our private chats could get snooped on. Come with me.”

“Sure thing. Let’s go, L’Arc.”

“Aight.”

So I took L’Arc and Therese to the deserted clearing where we’d fought Wrath Pengu and summoned Brave Pekkle.

“This was one of the island’s NPCs, right? Hmm… So they have stuff like this.”

“Yeah, it’s one of the island’s development NPCs. They’re called Pekkles, but this one’s a special one called Brave Pekkle.”

“Hmm…”

“You were asking how we got the accessory that Yamikage had? Well, it wasn’t from a quest. I had this guy craft it for her.”

“Huh? For real? That’s amazing! I’m so jealous! I want one of these too!”

“Therese, he called it a special Pekkle, right? I bet it’s just for the little lady,” L’Arc gently calmed Therese, whose eyes were sparkling with excitement.

“Aha ha… Well, since you were both so good to Yamikage, I’d be happy to take requests and make something as a thank-you.”

“Really? Then let’s hop right to it!”

“Are you fine with an Orichal-Starfire Bracelet? I can also apply enchantments—a function that hasn’t been unlocked for the players yet.”

“That’s insane! You’re all so far ahead.”

“We just happened to catch the right waves when we were searching for the unknown at sea.”

Thinking back, it wasn’t a mistake. It all started when I went fishing and bought a boat from Sheryl. Thanks to this and that, we went from the ghost ship questline to the Cal Mira development quest. Our long life on the island finally bore fruit, allowing us to reach the Third City before any of the other players. But that was all we had done.

“Being kind to others really pays off, huh, L’Arc?”

“Sure does.”

“But if you’ve got such a capable Pekkle, why aren’t you selling them at the shop?”

“Well, about that…”

I explained the practical problems that came with employing

Brave Pekkle. While he was incredibly skilled, it was hard to maintain his stress levels, and even equipping the Raph Plushie didn't completely solve the problem... It was hard to make him mass-produce anything.

"Are you sure it's okay to have it make such a rare accessory for us?"

"Absolutely. So what kind of enchantment would you like?"

"Therese mainly uses magic, so something that boosts magic power would be nice."

"Right. That accessory seems like it would work especially well if specialized for boosting the fire attribute, but we have to take sea combat into account now. It might be best to keep it versatile."

A long time ago, delinquents were often thought of as being at odds with nerdy stuff like video games. But looking at L'Arc and Therese, I was convinced that delinquents were actually the ones who gamed more than anyone else.

These two...they felt like ex-delinquents who grew up, joined society, and learned how to navigate the world. Maybe that was why they were so skilled at enjoying games efficiently... In a game with so many unknowns, they chose a flexible play style over focusing on specific attributes.

"Then I'll go with a simple magic power-boosting enchantment."

"Thanks!"

So, I brought Brave Pekkle to Romina's workshop and gave him the order to craft an Orichal-Starfire Bracelet. With Alto's permission, of course. I made sure to frequently check the stress gauge and my stock of materials in the inventory along the way.

The finished product was an Orichal-Starfire Bracelet +1. The + modifier seemed random considering that Brave Pekkle was the crafter, but I wasn't going to dwell on it. I applied the enchantment and...done! One Orichal-Starfire Bracelet (Magic Power Booster) was complete.

"Finished, pen."

I took the finished bracelet from Brave Pekkle and handed it to Therese.

"Wow! This is seriously amazing! L'Arc, I'll be unstoppable with this! I'm leaving you in the dust with my DPS."

"What are you talking about? I'm not going down that easily."

Seeing Therese so happy made me happy too. Hopefully, that

was enough to repay them for showing me the fishing quest earlier.

"If you're in the mood, why not take Shouko, Tsumugi, and Yamikage to the dungeon to test it out? I bet Romina will cut you a deal on some equipment too."

"What about you, Kizzy?"

"I'll just be fishing, so don't worry about me. I join now and then."

Fishing was my main focus, and I only occasionally took part in combat. That was my play style.

"Looks like a bit of success isn't enough to change the little lady. It's actually kinda reassuring."

"We'll have to find something to thank you with. Right, we should go around to see if we can find anything Kizzy might like."

"Good idea. So, Kizuna."

"What's up?"

"Are there any other quests on the island?"

L'Arc enjoyed completing all sorts of quests, and he seemed eager to know how to initiate them.

"A lot of things about the island have changed from when we were developing it... You're probably better off asking Alto. If there are prerequisite quests that need to be done in the First or Second Cities, then you'll need to find them yourselves."

"Fair, fair. You're not interested in filling out the quest log?"

"I'm interested in fishing."

"I figured! Aight, I'll round up the gang and get going."

I wrapped up my thanks to L'Arc and Therese for helping Yamikage. I managed to hear various bits of info through the two of them, and as I suspected, the craftsmen from outside the island fell quite a bit short of Romina. The same went for combat strength.

Of course, with monsters now appearing in the nearby seas, there was decent experience to be had at our current level. The highlight for many, though, was the instance dungeon. It was open to all players for a set entry fee, and the players all flocked to challenge it.

"Man, the dungeon sure is convenient. It's amazing how long you can spend in there!"

The first day was like a festival, almost like we were throwing an

opening ceremony. There were so many people crowded around it, it made me feel dizzy. Merchants, drawn by the scent of profit, rushed to set up shop, not just in the marketplace but all over the island.

†

Around three days after the city opened up…I ended up witnessing…something.

“Fwa… Fwa… Fwa ha ha ha ha ha hah!”

I stumbled upon Alto laughing maniacally while counting the money piled up in the castle…or rather, our guild’s treasury. Money from facility usage, trade of goods, and taxes was funneled through my wallet into the guild’s treasury, which was under Alto’s management. My lifestyle didn’t require too much financing, after all.

“Now this is a treat! It’s a business dream come true!”

“I-I see. Good for you.”

In short, he was thrilled by all the money coming in.



At least someone was having fun. Alto, still in his hyper-high spirits, called out to me.

“That’s quite a subdued reaction, Kizuna. Do you not understand what we have here?”

“I guess, not really…”

“What a shame. The amount of money flowing in by the second is so incredible that I can’t hide my excitement as a merchant. It’s incredibly disappointing that this is just a game…”

I kinda felt a little aghast with what I was seeing. Maybe it was just a difference in sensibilities, or maybe it was his excitement doing all the talking.

“Are we really making that much?”

“Yeah, even if I went and repossessed double the amount that I had initially invested into the island’s development, we’d still have plenty to spare! It just keeps coming in!”

Double, huh… Well, if that was what he wanted, I was fine with that. Since coming to the island, he’d taken over the tedious task of managing Pekkle schedules. And it wasn’t really my money. It was more like the guild funds.

“Perhaps I should be sincerely happy that you dragged me into this. Ha ha ha ha hah!”

There was something off about that man.

What are you even planning to do with all that money? Seriously. At this point, maybe you should drop the merchant role-play already and focus on getting a little stronger.

With all that money, he could easily get what was currently the best gear in the game. Not that I was really one to talk about priorities, though.

“It’s so much money, I just can’t stop laughing. Is this…what it feels like to be a noble with territory? I see, I see.”

He suddenly brought up nobility. I remembered hearing about how nobles in medieval Europe got rich off of collecting taxes from the land they presided over. That was presumably the same scenario we had found ourselves in now. It’s not like I was completely oblivious—before I’d sent it all to the warehouse, I’d seen it in my own inventory. A cash amount of a magnitude that I’d never seen before, right in my wallet.

“And what a wonderful feeling it is! But if I keep tasting this sweet nectar… I’m starting to get scared of what’ll happen after the

game is over."

"Are you worried that you'll start regarding money the same way in real life?"

"Yeah, there's always a chance that'll happen. As for what I should do now... Hmm, investment or independence, I suppose... Of course, only as much as you'll permit."

"You can use about a third of it however you want. But if you make a bad investment and end up failing, disappearing, or fleeing, I'll make sure to chase you down and make you face the consequences."

"I won't be running away from this much money. Even if the Third City starts to decline, this is still a continuous source of income. There's no need to run. In fact, getting fired would be my worst-case scenario."

I guess only a fool would run away from this.

With that said, I didn't want to see a good friend obsessing over money, money, money, although a part of me felt like Alto had always been like this.

"The flow of money won't dwindle here—not until the Fourth City is discovered, at least. The cost of employing the Pekkles is negligible at best; it's nothing *but* profits. And let's not forget about the guild use fees! It just doesn't end! Ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

Currently, the island's revenue apparently came from the shipping fees of the trade ships, fees for using facilities such as inns, a tax on purchases of tools and equipment, the entry fees for the instance dungeon, guild registration fees, and profit contribution.

Profit contribution was a set percentage of the money earned by each player in a guild—a flat one percent deducted from the money they made selling items or defeating monsters. It was originally deducted as a transaction fee anyway, and that money was now being redirected to us. The money made from the purchase of player housing went directly into our pockets as well.

In fact, whenever anyone needed something on the island, they'd have to go through us. Naturally, this kept the money flowing in. According to Alto, even if we failed again and again in poorly thought-out business endeavors, we would almost certainly be able to make it all back. And that was even considering that the dungeon entry fee was set to the default amount. It was possible

to raise it or make it free if we wanted or needed to.

However, the increased income also meant increased expenses. The facilities had to be upkept and repaired, and there was more developable land that opened up as the island was opened to outsiders. Not only that, but there were also various other available tasks that I didn't really understand yet. Alto explained that some of them would likely be elaborated on in future updates and it would be hard to get a grasp on everything at the moment.

"Now then, how about we get back to work?! There's still plenty I can do!"

Right now, Alto was shining more than he ever had in his life. Later on, he would become a merchant whose name would be known far and wide—for better or worse. But he would always say the most memorable event in his career was the island development event.

After watching his back disappear around the corner, I headed off.

Chapter 11: Judgment Upon the Scandalmonger

One day…as we were chatting and walking toward the plaza…

“I guess I’ll do some fishing after this.”

“Weren’t you *just* fishing?”

“It’s always fishing with you, I daresay.”

“Hey, why don’t you give it a shot too, Yamikage? At the very least, you could learn how to free dive. It might come in handy.”

After all, Sheryl was already doing it. Given the current state of the game where battles at sea had become commonplace, it was certainly a good skill to have.

“I am a ninja, I daresay. Not a fisherman.”

“Aren’t there those ninjas who hide underwater with bamboo tubes?”

“Now that you mention it… No, no, that is not the ninja I strive to be!”

Oh, she just wavered a bit. Maybe she’ll be more convinced if we talk about ninjas who walk on top *of the water*.

“Aww, what a shame. Even Shouko learned a bit of fishing…”

“I did, but I haven’t exactly dedicated myself to it.”

“You’re guilt-tripping me over something like this?! It’s unfair, I daresay!”

“On another note, what’s Sheryl been up to lately?”

I got the feeling I hadn’t seen her since the development phase ended, though I had gone free diving and fishing with her not too long ago. Was she working on Machinery again?

“The last I heard of her, she was using the castle’s private dock to build a ship, sparing absolutely no expense,” Shouko explained.

Is she in a partnership with Alto, then? I guess she’s getting into what she wants to do.

“When I last spoke to her, she said she was making a ship capable of making the voyage to a new continent.”

Right, we talked about that before… I’d been so focused on leaving the island that I forgot all about it.

At this point…it was clear that the island was something like a

relay point. It made sense that she was thinking about venturing out into the open seas that lay beyond it.

Romina was busy hammering equipment out of the loads of material being brought to her, while Tsumugi was off in the dungeon showing off her new strength to everyone she used to know.

What a loosely organized group we were. With that said… *Wouldn't the giant Pekkle work?*

Incidentally, after taking Alto's advice, we'd decided not to admit any more people into the guild. What was it he said? Right. Most of the newcomers these days were the shady sorts who wanted to exploit Shouko, Tsumugi, or Yamikage's strength or were just there for the money.

Not that they could hold a candle to Alto in that regard… But there was some truth to his concern. We were going to turn down anyone who wasn't completely trustworthy. I thought it might work out for L'Arc and Therese, so I brought it up with them only to be put on hold. They wanted more time to think about it.

On another note, most people didn't even know I was the lord of this place.

Anyway, when all was said and done, Cal Mira had begun cementing itself as the furthest point in the game. The frontmost line in the fight… *If this is the front, I'm sure my sister will show up sooner or later. I wonder how Kanade's doing nowadays.*

If I ran into her, I'd probably ask if she wanted to join the guild, but for now, I hadn't reached out. If I contacted her out of the blue about it, I could see her nagging me later.

She'd be the one to get in touch if something came up, anyway.

"More importantly, milord, why don't we head to the dungeon?"

"Hmm…"

Fighting wasn't everything the game had to offer. Now that we'd finished the lengthy development quest, I felt like we could take it easy for a bit.

But just as I was about to convince Yamikage…!

"Ah! Well, if it ain't the Reaper!"

A group of four called out loudly, pointing their fingers at Yamikage.

Shouko immediately frowned when she saw them. *Ah yes, the would-be seajackers. This reeks of trouble.*

“Just when I thought you’d been perma-banned. What do you think you’re doing here?”

Perma-ban…in other words, permanently banned from the game. Yamikage took on a look of blatant distaste as she hid behind Shouko.

And it was only at that point that they noticed Shouko was there too—their expressions souring even more.

“You don’t really have to announce it so loudly, do you?” Shouko asked them.

They’d raised their voice in the island’s central plaza, so of course they’d drawn the attention of nearby players.

“What’s wrong with calling out a cheater, huh?! Even if the suspension was lifted, that doesn’t mean everyone’s just gotta forgive her!”

In their minds, Yamikage’s account had apparently been suspended and then released. Sure, if you didn’t know the full story, perhaps it looked that way. But that theory didn’t hold now that the Third City had been discovered.

We’ve run into quite a pain…and wait, aren’t they getting suspensions and bans mixed up? They were similar, but bans usually meant actual deletion, while suspensions were just that. They could be lifted so long as there was a proper reason to.

“Yamikage and I were simply unreachable as we were summoned to complete the island-unlocking quest. Neither I nor she is involved in anything you are accusing us of.”

“Hah! Spinning some tall tale like that ain’t gonna change the truth.”

Well, the truth that’s not changing is the one Shouko told them about.

What was this feeling? For a while now, it felt like I’d been doing nothing but providing mental retorts. Were they comedians fishing for a reaction or something…? If so, they needed to get some better material.

“A tall tale…is it? Then please explain what we are doing on this island. At the very least, neither of us was banned or suspended. Didn’t you see the result screen after the previous wave?”

Shouko and I had been unable to participate in the wave. But the results screen explicitly stated we had been exempted—that alone should have made it clear our accounts hadn’t been

suspended.

And yet, these guys just keep spouting nonsense. What even is their problem?

“Obviously you got suspended after the exemption!”

“Right… Did you not hear what I just said? We were participating in the city unlocking quest.”

“I was but a victim dragged into their quest, I daresay!”

In an effort to prevent the accusations from spreading to me, Yamikage avoided directly mentioning my name. She was surprisingly thoughtful like that.

“Oh? What’s all this ruckus? Are you guys stirring up trouble again?”

That was when L’Arc showed up, drawn by all the commotion.

“You…”

The four troublemakers frowned at the sight of him.

“Listen, you better hurry up and learn your lesson. Otherwise, it’s not gonna end well. Can’t you see the writing on the wall?”

“Shut up! You’re actin’ real high and mighty when you’re just another cheater hanging out with that Reaper! You’re gonna be banned soon enough.”

“Man…you’re real incorrigible, you know that? Just because things ain’t doing so well for you doesn’t mean you can go around taking it out on everyone else,” L’Arc cautioned them with a sigh.

So they aren’t tackling the content that well, and they’re picking fights with other players to clear some frustration… What a pain.

“Wasn’t it on the First City’s secret quest board?”

“Oh yeah… There was a rumor about that. Something about the members who cleared a hidden wave disappearing one by one…”

“Someone said they were being banned, but apparently they were taking part in a city-unlocking quest.”

“Whoever designed that has some terrible taste.”

“It’s like that, you know. Like the pharaoh’s curse. Guess it was to startle the people who cleared it.”

This was a classic issue with online games where anonymity was king—destroying the peace of other players to vent off some stress. There were those who believed they could get away with anything so long as it sated their own personal sense of justice.

This time, more and more of the players around Yamikage continued to disappear. Since it was a game, people saw this and

assumed they were being kicked; they began to think that Yamikage was the problem. But the truth lay elsewhere. Yamikage was nothing more than a victim. Once that fact came to light, what would become of all the people who'd previously been flaming her? Either they'd pretend they had nothing to do with it, or they'd double down.

Apologies? Fat chance.

Still... Getting stressed out because things aren't going your way in a game? That sounds backward to me. What are we supposed to do if your end goal is to assert dominance over other people?

It was all just an annoyance for Yamikage, but perhaps that was still within the bounds of what could be considered enjoying a second life. If it really got to the point where their ill-natured event setup caused real damage, the GMs would probably step in. Not that I knew where they were watching from... Maybe they'd mixed themselves in among the player base.

"Shut it! Why should I care about some rumors?! Where are you even getting this info from?"

"It was on the official info board in the First City—the one that gives you the details on onetime quests that have already been completed. The quest was called 'Curse of the Ghost Ship.'"

L'Arc calmly laid out the source of his information. One look at the board would probably dispel any doubt.

"Yeah, the quest description even mentioned how members close to whoever cleared the ghost ship would vanish."

"Who was it? Who started this perma-ban nonsense?"

Surrounding eyes naturally gathered on the party of four, who were at the center of the commotion.

"Who cares?! You were banned! End of story!"

Why is he acting like he's the one who makes the rules?

"How truly lamentable... From the bottom of my heart, I now realize that I am a terrible judge of character."

Sure enough... Shouko had some history with these guys, and now she was regretting it hard. Tossing them off the ship had been the right decision. Honestly, I'd struggle to give a straight answer if someone asked if my party was made up of good people. That mess with Wrath Pengu, abandoning Yamikage, and the cordless bungee jumping was still fresh in my mind. But this was a bit much...

“In the first place, what’s wrong with this island?! It reeks of salt! And everything’s crazy expensive! Lower the prices already!”

Reeks of salt…? We’re right next to the ocean. Of course it does. As for prices, they’re not that much higher than the First or Second Cities.

Alto had been the one who set the prices, and I was sure he set them appropriately. At the very least, the equipment and food were being sold at market value. We didn’t even touch those.

If they’re expensive to you, doesn’t that just mean you’re not strong enough to be here yet?

Since they’d been with Shouko, surely they were frontliners… Granted, that was more than a month ago.

“It’s all that NPC blacksmith’s fault. Well, once we figured out she was a real person, I invited her over to be our exclusive smith, and she shot us down. Then, just when I thought she’d vanished, she turned out to be on this bloody island like the rest of you ingrates!”

“You went and did that to Romina? There’s really no saving you people.”

That was them too? They’re really causing problems all over the place.

“She said something crazy about banning us from the shop!”

“Who does she think she is?!”

“Who do *you* think you are? Calling everyone a cheater from your high horse; you really can’t see who’s gonna get the suspension if someone reports this? Quit it before you get burned!”

In the end, L’Arc’s tone—the one that usually gave him the impression of a reliable older brother—turned into a threatening yell. As expected, the former-delinquent-ish guy was a lot more intimidating than four idiots.

Even we felt uneasy, and we weren’t the ones being scolded.

“Sh-Shut up! Bark all you want, it doesn’t matter. It won’t change the reality of the situation!”

“Hah? The hell you on about? You’re the bastards confusing reality and a game!”

We were simply playing around with the tools given to us, and they were committing such despicable acts simply because they were annoyed with us. How did that justify anything?

To begin with, these guys had tried to hijack our ship; even

though I'd only heard about it secondhand, it was hard to say their actions were in any way just. Look, maybe they had a commendable drive to take the initiative, like when they spread nasty rumors about Shouko and the others. But that was beside the point.

"Hah? What are you even on about? You trying to make it sound like we're in the wrong here?"

"Don't push your luck."

"Better lower your head before we really lose our temper."

Their blatant, mocking attitudes were pushing L'Arc to the brink. Just as he was about to open his mouth—an awfully frustrated look on his face—I raised a hand to stop him.

"Hmm? What is it, little lady? Do you see the look on little Yamikage's face there? If you're her comrade, you're better off not stopping me right now."

"I get it, I do. As her comrade, I'm really grateful that you're standing up for her. That's why I'm confident I'm doing the right thing."

"F-Fine..."

L'Arc seemed taken aback by my smile, his anger fading as he fell silent.

Now then, it looks like I have to deal with them as the party's representative.

Even in a game, there were some lines that just weren't meant to be crossed. It was time to teach a little lesson about consequences. It didn't take the admins to obliterate someone socially.

"Gentlemen, a moment ago, you mentioned something about being banned from entering Romina's shop, right?"

I pretended to check my status icons as I glanced over the group.

"So you know how you can be prohibited from accessing buildings? Well, picture this: Imagine that the leader of a city—the player who oversaw the city unlocking quest—was standing right in front of you. You might want to consider what that player might be able to do to people who keep causing trouble."

I put a word in with Alto, just in case, securing his approval to take autonomous action against disruptive players.

"Like that's even possible."

“You delusional or something?”

“This is just a game, stupid. Can’t even tell the difference between real life and a game?”

Look who’s talking. If it isn’t the people more detached from reality than anybody. Honestly, things wouldn’t go your way in the real world either.

“Yeah. This is a game. But this game is *Dimension Wave*, poster child of the Second Life Project. There’s no telling what little things the developers threw in. It’s a game where everyone has to fumble through a brand-new life.”

With a snap of my fingers, I navigated through the options that came from my lordship privileges.

“There’s nothing strange about a player holding an island’s rights after being forced to build it from the ground up. Just like…this.”

The moment I finished speaking, someone who’d been chatting and shopping in the plaza let out a scream. The four troublemakers turned their heads toward the commotion.

“Noooooooooo! The prices! The prices just skyrocketed out of nowhere!”

“I can’t enter the dungeon! It’s too expensive! What’s with these prices?!”

“Hey, everyone! Did you see that? These four jokers were babbling nonsense, so I raised the island’s tax rate to an absurd level as a demonstration.”

Having authority really is something else. I’m no Alto, but I’ll concede just this once. If possible, I don’t want to do this. But…that doesn’t mean I’m going to sit back and let Yamikage be the subject of persistent harassment.

“Little lady…”

L’Arc seemed to pick up on what I was doing. I could feel a hint of resignation from his sigh.

“We are the ones keeping taxes at a level that’s convenient for everyone. But if we let selfishness like this slide, it won’t be fun for anyone. Unfortunately, I have no choice but to ask you to leave.”

I knew it wasn’t the most upright thing to do, but sometimes, you just have to use the tools at your disposal. I promptly returned the prices back to their original levels, calming the panicking players.

“I could just put these guys on the blacklist and forcibly eject them from the island. But then again, some people treat getting blacklisted as a badge of honor, like it means they won the argument or something.”

Instead, I’d let them be gradually isolated. In short, I was going to tarnish their reputation. Blacklisting could come later.

“That’s the first step. Now, what’s next? To be honest, I don’t want to do anything that restricts your freedom to enjoy the game. For now, you’re a nuisance, so get off this island of your own accord. There’s no place for you here.”

I made it look like I wasn’t outright banning them, only strongly encouraging them to leave. The surrounding players had begun to direct their hostility at the party of four.

“It’s better not to act like you’re automatically in the right about everything. At the very least, you should follow proper netiquette.”

Though I probably wasn’t the best person to preach that.

“Milord…”

“Kizuna…”

Ah, their eyes are scary… I’d like to think they’re not filled with contempt.

“Wow… Never knew you could do that, little lady.”

Yes, it was incredible, just thinking about how much authority I had. A single player had been given the right to manage a whole city. Meaning I was able to eliminate problematic players… It was practically like I was running the government on my own.

“D-Don’t screw with me! Did the devs seriously give you that much power?! You goddamn cheaters! You really are the devs’ favorite, huh?!”

“You won’t get away with this!”

At that point, the other players stepped in. It seemed they’d finally grasped that their own gameplay could be affected—that they might become collateral damage in this mess. It was easy to predict how the folks who could no longer remain onlookers would react.

“Cheating… How are you even supposed to do that in this game?” someone muttered.

Well, you’re not wrong. This might be a VRMMO, but it’s not like your usual online game. We had all undergone checks when we entered the facility, and our real-world bodies were hooked up to

the machines.

On top of that, there had to be some level of monitoring by the GMs. How was someone supposed to hack into a game like this? At best, we could exploit bugs if we found them.

“Don’t provoke her any further! If you cause a ruckus, it’ll blow up on the rest of us!”

“That’s right! That’s right! If you’re going to bad-mouth someone, do it where she can’t hear you! They’ve already proved they’re not cheating, right?”

“Stop slinging around labels! If you’ve got complaints, write them on the back of some scrap paper where no one else has to see them!”

The four of them grew even angrier as others voiced their support. *No, I don’t want them talking behind our backs either... Well, this sort of thing is just part of the online gaming experience. It happens whether you like it or not.*

“You heard ’em. If you’re going to take any lesson from this, you should learn how to get along with people a bit better,” L’Arc urged them to reform one last time. Though knowing their pride, I doubted they’d take the hint.

“You’re kidding me! There’s no way this should be allowed! I’ve had it! I’m quitting this stupid game!”

“Let us log out! We don’t want to play anymore!”

“What a garbage game!”

“Nggaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!”

Despite all their yelling and screaming, I just knew they weren’t actually going to leave. Watching their reactions was even more amusing than watching them fish for a reaction. As a farce, I mean. They’d gone from comedians to outright clowns.

“Maybe this will sink in better for you: Even if it’s a game, this is your second life. It’s not a free pass to do whatever you want. And the fact you can’t quit by dying like you can in the real world—at times, that can make it a harsher prison than reality.”

L’Arc wasn’t wrong about that.

“Just leave already! You’re being nuisances!”

“We just want to enjoy the game!”

“I paid a fortune to get some rest and relaxation here!”

“Get out! Quit making a racket!”

“What?! Don’t screw with us!”

“You don’t know how strong we are, do you?!”

“Hah?!”

They were escorted toward the harbor with a bit of shoving from the other players. Since the game didn’t allow PK, there wasn’t any real danger involved.

“Strong? Doesn’t matter how strong you were; you’re not that tough anymore. It’s about time they realized they were being carried by Shouko. Good grief…” L’Arc muttered.

I later heard rumors about how their reputation had completely tanked. Their long history of harassing other players—bad-mouthing management, spamming false claims about account suspensions, and more—caught up to them. It was all entirely their own doing.

But now…the other players looked at us with a hint of fear in their eyes. That was understandable. It’s hard to have fun when someone has a grip on your livelihood.

“Ah, there’s no need to be that scared, everyone. We just want everyone to enjoy the island as much as possible. The quest was a real pain, so I want you all to focus on having a good time.”

However, I wasn’t going to get rid of the taxes completely. Alto had explicitly told me not to. It was a necessary authority, and he’d insisted that a tax-free system wasn’t all sunshine and rainbows for its residents either.

Back then, I’d glared at him, wondering if he just wanted the money. But I was being honest when I said that the quest was a pain. Our guild was a bit oversaturated with production characters. I mean, just look at Alto, Romina, and Sheryl.

“Please take this as a demonstration of what’s possible,” I explained. “If you clear an unlock quest for another city, you all might gain the ability to do similar things.”

Alto had also explained that players would leave if taxes were too high. Worse, they might exploit the few remaining untaxed facilities to avoid contributing entirely. The control we got over the island for clearing its quest only applied to certain parts of it.

“That’s right! The little lady here solved the mystery and unlocked the city for everyone! Don’t get hung up on the old gaming rules—this game is about challenging the unknown and seizing your second life. The next Kizuna could be any one of you!”

Hearing my explanation and L’Arc’s impassioned declaration,

the players around us seemed somewhat inspired. It was like they were hearing a real-life success story; their faces lit up with ambition. It was only human nature to get hyped up upon learning what was possible.

From that day on, the horrible moniker that had stuck itself to Yamikage began to fade away.

“Milord, Sir L’Arc, umm, I daresay…thank you.”

“Don’t sweat it. You make sure you have your share of fun too. Otherwise, all the effort that little lady put in will be pointless.”

“You were cool, Kizuna.”

“Y-You think so? This kind of thing isn’t really my style.”

I’d only started the game to fish, not to manage a city as some enigmatic lord. That sort of role was better suited to someone like Alto. The only thing I wanted besides fishing was to have some fun chatting with friends.

“Phew… The air’s feeling a bit heavy now. Let’s skip fishing for today. Hey, L’Arc, how about we dive into that dungeon to grind out some proficiency?”

“Count me in! Just what I needed too. Therese’s been obsessed with fighting lately; says she can’t stop.”

“Yes, that’s the spirit!” Shouko added. “I am glad I joined hands with you, Kizuna.”

“As am I, I daresay! Let’s do our best.”

“If you all get serious, I’m not strong enough to keep up.”

And so, we formed a party with L’Arc and Therese and delved into the depths of the instance dungeon to farm Energy and proficiency.

That day, everyone was especially nice to me.

Chapter 12: Pekkle for Hire

Now then, as for the Pekkle Employment System that was implemented after the Third City of Cal Mira was opened up, the help section extensively detailed everything there was to know about it. Simply put, users had to come to the castle's reception just like they had to do for guild registration; there, they'd pay money to hire a Pekkle. Every user could pick one Pekkle out of the herd… Wait, since Pekkles were like penguins, was it out of the flock? School? The waddle?

Anyway, hired Pekkles could be summoned into battle and—in short—could be used like pets. However, Pekkles were better suited to noncombat tasks. Cleaning your personal home, repairing equipment, crafting, and whatnot. There was a decently long list of orders players could give them.

You could continue to employ them as long as you supplied the necessary funds. Feeding them fish boosted their motivation and increased work efficiency, but giving them a small amount of (bonus) money achieved a similar effect. According to the help section, the Pekkle would just use that money to buy its own fish to eat. Incidentally, a small portion of the employment renewal fee went directly into our coffers.

We all gathered at the hall to exchange a bit of information. This time around, we'd invited L'Arc and Therese.

"I hired one to try out the new system, but…"

Everyone examined the Pekkles they'd hired as a test run. They seemed to be classified as completely new Pekkles, separate from the ones I'd fished up. For functional purposes, I understood why they did it like that.

"But just borrowing them from Kizuna seems to be more efficient," said Shouko. "Not to mention it's free."

"Well…"

Perhaps because I was the lord of the island, I could still assign Pekkles to my guild members with the Pekkle-o-meter; if I did, the Pekkles who worked alongside us on the island would act the same as employed Pekkles. And, since we had such a wide

spectrum of Pekkles specialized for different roles, we could essentially pick and choose the best Pekkles for any given situation.

"It's pretty convenient, if I'm being honest. You can teach them new skills, and they'll help out however they can. Get them a bit of experience, and they'll even take care of tedious tasks like gathering, mining, or foraging," said Romina, who was clearly getting some use out of the Pekkle Employment System.

There were no restrictions as long as we were on the island. However, the moment members of our guild left the island, the number of Pekkles we could each employ went back down to one—just like every other player.

As a sidenote, Romina's favorite was a Pekkle who wore a Viking helmet and carried around a hammer.

"Plus, there are countless Pekkles on this island. If I ask Alto, he can allocate as many as I need, so I can keep doing whatever I want," she went on.

"Oh... I see."

"But raising an original Pekkle sounds fun too. My friends are all enjoying playing with their own Pekkles," Tsumugi explained, updating us on how the rest of the player base was faring.

How should I put this? From what I'm seeing, they're treated kinda like how another game treats fairies.

Now then... Regarding the Pekkle Employment System, as expected—or perhaps not—I had no restrictions. The limit of one Pekkle per person did not apply, and with my C'mon Pekkle skill, I could summon them anytime, anywhere.

However, there was only one Brave Pekkle.

"Your group sure has some nice perks," said L'Arc.

"Sure sounds like it. Sure, I'm a little jelly, but starting from scratch has its charm too. Kizzy's the only one who can use Brave Pekkle, right?"

"Yeah, that's right," Alto answered. "Only Kizuna can employ him externally. I can still issue him work commands on the island, though."

Seeing how much she liked the accessory, Therese probably wanted to borrow Brave Pekkle if it was an option.

"It looks like you can use Pekkle Customization to change the equipment and accessory of your Pekkle."

“Then maybe I’ll give mine a front pouch and have it dual-wield knives.”

“Where have I seen that before?”

I guess L’Arc dabbles in quite a few genres. I’m not entirely sure what he’s talking about, but I get the feeling I’ve seen that character design somewhere before.

“I think you’re wading into dangerous waters there, so I won’t recommend it,” Tsumugi cautioned.

“You think so?” I chimed in. “For my Brave Pekkle, I think I’m going to have him use the Chimera Viper Shield.”

“We don’t have anyone who uses a shield, after all,” added Shouko. “Do you have any use for it, L’Arc?”

“Not me. I’m not using one.”

“Me neither. I’m sure a tank would just love it, but just like Yammy, I’m at home on the back line.”

“And we can’t let you pamper us too much, can we? Considering the market, that shield’s probably worth a pretty penny. That there’s equipment from the last event boss, right?”

The two of them casually turned it down, insisting they couldn’t accept something so strong. *What a strong sense of ethics. But maybe that’s exactly why I don’t mind lending stuff to them.*

“You could process it into something else, but you’d end up with something worse than what you’ve got right now. Maybe this really is the best option.”

“Hmm… Well, Brave Pekkle’s definitely able to equip it. I might as well give it a try.”

Taking Romina’s suggestion, I handed the Chimera Viper Shield to Brave Pekkle.

“Peeen!”

As soon as I handed it over, the Brave Pekkle’s default shield morphed into the Chimera Viper Shield. And then the shield I had handed over was given straight back to me…

“Umm…”

“He went and copied it, huh?”

Although the shield he had was slightly smaller than the original, his defense had increased, and he now had a high chance of dealing poison counter damage whenever he blocked an attack.

“So we still need to do something with it…”

“Why don’t you just sell it? I’m sure there’s a tank out there

dying to have it."

"That does sound like a safe option."

"Then I will take care of it," Alto spoke up. "Or would you prefer to have it, Romina?"

"I might be able to use it to enhance something later. Just keep it in the storehouse for now."

And so, the Chimera Viper Shield ultimately went back to the warehouse just in case it proved useful for something down the line.

"Putting that aside," said Alto, "there's one more thing about the Pekkle Employment System. It seems like there's a new stat called Fatigue. When it gets too high, the Pekkle will arbitrarily go take a break on its own. It's probably the same thing as the Stress gauge."

I guess they simplified the system for the general player base.

Though a Pekkle could be summoned and worked as much as the player wanted, they still needed to pay attention to its Fatigue levels. Raising Pekkles sounded interesting in its own way. *If I can call my own Pekkles at any time, maybe I can get them to fish with me.*

"Now, Kizuna, if you do end up summoning Pekkles," Alto went on, "I'd appreciate it if you didn't summon too many at once. The more Pekkles you take from the island, the fewer there will be to work."

It was like he could read my mind.

"We've been together long enough that I know a thing or two. Your wild ideas sometimes lead to you ignoring common sense."

"If I had to take a guess... I would recommend that you don't summon an endless number of Pekkles to fish just because you found a good fishing spot."

Even Romina chimed in... *Am I that untrustworthy? Or maybe they're driving the point home because they know the usual me?*

My big sister and my parents occasionally laid down the pressure in pretty much the same way.

"I'd love to see it!" the little sister exclaimed.

"Yeah, nice and lively if you ask me," said L'Arc. "I mean, people still remember the little lady fishing at the First City alone for hours on end—imagine how they'd see you after that?"

"I'd love to see it too," Therese enthusiastically added.

"You should totally do it, bro!"

I'd been planning on fishing at the river in the Second City… I imagined a long line of Pekkles casting their lines all the way down the riverbank…

How surreal.

"They might think there's a special event going on," Shouko nodded as she too pictured the scene.

"I believe I told you *not* to do it."

Yes, Romina had a point. Perhaps it was best I didn't.

"Got it, got it. But still, I didn't think there would be a raising system in the game."

"Well, the amount of stuff we want to do increases the longer the game goes on, right? So maybe it's to help out with that? This kind of system isn't uncommon in MMOs—like hiring NPCs to craft weapons, tools, armor, furniture, and so on."

"I'm not unfamiliar with it myself, but yeah…it's pretty convenient. Especially since you can even bring them into combat."

If you really wanted them to be helpful in a fight, you'd have to summon at least five of them. That would let you operate as a one-man party… Though it was kind of a lonely thought.

"What about you, L'Arc?" asked Shouko. "What do you plan to have your Pekkle do?"

"I'm thinking of having him craft consumables like potions. Teaming him up with Therese's Pekkle, see? We'll have one focus on gathering, and the other will do the mixing."

I see. By divvying up tasks, they can secure consumables to ensure an optimal battle environment for their clients. And you also get plenty of bonus goodies while collecting… Or maybe not. That might just be because of our sheer numbers.

"If you find a Pekkle you like, just let me know and I'll assign it to you."

While L'Arc and Therese didn't plan to borrow any through our perks, we could still offer them preferential choices of the ones on the island.

"Got it… But now that that's settled…"

Just then, everyone except Alto turned to look at me. At the moment, I was wearing the Santa hat that ex-Santa Hat Pekkle—now Chris—had discarded.

"Umm, Kizuna. How long do you plan on wearing that hat?"

Shouko inquired.

“I just thought the little lady liked running with the bit.”

“Right, right. Maybe it’s like he’s throwing an early Christmas? Like a ‘Welcome to the Third City of Cal Mira’ sort of thing?”

That was what L’Arc and Therese thought of me… But I found that deeply offensive.

“I’m not wearing this because I want to!”

“That’s right. There is a very important reason Kizuna is wearing it. To be more precise, it has an effect on the Pekkles,” Alto backed me up, confidently puffing out his chest.

Indeed, I was equipped with the Christmas Pekkle Hat, an absurd piece of headgear.

`Christmas Pekkle Hat: Exclusive to Chris and the Island Lord`

As for the effect it had, it boosted all abilities of employed Pekkles by twenty percent—a ridiculous amount, if you ask me.

In other words…the simple fact I was wearing this stupid hat meant that every single Pekkle on the island was twenty percent better than before.

By the way, if Chris equipped it, he would revert back to his previous Santa Hat Pekkle state. He was still classified as King Pekkle, but it would overwrite his King buffs.

Thanks to that incredible effect, I’d essentially been coerced into wearing it.

“When you combine the buffs of Kizuna, Chris, and Brave Pekkle, all Pekkles effectively have their stats doubled! And that’s without Brave Pekkle taking command!”

“What about with his command?”

“Two point five times.”

“Are we even going to run into any situations where you need that much Pekkle power?”

There was a lot to do during development, so perhaps something like this could have been necessary. But now, the Pekkles were just managing stores, mining, and fishing for the most part. Was there even anything else? Even building repairs weren’t needed yet since they hadn’t begun to deteriorate at this point.

“Heh… How naive. Did you think players who purchased homes in Cal Mira wouldn’t outsource construction?”

“Oh, I see.”

So they’re taking build requests from players.

There was also furniture crafting and that sort of thing. As far as Alto was concerned, it seemed that there was still plenty of work to go around. That said, most players could at least build their own houses if they wanted to… Having them solve their issues with money felt grimly realistic, and I personally didn’t know how to feel about that.

“And what’s the harm in having their abilities as high as they can be? It’s great when I need some bodyguards.”

“Alto, I think you need to focus a bit more on leveling up.”

“You’ve got plenty of people out to get you, my man. The merchant players for one—they’ve got quite a skewed view of you. They’re saying you just so happened to ride the coattails of the winning team.”

“Being resented is part of being a top merchant.”

Even L’Arc’s information network had picked up intel on the Merchant of Death. We were fortunate that the game didn’t include PKing.

“Haven’t learned a thing, huh? Even after the little lady’s group dragged you over the coals for it.”

“L’Arc. Would you have preferred it if they had called for you instead of Yamikage?”

Ah, he’s still bitter about that prank we pulled. Is he that frustrated that it didn’t work on Yamikage?

“If we had called L’Arc instead of Yammy? Bro, wouldn’t Therese hold a grudge for that?” Tsumugi questioned.

“Nah, not at all,” Therese responded. “Being real, I think I’d be jealous that L’Arc got to take part in such a rare event. I’m happy for Yammy.”

I’d already confirmed it with both of them.

“I daresay, it was bad for my heart.”

“I’d have loved to have been there to see it. Alto, trying his best to be a scarer.”

“Alto… Your threat doesn’t seem to work on them.”

“Grr… Then who?! Who could I have dragged down to get a comrade?!”

Honestly, it was doomed the moment he decided to take charge of the event.

"Grumble about what-ifs all you want, but you seriously need to focus on raising up your combat skills."

"Well, Kizuna—heh heh heh—just like you focus on fishing, I'm all about business. If I have the time to go hunting, I'd rather spend it closing a deal."

I really wanted to ask him, *Why are you so adamant about not leveling up? Are you seriously playing* Dimension Wave *just to practice your business skills from beginning to end?*

I could faintly grasp how he saw this game.

"Ech…" L'Arc groaned. "As for me, I work enough in real life. I'm sure as hell not going to bring it with me into a video game."

"Same," Therese agreed.

As working adults, L'Arc and Therese seemed to find his merchant play style utterly unappealing.

"Looks like we'll need to teach this Alto kid how fun a game can be."

"Right, right. What's the point of building up in-game currency when you don't even need it to have fun? And if you're strong, you can make more than enough on your own."

"I have to agree with you there."

I should have Tsumugi subtly nudge Alto toward becoming a game addict like her. I mean, Alto already gives off a gamer vibe, but still…

"Getting back to the point, Kizuna," said Alto, "don't forget that you can set Brave Pekkle and…Chris as your regular employees. In fact, you should focus on making those two your main supports."

"Got it."

The two most competent Pekkles were my exclusives…though sadly, they were also the ones with the strongest personalities.

"If we discover a new mining site, we can always have Kizuna summon a huge army of Pekkles there."

Romina's started to develop a knack for scheming, eh?

Sure enough, that was one way to acquire a massive amount of ore in a short period of time. Even away from Cal Mira.

"Other than that… Now seems about the right time to bring this up," Romina said as she brought out a large Pekkle plushie from who-knows-where.

No…it's not a plushie.

“What is that?”

“I made it out of some materials that were piling up in the storehouse. When I tried using Molted Pekkle Feathers to craft something, the recipe popped up.”

“Is it…a costume?”

Indeed, it was a costume modeled after a Pekkle. It was like the kind of mascot outfit you’d see at a theme park.

“It seems to boost Fishing Mastery, Swimming, and Underwater Combat…” explained Shouko. “Its stats are decently high too.”

“However, it falls short of your low-grade Ancient Dress, and it’s slightly worse than equipment made from Dragon Zombie materials.”

It seemed to come with all sorts of useful skills. In a sense, this outfit truly embodied what it meant to be a Pekkle. This sort of novelty equipment was pretty common in online games, but… Hmm…

“Incidentally, we were talking about the Santa hat, right? For as long as you wear this outfit, your race on your status screen will be temporarily changed to Pekkle.”

“What…? But Spirits work on completely different mechanics.”

“I’ve confirmed that it doesn’t actually alter that part of the system. But you know what I’m getting at, right?”

“If I’m set as the party leader and everyone equips one of those, the equipment will perform even better than Dragon Zombie gear.”

I glanced at everyone—and got a few head shakes.

“Penguin Story. Diet. Retro Game…”

Sheryl’s reaction’s pretty vague. What is she referencing?

“You’ve got some niche taste, Sheryl.”

“Uh-huh…”

L’Arc seems to know about it. Is it because he’s an adult?

“No matter how much stronger it will make us, it’s a bit much. Appearances aren’t everything, but I believe this takes it too far,” said Sheryl.

“Exactly, I daresay!”

“Right, right, keep your joke equipment to yourself, bro.”

“I can see the little lady liking that sort of thing. I myself love ruining important cutscenes with joke gear.”

“Yeah, it happens now and then. When it’s supposed to be an

emotional scene, but you just end up laughing because of how ridiculous you made your character. We were dying of laughter last time, right, L'Arc?"

It wasn't hard to imagine the two of them laughing away, playing games at home. They were pretty laid-back and knew how to take things as they came... It was quite an adult approach, if you ask me.

"I'm pretty confident I'll laugh if you really put that on, little lady."

"Are you going to Pekkle up for us, Kizzy?"

"If you are, I want the dress."

"Who said I'm doing it?! You're all hell-bent on making me a Pekkle, aren't you?!"

"It might work for me. I can hide my face and draw in customers."

For you, Alto... You've just made too much of a bad name for yourself.

It seemed pretty useful for various things. Actually, perhaps it would be good for a prank on Shouko's former comrades.

"Were you unable to craft it into a weapon? I might be able to compromise with that."

"Wouldn't we still end up with a joke, novelty item, Shouko?"

"I don't really know," said Romina. "I get the feeling it's possible, but it wasn't an option."

"Maybe it'll show up as a new weapon type after the next update?"

"Maybe. Or maybe we're missing a key material. Either way, it's worth remembering—it might come in handy at sea."

"Let's pray we won't need to use it."

"Swimming, huh... I get the feeling it's going to be a necessary ability going forward. What do you think, Therese?"

"Yeah, maybe we should get some swimsuits and take a dip in the ocean?"

"A day at the beach? That takes me back... The blazing sun, chatting up cute girls, inviting them in... Those summer days..."

L'Arc started to reminisce about IRL memories.

What kind of shady place were you inviting them to?

"That part-time job at the beach hut, making shaved ice and yakisoba... And there was surfing too. How long has it been?"

I couldn't help but feel deflated. He was like a delinquent, but in a wholesome way—the bright, sunny type.

"You used to surf a lot in the summer, after all."

"I daresay, you're so bright it's stinging my eyes!"

On the contrary, our socially awkward ninja was taking damage from her trip down memory lane. *It's pretty hard on me too!*

"Hey, Sheryl? Are there surfboards in the game?"

The shadow cast over Sheryl's eyes was kinda scaring me. Thinking back, Sheryl seemed to be the same sort as Yamikage.

"Sheryl?"

"They...exist."

Wait, really? Just how much stuff did they throw into this game?

"Aight! Then let me show you what I'm made of!"

"If we're being real here, your stats and skills will affect your performance, so I don't think you'll be able to do it as smoothly as in real life."

"But with my experience, I might be able to manage with low-level skills. I wonder what factors come into play here."

"Is there a Surfboard Art skill? Sheryl?"

Sheryl shook her head at my question.

"Shipboard Combat."

"Oh, so it's treated as a ship, for what it's worth."

"Uh-huh."

So even surfing requires Shipboard Combat... Wait, why does Sheryl know that?

"Hey, why do you know what skills we need for surfing?"

My question was met with silence.

Why are you going silent there? It wouldn't be strange for a woman of the sea like you to test it out. Is it embarrassing to say so?

"Kizuna gets a kickboard."

"Why do you figure? You think it fits because I look like a kid?"

Everyone quickly looked away at that one. They all thought it suited me—that was clear as day.

"I think the little lady would look good in a school swimsuit, to be honest."

"I know, right? I second that."

"Not happening. I'm a guy."

"But right now, you're a little girl, I daresay!"

"Shut it! I'll have you know I can swim just fine. If I can dive into

the underground lake, I don't need a kickboard!"

"More of the usual."

"Yes, more of the usual. But thinking ahead, it might not be a bad idea to learn how to swim."

"The summer sun is calling me! Let's go play on the beach!"

And with that, L'Arc and Therese headed off to the beach. If this was a fun way to grind out swimming and Shipboard Combat, then so be it.

Just like that, Pekkles began to spread among the players of *Dimension Wave*.

There was an event soon after that resulted in the discovery of a new island nearby. For what it was worth, it was treated as a part of Cal Mira's territory and was pretty much just a monster hunting ground.

The players with boats who'd set Cal Mira as their base of operations began setting out for more islands and formulating the most efficient ways to hunt. A flood of new players began putting in requests for new ships at the shipyard overseen by Sheryl.

As for the shipbuilding, production-focused players were quick to put in the work to learn the skill. But they were still no match for Sheryl, who had been building ships from the start of the game. What's more, the ships Sheryl built were equipped with radars fashioned with her Machinery skill, making them a cut above the rest.

Seeing as Sheryl was generously covering all the costs—all the money and materials—surely she was happy with her situation, right? She didn't say much, so it was hard to tell, but she seemed to accept requests from a select few people at a time. The skills she'd honed all the way up to when the island was opened up were finally being recognized.

Oh, and about Dismantling... It became pretty well-known what it could do, and the number of players honing their Dismantling skills was on the rise. From what I could see, there still weren't too many fishermen, however. That was the one thing that irked me.

Despite the excellent synergy between fishing and dismantling... Well, whatever. Things were changing on the island day after day.

It was now a choice between the tedious but time-saving grind of the instance dungeon or to venture off to find islands yet

unknown. It was up to everyone to find the best hunting grounds suited for each player. Our possibilities had certainly expanded.

Chapter 13: Third Dimension Wave Kicks Off

Around the time that we'd all become comfortable with the new changes to the island…

CRACK!

A familiar sound filled the air as the island was struck by a powerful gust of wind.

"Ah…"

I instinctively looked toward the direction the wind was blowing from. A fractured sky loomed over the nearby seas.

Last time, it had been too distant to make out anything other than the colors, but now it was disturbingly close. The wave had opened up right before our eyes. Indeed…the next wave had formed in the waters around the island.

"Speed up the shipbuilding!"

"It looks like this one is going to be on the ocean!"

"Seriously? Man, I haven't even learned Shipboard Combat yet. The devs should have given us a better heads-up!"

At the island's docks, the crafters with shipbuilding skills had bought up workspaces where they worked at a furious pace. It wasn't long before a scouting team confirmed everyone's fears—the wave was set to take place out in the open waters. That left players with two options: fight aboard a ship, or dive in and battle while swimming. Magic to walk on water had yet to be discovered.

Similarly, we'd yet to find any technology to let us fly through the air. Fighting on a ship became inevitable, yet most players had zero experience doing so. They'd be unable to move properly when push came to shove. I could still vividly remember Shouko and Yamikage when they first tried it. It wasn't any different this time. Those unaccustomed to fighting on ships were completely out of their depth during trial runs—returning beaten and battered.

Some players had dabbled in ocean combat and had picked up some level of Shipboard Combat, but for the majority, the skill had mostly been overlooked. This likely stemmed from the preference

for the instance dungeon, not just for the time compression but also to avoid the hassle of acquiring Shipboard Combat in the first place.

“Going through those summertime blues at the beach turned out to be the right move. I kinda saw it coming, but players like the little lady are really going to benefit.”

Summertime blues… I’m starting to seriously doubt L’Arc’s real age. How old are you, really? I’m starting to feel some grandpa energy from you.

I mean sure, he had that spirited delinquent vibe, but still…

“L’Arc,” said Therese, “isn’t your taste a bit outdated?”

“Huh? For real?”

“Even I can’t defend you on this one, L’Arc. You sound like someone who says they need to stay *hip with the kids*.”

“W-Wrong! No way I’m that old!”

“Well, for now, let’s just assume his real age is somewhere in grandpa territory,” I teased.

“Hey, hold on! Are you trying to turn me into some sort of punch line?! I’m not gonna let that happen!”



It was rare to see him so frantic, and poking fun at him was amusing enough. But there was no way we could continue the conversation like this.

“Setting that aside, it’s good to know that you two will be able to fight properly in the upcoming wave.”

According to Alto, the frontliners were grumbling about being forced to learn skills they considered unnecessary. This wasn’t the kind of game where simply fighting monsters—any monsters—would equate to success. Strength wasn’t defined by Level alone.

I had to wonder if the frontliners lacked the flexibility to adapt. I’d encountered similar players in other games before. They were the ones who wouldn’t trust anything that wasn’t detailed in an online strategy guide.

Once, I figured out an efficient trick before it spread online. When I shared it with a few acquaintances, they dismissed it outright, claiming it wasn’t credible since it wasn’t published anywhere. Later, when my trick gained traction, they conveniently changed their tune, but it had all been radio silence up to that point.

There would always be a subset of people who could only follow established practices laid out by others. That wasn’t inherently wrong. But I didn’t see it as the right way to approach things either.

Those same people were often the ones who fell prey to misinformation—and back to the point, while Shipboard Combat took some time to learn, it wasn’t exactly difficult.

“The low acquisition rate of Shipboard Combat and other naval combat skills among the frontliners is going to sting. Why are they so rare?”

“Ah… Well, stubbornness might play a part. In other games, being high-level or spending money is usually enough to get by. It’s rare that you get thrust into a closed-off environment like this, and they put too much time into grinding out Levels,” L’Arc theorized.

“It’s more productive to try something else once the EXP slows down near the level cap,” Therese agreed; she was still wearing a bathing suit, clearly enjoying her island life to the fullest. Seriously, those two really got along.

“If a wave broke out in a polar region, would they complain

about needing winter gear to fight properly?"

"There'll always be complainers. Some of them whine about the grind being too tedious. But they don't branch out—don't open up a business like Alto, and don't pursue a hobby like gathering or cooking."

"Why even join this game, then?"

It cost quite a bit of money to participate in *Dimension Wave*. Were they even trying to enjoy the experience?

"Apparently, it wasn't what they expected, so they lost their motivation."

"Spending this whole game doing nothing sounds like hell to me."

The faces of Shouko's former comrades crossed my mind—but that was beside the point. They were going to spend years in a game they couldn't log out from. Were they really going to do it without finding anything they considered enjoyable?

"Who knows? What's the use in worrying about people who've forgotten how to have fun? Those frontliners are probably clinging to habits from other games… The way they think things ought to be."

L'Arc had a point… It was only a portion of the player base, and worrying about them wouldn't accomplish anything. Clearly, the frontliners had their own rules and norms.

In any case, it hadn't been long since the island had first become accessible to most players, and we were going to have to confront the wave before a large chunk of our combatants had fully adapted to it.

Oh, come to think of it, I met up with Kanade the other day.

"It's been a while, Kizuna. I'm sorry to drop this on you out of nowhere, but could you do me a favor?" she'd asked me. *"There are some materials I need—could you tell me if you have any?"*

"Hmm? Sure. What is it?"

The moment we met, she immediately asked if I had any of the materials she was short on.

"I want to update my equipment before the wave. I'm not asking for anything for free, of course."

"Got it. What do you need? I'll have a look at my storage."

"Thank you. That's the sister I know and love."

"Brother. You mean brother."

That was the exchange we had, but it seemed Kanade was still doing things at her own pace, completely oblivious to the fact that I was the lord of the island. What was I supposed to make of that? She had her own comrades and seemed busy doing her own thing. It felt wrong for me to interfere too much.

Meanwhile, Tsumugi was having fun chatting with her own acquaintances too. She mentioned being asked if she could get Sheryl to make a ship for them. Tsumugi firmly turned them down, reasoning that it would be presumptuous to loan out one of our ships. She made sure to take care of that herself.

With this and that going on behind the scenes, the day (or at least, we were pretty sure it was the day) of the battle was finally upon us.

"Whoa... When did we have so many ships?"

Countless ships had gathered on the special wave map, almost like each vessel was eagerly awaiting the moment it served the purpose it was built for. I'd barely ever seen any ships back when I was in the First City.

"What's with th-that thing?!"

"Look at the size of it! It's fused with a massive Pekkle!"

"Looks like a pirate ship. They really went all out with that one."

I could hear bits and pieces of the chatter going on around us.

Everyone was pointing at the ship we'd boarded—a custom-made vessel crafted by Sheryl.

I couldn't help but feel a bit smug. Its design was unique, to say the least. For starters, the shape of the bow defied what it traditionally meant to be a ship. Rather, it was shaped more like a carriage, as it was designed to be pulled by a massive Pekkle.

There was a mast at the center and cannons lining the sides. Perhaps owing to Sheryl's personal tastes, or perhaps a result of using Dragon Zombie materials, the mast was topped with a rather large skull. And of course, we had a ballista mounted on the stern. We'd completely taken on the look of a pirate ship.

When we were developing the island, I think the Pekkles were using this ship for fishing.

It reminded me of...an old shooting game I'd played before, where the mid-boss was a fusion of cat and ship. This was essentially the Pekkle version of that.

For some odd reason, whenever you loaded Pekkles onto a ship, they would all swap their accessories for bandanas, wrapped around their heads like pirate henchmen.

Pekkle pirates, eh? Someone had to program that.

"That's a nice one. How do you reckon they made something like that?"

"Isn't it the island lord's? I mean, just look at all the Pekkles, not to mention the giant one... I don't think that's just a set piece."

"Meaning they've got to have some exclusive item or something. This is just unfair."

"Well, that's the difference clearing secret quests makes. We just need to work harder."

"So either we stick to the dungeon runs, or we risk it to find a big quest..."

We were gathering a fair bit of attention. It was bound to happen with all the preparations we'd done in advance. For the record, our ship could move at an impressive speed, based on all the test runs.

It was additionally equipped with a sonar that let it detect schools of fish.

The ship was customized well—and tailored perfectly for me. Sheryl had really outdone herself.

"Last time I was stuck with the island development and exempted from the wave. But this time, I'm going all out!"

"Yes, let's do our best."

"Of course!"

Alto and Romina were focusing on supporting the general player base back on the island. They were tasked with supplying healing items and selling weapons on top of countless other responsibilities.

We planned to use a reserve ship to ferry players and supplies back and forth between the combat field and the island. Still, the real challenge would come once the boss appeared.

"I shall be taking command again!"

Oh? I can hear the same guy from the first wave on the map-wide chat.

"Urgh, learning Shipboard Combat was such a pain."

"What's the harm in picking up a few skills? It's not like this game uses skill points or anything."

“Shut it. Just let me fight how I wanna fight.”

The frontliners, for all their complaining, were preparing their weapons with practiced ease. It seemed like things would work out somehow or other.

“Sorry for imposing on you and your ship, little lady.”

L’Arc and Therese were hitching a ride on our ship. I had invited them, thinking it would be nice to have some familiar players on board. We’d been diving into the instance dungeon together fairly often, and I figured it would be more fun to tackle stuff like this as a team.

“Let’s give it our all.”

“You got it!”

“Yammy, it’s totally time to show off our matching accessories!”

“I-Indeed, I daresay.”

As we made our final preparations, the monsters appeared—just as they had in the first wave.

“As always, hold out until the boss shows up! Everyone! Hold the line!”

I hadn’t been there in the second wave, but I understood the sentiment. I was excited, my mind screaming: *Finally, I get to fight!* It wasn’t like I lost anything—thanks to my exemption—but it was still a onetime event. I wanted to be a part of it.

“It’s been a while since you’ve been in a wave, eh, little lady?”

“Yeah, and I’m aiming for the top this time!”

“Yes, now is the time to unleash our full power—just like we did in the first wave.”

“Yammy, think you can do it? You always seem to score high.”

“We’ll see. But I daresay, I don’t intend to lose!”

“Uh-huh…”

“Naturally! I’m not falling behind either! Let’s go, everyone!”

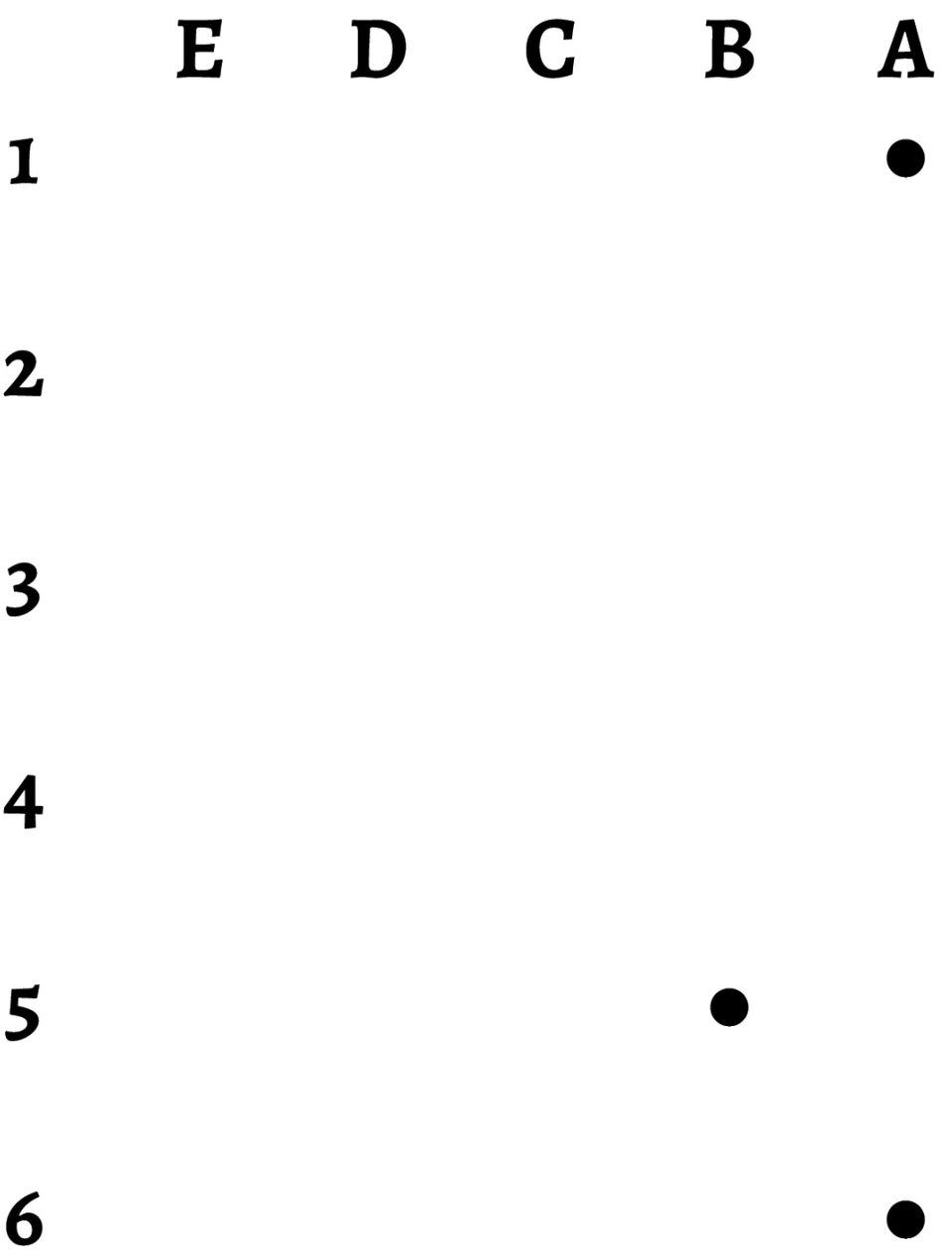
Now to check the names of our opponents…

```
Dimension Sahuagin
Dimension Strangefish
Dimension Swordfish
```

They all seemed to be aquatic monsters. *Ah, swordfish… I would have loved to fish one up, but it seems like it’s just a normal monster.*

“M-Monsters have boarded our ship!”

“Hurry and eliminate them! Those black islands...our destruction targets have surfaced on A-6, B-5, and A-1. Countless monsters are pouring out of the sea—a good deal more than last time! Everyone, prepare for a long battle!”


E D C B A
1
2
3
4
5
6

With a splash, a Dimension Sahuagin leaped from the ocean and landed on deck.

“First one’s mine!”

With a light step, L’Arc swung his scythe in a masterful arc toward his foe.

“Hey! That’s no fair, L’Arc! Save some for me!”

And Tsumugi—the sore loser she was—rushed out, wielding her own scythe with equal fervor as she joined L’Arc in cutting down a growing number of enemies. They were reliable, if nothing else.

“I won’t fall behind! Kizuna, Sheryl, please take out the underwater monsters with the ballista and the cannons.”

Sheryl and I gave a thumbs-up before turning our focus to the Dimension Strangefish and Swordfish in the water. It wasn’t long before we’d unleashed a wild volley of ballista bolts, the twang of firing arrows filling the air.

“Pekkles, cast the nets and throw the mines! Reduce the number of monsters as much as you can!”

“Pennn!”

On my command, the Pekkle crew began tossing fishing nets and explosives overboard. We’d spared no expense in stocking our ship with top-notch supplies.

“I daresay, I must join in.”

As per usual, Yamikage hammered one of the Dimension Sahuagin that Shouko was holding at bay with her Drain. There was a nice, satisfying sound as its life was snuffed out in a single shot.

“Huh…?”

Even Yamikage had to cock her head, confused by how anticlimactically it had gone down.

“Not bad, Yammy! Now here’s one from me! Burst Thunder Rain!”

Just like that, Therese called up a storm of lightning, sweeping away a large chunk of the remaining Dimension Sahuagin with ease.

“Not bad, I daresay. Though they’re weaker than expected, I won’t fall behind.”

It wasn’t really news, but L’Arc and Therese seemed to have a healthy rivalry going with Tsumugi and Yamikage. *I wish I had*

someone to compete with me…in fishing.

With us darting around aboard the massive Pekkle ship, launching an endless barrage from the ballista and cannons, the Dimension Sahuagin and Dimension Swordfish began to target us more and more. Soon, we were at the center of a swarm.

"We've drawn too much aggro," noted Shouko.

A horde of Dimension Sahuagin burst onto the deck, causing her, Yamikage, and Tsumugi to prepare to hold them off.

"Pennn!"

That was when the Pekkle unit—led by Chris and Brave Pekkle—stormed in, the deck devolving into a chaotic melee.

"Hm?!"

Just as I prepared to intercept a group of charging Dimension Sahuagins with Cerberus Slaughter, Brave Pekkle stepped out in front, using his shield to soak up their onslaught.

There was a *poof* sound as the Chimera Viper shield he had equipped took effect and poisoned the sahuagins.

"Try this on for size, pen!"

Chris spun into the fray, striking the sahuagin with a flurry of flipper-based combos.

Wow, he's got the moves, plain and simple. In one fluid motion, he'd produced a hammer from his crown and brought it down on a Dimension Sahuagin's head, stunning it. He fought with a free-form style that involved freely swapping between the Seven Tools of the Pioneer, overwhelming his foes with calculated attacks. There was a sort of beauty to it.

That's a Pekkle for you. Is it because they're all sea creatures? If the NPCs can contribute this much, then I guess this wave will be a breeze.

"You can't underestimate the little lady's Pekkles. That headgear's effects are wild."

"Try putting yourself in my shoes, being forced to wear it day in and day out."

"Ha ha! I get you, I get you."

"How about this? Whoever ranks last in this event has to wear the Pekkle costume until the next wave hits."

"Everyone! We can't afford to lose!"

"Wooooooooh!"

Everyone aboard the ship began fighting with even greater enthusiasm than before. *Do you really hate that joke gear that*

much?

Granted, they were probably just going along with the joke. It wasn't like I was planning on actually enforcing the penalty that strictly—two or three days at most.

"Hmm...?"

Just as Yamikage's might and the impressive maneuvering of the Pekkles had given me a false sense of security, I was struck by the palpable desperation of the map-wide chat.

"They're spawning faster than we can kill them!"

"Waaahhh! Blurgh-blub-blub..."

"This is E-3. Strong winds have capsized our ship. Someone help us!"

"I'd love to, but I can't steer straight in the wind!"

"Pekkle is not a monster, pen."

More of those voices were coming in one after the next. *Wait a second... Isn't this getting kinda bad?*

This event required both Shipboard Combat and Helmsman skills. It was a bit too much to ask for those specific skills on every single player participating.

This might be even worse than I thought... I mused, ignoring that last Pekkle voice. At the very least, it wasn't one of mine.

"Kizuna, the ship to our right is requesting aid. May I go?" Shouko spoke up.

I glanced over. Their crew looked ill-equipped, unable to fight properly or steer well on the waves. They were bound to fall if we just left them. For the time being, we were more than capable of holding off the enemy with just Yamikage.

"All right. Support them until they're back on their feet."

"Understood." Shouko nodded before kicking off the handrail and landing deftly on the neighboring ship.

"It's a bit worrying, sending her out there alone. Therese, I'm gonna back her up."

"Got it. Go wild, or else Kizzy will have us all in costumes before you know it."

"You don't have to tell me twice! You take care of yourself too. I'm off!" And with that, L'Arc went off after Shouko. I couldn't help but find myself jealous of his sheer display of athleticism. There was no way I could move that nimbly.

He took out a Dimension Sahuagin the very moment he landed

on the neighboring deck.

“Aight, I’ll help the left ship, then.”

Without hesitation, Tsumugi took a page out of Shouko’s book, launching herself in the opposite direction. I didn’t need to check —I knew she’d hold her own.

“Well, L’Arc’s gone now, so how about I make a mess with Mugi? I’ll be back soon.”

Therese went off with her. It seemed like everyone was cutting loose in their own way.

If this keeps up, won’t I be the one stuck in the costume…?

“Full speed ahead,” Sheryl muttered, advancing the ship.

But didn’t everyone just jump off?

“I daresay, what about Lady Shouko? Circle Drain, I daresay!”

“We will be boxed in at this rate,” Sheryl firmly replied.

I scanned our surroundings.

Perhaps I would have seen something if we’d been fighting on land, but all I saw were ships. There were ships everywhere I looked, all locked in battle. Some had already capsized and plunged their crews into the sea. On land, it would have been easier to coordinate and hold the line. But here, the enemies kept bursting out of the water, making things far more chaotic.

Oh, I see a few people diving in to take the battle straight to the enemy.

It was quite a unique battlefield, but some players seemed to have builds well-suited for it.

With that said…Sheryl was right. Moving forward was better than being rendered completely immobile.

“You’re right. Let’s advance to where we can move freely.”

“Uh-huh.”

As the ship began to gain ground, I switched to the party chat to relay the plan.

“We’re going to lose mobility at this rate, so we’re relocating the ship. Hop between ships, clear a path, and rejoin when you can. I leave it up to your judgment.”

“Understood!”

“Gooot it!”

Fortunately, our ship stood out in the chaos. With so many vessels cluttered together, my teammates could use them as stepping stones to catch up later.

Chapter 14: Dimension White Whale

"Mmm... Lady Shouko, Lady Tsumugi, Sir L'Arc, Lady Therese, they're all so cool, I daresay!"

"Yamikage, your job is to guard the ship."

"I-I daresay, I know that."

Yamikage watched the others, her eyes filled with admiration. It was probably because of the very ninja-like way they were leaping from ship to ship. Still, if Yamikage left, we'd hardly have any defenses remaining, so I needed her to stay put.

Ah, I should update the map chat.

"This is E-3... Err, I mean D-3. We were on E-3 when I sent out my comrades to assist the nearby ships. If you're in trouble, contact someone from the Dimension Wave Countermeasure Committee Guild for help."

"I mean, one person isn't really gonna... Ah, no, never mind. They're a huge help. That lady in the kimono with the fan... Ah, it's Madam Shouko. She's clearing out the enemies with L'Arc."

"Tsumugi and Lady Therese are over on our side..."

They were already making an impact in such a short time span.

Madam Shouko... She's more famous than I thought. Tsumugi knows how to get along with people, so she's got a lot of friends too. It looks like L'Arc's also famous, and they know Therese too. She's a Lady? Maybe she becomes a queen when angry or something. It wouldn't surprise me, based on how she talks to L'Arc.

Now, as for the battlefield analysis, the enemies weren't individually strong—which was likely an intentional decision by management. It was a special map, and it probably wasn't supposed to be too difficult for players who'd picked up the right skills. Looking at it the other way, though, it would be a harsh one without them.

In the time I spent thinking over it, a fresh wave of enemies burst from the sea and landed on the ship. Brave Pekkle intercepted their attacks while Chris picked up the offense.

Once we'd finished wiping out the enemies on board, I turned the ballista I was manning toward the enemies on the nearby

ships and on the water's surface, launching bolt after bolt after bolt.

Yeah, this might not be a financially sound decision, but I'm racking up points at an incredible pace.

More than that, the overwhelming feeling of power was exhilarating. I'd never felt this overpowered in a VRMMO, let alone a normal online game before.

The reason being, my player skill simply didn't measure up to Tsumugi's or Kanade's. In the first place, most online games had player stats at a similar range across the board, making it difficult to stand out. But here? The Dimension Sahuagins, Dimension Strangefish, and Dimension Swordfish were being obliterated by the ballista one after another.

The same held true for Yamikage's spells, and while I didn't want to become like Alto, it did make me feel like exclaiming, "Ha ha ha, they're like trash!" like that famous Ghibli film. Though in his case, it was more about the money.

"All right, Yamikage, Sheryl, we're pushing the line forward!"

"Okay."

"I daresay!"

†

"Sheryl, we got a new shipment of ballista bolts!"

"Mm..."

Since then, we'd fired, fired, and fired some more. At one point, we ran out of things to fire, but thanks to the supply system we'd set up with Alto, we were restocked at regular intervals and never fully ran out of ammo. Even during brief shortages, I'd just switch to my bow and keep firing.

"I can see the island."

The black island—what we were supposed to destroy—was in sight. We'd cut straight through the map, heading directly for B-5. Unsurprisingly, we were the first ones to arrive.

"I'll keep an eye out. Keep going."

"Got it! Yamikage, we're heading out!"

"On it, I daresay!"

Our ship charged straight into it, slamming in with a heavy thud. Without hesitation, we leaped and landed on the shore. Our

destination was the black tower at the island's center. But naturally, the whole place was swarming with enemies.

"Cleaver! Cleaver! Cleaver!"

"Circle Drain, I daresay!"

The enemies were falling like dominos under our attacks. By that point, our Energy had already capped out, so there was no reason to hold back. Thanks to the party system, it was also regenerating while we fought—probably because Shouko and Tsumugi were defeating monsters all over the place. And even without that, Yamikage was clearing enemies with her AoE magic.

"Aight! We've secured the area! Pekkles, all-out attack!"

"Pennn!"

The Pekkles swarmed the tower, hammering away at it relentlessly, and I was there with them, weaving together skills and normal attacks. From the rear, Sheryl supported us with precise ballista fire and later her harpoon once the coast was clear.

Now and then, Yamikage would head back to deal with any new enemies rushing in to keep our path secure.

"How hard is this thing..." I grumbled.

"It's designed to hold up against a larger number of players," Sheryl replied.

"That's right, I daresay." Yamikage chimed in. "It being balanced for at least ten would make sense."

It was just the three of us and the Pekkles, after all. While the sheer number of Pekkles did give us the numerical advantage, they were still just NPCs.

They couldn't even hope to match the firepower of real players... *Still, if my Energy is replenishing this fast, it might be time to whip it out. It's been a while.*

"Energy Blade!"

I pulled the Energy Blade from my inventory, brandishing it, ready to strike. And I swung.

Of course, I stayed within a safe Energy usage range—taking into account my recovery. Even then, the might of that one single attack had to be massive.

But still, it wasn't enough to destroy the tower in one shot.

All right, let's switch over to Cerberus Slaughter and... Wow, I've already recovered a fourth of what I used up.

It had to be due to the sheer number of enemies that were

being defeated during the wave. In that case, another shot didn't seem too unreasonable.

"I'm using the Energy Blade under the assumption I'll recover it. Cover me."

"Understood, I daresay!"

I poured Energy into the blade again and took another swing.

As its humming power surged and struck the black tower, it carved a deep gash into its surface. The structure began to collapse. *Heh heh heh, it's on a whole 'nother level compared to my normal attacks.*

"All right! Tower in B-5 destroyed! We're moving on to A-6."

"We appreciate your service."

"That was fast."

"Too fast, I'd say. How does that even work out?"

"That large ship has a lot of Spirits. If they concentrate their firepower, it is not impossible."

At least someone gets it.

Though they were often treated poorly, Spirits were perfect for events that required endurance. The downside was that they struggled whenever they didn't have Energy recovery like this.

"I see... Wait, we talked about this last time too."

"Didn't we?"

"And wait, is it just me, or is my Pekkle doing more work than me...? Its firepower just skyrocketed. Is it an event buff?"

The chat drifted into a casual back-and-forth. Apparently, this had become a regular discussion. Perhaps Spirits weren't considered underpowered anymore. I'd been living on the island so long that I'd stopped keeping up with the trends.

As for the boost in Pekkle abilities, that probably came down to me standing on the battlefield while wearing the Santa Hat.

"We're heading to A-6."

"Uh-huh..."

"Roger, I daresay!"

"Pennn!"

We returned to the ship and set sail again.

†

Ultimately, it was the left force—that Tsumugi had joined—that

crushed the island on A-1, while the right force that included Shouko took out the one on A-6. It didn't take too long at all.

The event's challenge couldn't stack up to all the equipment, money, and preparations we'd invested into it. It seemed that most of the players had grown accustomed to the waves to boot; their movements were quite a bit more coordinated than they'd been during the first wave.

Honestly…it felt too easy.

"Confirmed the destruction of the island. The boss will come soon! Everyone get ready—no respawns from here on out!"

I could hear it all playing out in the chat. The chat commander's orders were as sharp as ever.

"Now what kind of boss are we up against?"

From the deck, I scanned the seas to see where the boss might be coming from. The endless waves of small fries meant I couldn't stop for too long, but I was out staring at the open water whenever I had the chance.

"B-Boss sighted at C-3— Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

I turned toward the voice and there—rising gracefully from the ocean—was the boss. A massive creature launching a surprise attack on a nearby ship. The ship it attacked…vanished. Where had it gone?

"Whoa…"

The sight of it was magical, in a way. At the very least, the way its motions perfectly synchronized with the ocean waves almost made it look like it had come straight out of an art piece. It made me feel a natural urge to enter screenshot mode.

"A whale, I daresay," Yamikage muttered.

"The legendary Moby Dick."

It was, indeed, a white whale, but its back was studded with numerous eyelike gemstones. It almost looked like a whale fashioned by an expert jeweler. The name: Dimension White Whale.

As its body briefly drifted through the air from its great leap, the gems scattered countless beams of light, coming down upon us like rain across the sea before it dived back beneath the water's surface.

The entire sequence felt like a meticulously crafted cinematic.

So we're supposed to take that thing down?

“The boss has appeared!” the usual voice boomed. *“If you’re battle-ready, move out!”*

“Oooh!”

“Let’s go!”

Sheryl seemed a bit more motivated than usual as she gripped the helm, deftly steering the ship toward the Dimension White Whale.

“Yamikage. Take over.”

“Wah?! Sheryl?!”

Then, handing control over to Yamikage, she rushed over to the ship’s weapons, joining the Pekkles manning the ballistae and the cannons and attacking alongside them.

Without hesitation, she reached for a specialized weapon—a large harpoon cannon.

With the resounding pull of a trigger, she sent a harpoon flying, piercing deep into the Dimension White Whale.

Oh… That looks like it dealt some decent damage. I could see the White Whale’s HP bar chipping away as we hammered it with attack after attack.

In retaliation, the whale unleashed beams of light from its gemstone-ridden back.

“Leave it to me, pen!”

Reacting quickly, Brave Pekkle took a great jump with his shield out, absorbing the incoming attack.

“We’re going in too!”

“Yeah!”

Other players followed suit, unleashing their ship’s weapons on the whale while the diving teams jumped into the water to engage with their own personal weapons. As per usual, I teamed up with the Pekkles, using the ballistae and cannons to snipe from a distance.

“Kizuna, I wish to join the attack, I daresay.”

Yamikage’s eyes were on fire. Battles like these were the real thrill of the game. No one wanted to sit idly by while watching a giant boss battle pan out.

“Yeah, yeah.”

There wasn’t much I could do about it. I relented, pulling out the Pekkle Pipe to take over the ship’s controls. The ship could be steered directly via the rudder, but it could also be operated if I

took direct control of the Pekkle.

Releasing her grip on the helm, Yamikage began chanting a spell while targeting the Dimension White Whale.

“Drain, I daresay!”

The old reliable.

“Circle Drain, I daresay!”

And, when enemy reinforcements arrived, she was also the one to clear them out.

There was a limit to controlling with the flute. Eventually, I had to take over the helm, steering to avoid the whale’s attacks. *This is pretty tough…and for some reason, Sheryl’s gleefully attacking the whale without a care… In fact, she’s completely ignoring the mobs; it’s like she only has eyes for the white whale!*

Soon enough, the Dimension White Whale dived back into the sea, likely to breach into another ship on the surface. Just as the thought crossed my mind, Shouko, Tsumugi, L’Arc, and Therese returned to the ship. The Pekkles skillfully caught them as they jumped over.

“Back, bro.”

“It is good to be back. That is quite the massive boss.”

“Oh yeah, it’s a real heavy hitter.”

“How exciting.”

“Sheryl’s been going crazy for a while now. She seems obsessed with that boss.”

“That’s rare.”

Sheryl was usually calm and spaced out, so seeing her this fired up was definitely unusual.

Come to think of it, she did mention something about her Ahab Spear…and she murmured something about white whales. Maybe she has a particular interest in this boss.

In that case, perhaps the Ahab Spear would pack a punch against the Dimension White Whale.

And, just as I was preparing for the next round of attacks, the water’s surface began to bubble and churn.

“Whoa! It’s trying to throw us off!”

A nearby ship attempted to sail through the bubbling waters only to start spinning uncontrollably.

“Aaaaah! We’re—we’re sinking!”

The smaller boats, unable to withstand the strain, began to

sink, gurgling as they disappeared beneath the waves.

"Yeek... That looks like a pain."

It was annoying, plain and simple. Meanwhile...a dark shadow from below was closing in on our ship, and it was closing in fast. *Is this going to be the same charging attack it did when it first appeared?*

"Shouko, take the helm! Brave Pekkle!"

"Ah, Kizuna!"

I handed her control and leaned over the side of the ship, shouting a command to Brave Pekkle.

"On it, pen!"

The Pekkle obediently dived into the water, circling beneath the hull.

There was a loud thud; something collided with us just before the Dimension White Whale shot up diagonally from the side of our ship. Fortunately, Brave Pekkle had managed to veer it slightly off course.

"Now."

Without missing a beat, Sheryl fired the harpoon cannon at the whale just as it splashed down nearby. Then, in that same motion, she leaped from the deck onto the whale's back, wielding the Ahab Spear.

"Bomber Lancer!"

The harpoon's explosive tip struck with a thunderous blast, drawing a pained cry from the beast.

Whoa... That's incredible. And Sheryl—looks like she's having the time of her life.

Given the nature of her weapon, perhaps it just had a really good affinity for the fight. By that logic, my Isana no Tachi was probably pretty effective too, but... *I'll save testing that theory for when I'm dismantling. After we've taken it down.*

I was not athletic enough to jump on that massive thing and swing a weapon around. Sure, it was a game. But that didn't mean I was good at it.

"That look on Lady Sheryl's face—I daresay, it's like she's become one with a movie character," observed Yamikage, a role-playing specialist (if you'd believe it).

Sure enough...rather than Sheryl having a personal vendetta against the whale, it was more like she was thrilled to be facing off

against a monster she'd always wanted to fight. When it came to maneuvering on the sea, her movements were almost as sharp as Shouko's and Tsumugi's. I'd considered her a production character like me, what with all the shipbuilding and the Machinery. I was wrong.

"We're joining in too! Haaaaah!"

L'Arc let out a fierce battle cry and a great swing as he joined the fray against the Dimension White Whale.

Now then, it's time to focus on my part. I aimed the ballista, the cannons, and the harpoon cannon, firing with precision while commanding the Pekkles to do the same.

Still...what is this? There's something oddly nostalgic about it.

It reminded me of a game I'd played a long time ago with Tsumugi and Kanade. The ships in that one raced over the sands, but we were still up against monsters as big as whales. It was oddly similar, and I couldn't help but wonder—*if we stung pickaxes on the back of the Dimension White Whale, would we be able to mine anything from it?*

It's all about imagination...right? That creative thinking is what's carried us this far.

It wasn't like the Dimension White Whale was sitting idle while I mulled over these thoughts. Its attacks were relentless—charges, heat rays, and even summoning tsunamis to destabilize us.

Fortunately, our ship had the best mobility of any in the fleet. With that mobility, and with Brave Pekkle's robust defenses, we were able to contain its attacks. What's more, we were armed to the teeth, with all the nets and mines Sheryl had prepared proving incredibly useful.

"Sheryl looks like she's having fun," said Shouko.

"She sure does."

Clinging to the whale's back, Sheryl gleefully cried out "From hell's heart I stab at thee!" while unleashing a barrage of attacks.

"She has become Captain Ahab, I daresay. I remember reading it once."

"I think Sheryl mentioned that Ahab was ultimately defeated by the whale."

"I've heard that too," Therese chimed in. "It was in a foreign movie I watched one time."

"Indeed..." Yamikage confirmed. "I daresay, the narrator was

the sole survivor. The rest of the crew perished."

Hearing that really emphasized just how much of an ill omen her weapon was. Either she was actually interested in whaling or she loved the story so much that she wanted to take on the challenge herself. It was probably the latter. Surely she wasn't a blood relative of anyone involved. If she was, that would make her a foreigner, and if she was, I doubted she would look that happy while fighting it.

I asked her about it after the fact, and she simply said the book was a favorite of hers.

"By the way, I daresay, one of the movie adaptations had Captain Ahab win and get a happy ending."

"Hmm."

"You're so knowledgeable, Yammy! In fact, you seem to know a lot of random things. Are you an enthusiast like Sheryl?"

I had to admit, I was also curious why Yamikage was so knowledgeable about it.

"I just saw it on a plane once, I daresay. Then I grew curious and read the book."

Was it really so good that she had to experience it multiple times? I couldn't wrap my head around it... And I really didn't understand her breadth of knowledge.

Of course, we had the luxury to enjoy such a casual conversation because we were putting up a good fight against the monsters and doing a good job fending off the White Whale's attacks. Yamikage's Circle Drain and Therese's lightning magic were effortlessly wiping out the mobs like the Dimension Sahuagins.

"Crimson Heaven Wheel!"

Tsumugi and L'Arc had followed Sheryl's lead, hopping onto the Dimension White Whale's back and unleashing their own powerful techniques.

The damage seems to be piling up nicely.

"I will go too, I daresay! Lightning Style...Burst Thunder Rain!"

"Me too! Me too!"

After some decently lengthy chants, Yamikage and Therese unleashed their spells on the Dimension White Whale. I'd grown accustomed to seeing Therese's lightning magic already, but it was still a sight to behold... It had a decently wide range, and its power

left little to be desired.

But, in games, there was a long-standing rule—water-based monsters were always weak to lightning. The Dimension White Whale was no exception if its HP gauge was anything to go off of.

“Way to go, Yammy! I might just snag MVP.”

“Not if I have anything to (dare)say about it.”

“Right back at you!”

Of course, the ballista, cannons, and harpoon cannon were also dealing considerable damage.

By the way…when did Yamikage learn lightning magic? Did she pick it up after seeing Therese?

Considering we were always hunting in the sea, it was a welcome addition and maybe a deliberate one on her part.

“Wow… The island lord’s party is pretty much dominating this fight.”

“What are the rest of us even here for?”

“They’re not cheating, are they?”

“From what I heard, they were forced to develop the place for more than a month. Their equipment and level are also top-tier. Those ballista bolts and cannon shells cost a fortune, and they’re firing nonstop like it’s nothing.”

“Is that our tax dollars at work?”

“At least they’re being put to good use.”

“Unlike certain politicians.”

“Grumble all you want, but you better contribute too if you want a share of the spoils.”

“Is this…corruption…? Is this how the rich get richer…?”

The map-wide chat was getting noisy… *This is just a game, right? I mean, they’re clearly not serious, but still…*

“Everyone! Though its attacks are fierce, our foe is not more than we can handle! Strike with all you have!”

The Dimension White Whale let out a scream I struggle to put into words. With waves of players leaping on its back from countless ships, latching onto it and slashing away… With ballista bolts, cannonballs, and harpoons being fired away like money was a nonissue, its massive HP bar was dwindling fast.

It wasn’t just a show of how strong we were, but of how financially stable we were too.

“Pekkles! Fire like you’re trying to run out of ammo!”

“Pennn!”

Even with our relatively small numbers, we were able to pad out our forces with Pekkles. We weren't going to fall behind anyone when it came to sheer attack volume.

Finally, the Dimension White Whale retreated with a deep dive underwater. *Is it preparing for its next attack?* I ordered Brave Pekkle to take on a defensive stance.

Sheryl, Tsumugi, and L'Arc...still clinging to its back...were dragged underwater.

Are they...okay?

"The next attack is coming."

Our ship had drawn the most aggro, so surely we would be the next target for its charge. I kept my eyes locked on the sea, waiting for the inevitable.

And...

...

.....

.....nothing.

Bubbles would periodically rise to the surface, but there was no sign of an attack coming from below.

"Do you think everyone is okay?" Shouko asked, glancing back from the helm.

"Ahem... Attention! It seems the Dimension White Whale has moved to a different combat field. Reports indicate it is swimming freely, shaking off the players clinging to its back, and initiating attacks underwater. Furthermore, its HP is slowly regenerating."

"What?!"

I could hear curses erupting from the surrounding ships.

"What the hell?!"

"What an obnoxious fight!"

"Does that mean all the damage we dealt was pointless?!"

I shared in their frustration, of course. Seeing as this was a game, there had to be some way of dealing with it, but I couldn't think of an immediate solution.

"Hmm? I see, I see... Apparently, the party hit by the initial charge is currently battling inside the whale's body. If you are caught in its underwater devour attack, you'll also be transported there."

Eaten...?

Well, the idea of a whale's insides being like an inescapable cavern was classic fantasy.

“That sounds like so much fun. L’Arc is trying to get in there…but it looks like he missed his chance and he’s sulking. He just messaged me.”

Even in this chaotic situation, his love of fun events had him wishing to go all out in a whale’s belly. It did sound like a standard gimmick.

“You think it’ll resurface if they succeed down there?”

“Otherwise, how else are we gonna stop its HP regen?”

“Guess it’s a diversion… Those guys who took the first attack sure are lucky.”

“And the Island Lord Team who blocked the second attack; they missed their chance to attack from inside.”

Oh, shut it! Don’t act like it was obvious. If an attack’s coming, you’re supposed to block it! Therese, stop pointing at me!

“However, waiting for a separate team to finish their mission could allow the whale to fully recover. If you have swimming skills, please dive in and join the underwater fight.”

“Another field… I daresay, can you reach it if you can swim? I daresay that I never picked up swimming skills.”

“They would’ve really helped out in island development,” I insisted. “You really don’t have any?”

“I don’t have them either,” Shouko admitted.

“Bwah…” Tsumugi suddenly resurfaced, waving at me. “My brother! I don’t have swimming skills, so I couldn’t move properly and had to come out. Apparently, L’Arc obtained them from playing around at the beach.”

Liar! If you couldn’t swim, you would have drowned like Yamikage!

Since she could move around, she had to have some skills.

“Can you swim, Therese?”

“Yeah. If L’Arc’s down there, maybe I should lend a hand. Oh, what to do?”

“Romina did prepare some diving equipment just in case…” Shouko hesitantly said.

The equipment Romina prepared went by the name of…the Pekkle Costume.

Everyone collectively gave up on the idea. The idea of wearing that in front of the other parties was too much to even think about.

“Tsumugi, can you breathe in the other field?”

“Umm, oh yeah! If you swim through the big bubbles the Dimension White Whale creates during its attacks, you can breathe.”

So you have to use the enemy’s attacks to keep swimming while attacking at the same time… So they did prepare some exclusive gimmicks. That’s an action RPG boss battle for you.

“For now…”

I registered the Dimension White Whale as a target and directed the Pekkle units to attack.

“Let’s go, pen!”

“Pen!” they yelled in chorus as they—Brave Pekkle included—leaped off the ship as one and charged at the whale.

This will help to some extent.

As a matter of fact, the HP recovery rate of the boss had slowed down ever so slightly. I could also tell Sheryl was pulling her weight in the fight.

“Dropping more mines and nets might have some effect.”

“Then let’s have the people who aren’t too good at swimming drop them.”

“And you, milord? I do believe you can swim, I daresay.”

“What are you looking at me for? I don’t mean to brag, but I have some terrible motor skills.”

“Kizzy, bragging about that doesn’t make you look cool.”

“My brother, you see…he’s pretty clumsy.”

“Can it! If I were good at sports, I wouldn’t be a gamer.”

“True.”

“Relatable.”

No, I wasn’t talking to you people. And how are you eavesdropping on our conversation?

“But if you have the skill, I daresay, you should be able to move better than us.”

“I’ll probably end up straight in the whale’s stomach. You want me to bring the Pekkles along to go on a rampage in there?”

Honestly, I wasn’t confident I could be of any help. Staying on the ship and commanding the Pekkles seemed like a smarter move. With my Island Lord buff boosting their abilities, I was contributing a lot more up here than down there…and suddenly, I realized I had nothing left to do.

Shouko and Tsumugi were taking turns at the helm, Yamikage

was dealing with the small fries, and the remaining Pekkles were dropping the nets and mines.

Hmmm… Oh!

"Yamikage… I just had a brilliant idea."

"I daresay, a solution to our predicament?"

"No…not exactly."

"Then I daresay, what is this idea of yours?"

Yes…this is a field that only exists during the wave. And I am a fisherman. In front of me is an ocean. Then what else am I to do?

I took out my fishing rod, swung the lure around, and cast it into the ocean. *What can I catch here?*

"Kizzy, you're too consistent," Therese chuckled. "I can't say I dislike that unwavering style."

"M-Milord! The disease has struck him at the worst possible moment, I daresay!"

The lure hit the water's surface with a plop.

"Hey, Yamikage! You're making me sound like the bad guy here! Think about it—there may be a rare fish you can only catch precisely *because* of our situation."

"Kizuna… I can't even begin to justify this," Shouko sighed.

"Really? I'm all for it," Therese chimed in. "Better to regret doing something than not do it at all. What if there's an event tied to this exact moment?"

"Therese. Don't encourage him. You'll only make him worse."

"If you can't swim, why not head to the stomach field instead? Leave the ship to me!" I offered.

"You do have a point, but… At least try to fight."

"I'll think about it if you put on the costume, Shouko!"

"Can I…take your word for it?"

"Wow, Shouko's willing to take one for the team!"

Huh? For real? I only said it because I thought she wouldn't…

Urgh… Sure, I took part in the event because I wanted to fight in the wave, but my real job is to fish up tasty fish for everyone and dismantle them into delicacies for the dinner table. I'm a semi-crafter. And you want to make me fight?!

"I'll go with you, so let's fight together," said Shouko. "If you ask the Pekkles, I'm sure they'll help you avoid attacks."

Do I have to do it? Faced with the massive wave known as social expectations, is it finally time for me to conform…?

“That’s right! Giant Pekkle! Enter submarine mode!”

“Milord has truly lost it! I daresay, did it come with that function?”

“Pen?”

The giant Pekkle tilted its head in confusion. Even though it had never reacted to anything I’d said before, the AI decided that now was a good time to react.

“My bro says some wild things in the heat of the moment.”

“I don’t know if I’d be happy or concerned if that actually worked…”

“I kind of got my hopes up…” Therese admitted.

“If it deployed some sort of magical membrane to protect the ship, it might be useful,” said Shouko. “But if it just dives, we will likely end up with a shipwreck instead.”

“I do think it’s good, theoretically.”

I guess Pekkles aren’t that omnipotent. I played it off with a second cast.

“Enough with the fishing, Kizuna. Please—”

And just before she could finish reprimanding me, there was a sharp twang as the rod bent more than it ever had before!

What?! What’s this resistance?! This tension?! I can’t even compare it to the catfish!

Chapter 15: Third Dimension Wave Complete

```
Secret Wave Quest Activated!
Quest: Reel in the Dimension White Whale!
```

I furrowed my brow.

“I-I daresay, what’s happening, milord?!”

All of a sudden, the boat was tilting sideways. And of course, I was the cause.

“Tsumugi! Grab the helm and steer!”

“Kizuna! What exactly did you hook?!”

“It looks like I’ve nabbed myself a Dimension White Whale…”

“Yippee! Looks like your intuition was on point, Kizzy! Good thing I stayed here instead of going after L’Arc!”

Therese enthusiastically cheered me on. And though I found her words rather questionable, she had high hopes for me, and I wasn’t about to let her down!

“Pardon? Kizuna, are you saying that lure and that fishing line managed to hook the Dimension Whale that’s fighting so deep below?”

“That’s clearly strange, I daresay!”

“I get how you feel, but don’t think too much about it!”

Stuff like this happened all the time in games. Like that monster hunting game where you could catch a massive fish with legs using a frog as bait.

“Well, if it’s tugging this hard, it might not be a lie,” Tsumugi said with a tinge of excitement, her hands firmly gripping the helm. “I mean, we were being dragged when he hooked the giant squid too.”

Still, what’s with this tug?!

“Hey, the island lord’s party’s doing something.”

“Fishing? Now? What are they thinking?”

Map chat was abuzz.

Shut it! I’m playing this game to fish! Is that so wrong?! Who knows

what rare fish I might catch in a field that only exists while the wave's going on? It's all about experimenting! And look, it even triggered a secret quest!

Though even if I told them that, I doubted they'd believe me. I needed to back myself up with results!

"Hraaaaaaah! Don't underestimate my fishing experience!"

Every bit of my fishing experience, the specs of my rod, the power of the motorized reel…and all the skills and proficiencies I'd invested in… *I'll put it all to work right here, right now!*

I poured all the Energy I could into the motorized reel while pulling with all my might.

Gradually, the shadow on the line grew bigger and bigger until finally, it had revealed itself as the foe we'd been wrestling with all this time. The surrounding players who'd been sneering at us while fighting off small fries were left slack-jawed.

"Go get 'em, Kizzy!" Therese cheered, her clenched fist thrust into the air. She was playing along even better than Tsumugi.

"Pole Fishing!"

I unleashed a skill to seal the deal, swinging the rod up with all my might. And then, with a great splash, the Dimension White Whale burst from the ocean's surface.

"WHAAAAAAAAT?!"

The enormous creature smashed back down with a colossal spray, its belly up and its eyes spinning in a stunned animation. A beat later, Sheryl and the other divers poked their heads up as well.

"A-Allow me to report the latest intel. The Dimension White Whale that had been running amok underwater suddenly turned its face toward the surface and shot up at an incredible speed."

"The boss was fished."

"Sure was."

"The island lord's party did it."

"This makes no sense."

"What? The island lord's party was fishing? And they managed to hook the whale?"

An air of disbelief filled the map. I took the opportunity to stand at the bow, striking a pose with a triumphant grin.

"Kizuna's so cute when she's smug."

"Looks like she really is Tsumugi's little sister. That cockiness is

unmistakable."

Why is Tsumugi coming up now? Are we really that similar?! And for the record, I'm the older brother here!

"Therese! What just happened?"

"Kizzy pulled it up, just like that! I'm glad I got to see it!" Therese excitedly explained to an exhausted L'Arc as he climbed back onto the boat.

"I-In any case! Now is our chance to attack!"

At the commander's words, the stunned players snapped out of it and resumed their assault. Perhaps because it was unconscious, the Dimension White Whale was taking some massive damage. It wasn't long before we'd taken out all the HP it had recovered underwater.

Eventually, the whale regained consciousness and was back on the move; but, after a frantic flurry of attacks on the surface, it quickly dived back down to the depths.

Yep, it's definitely programmed to dive after its HP crosses a certain threshold.

While some folks dived in after it, this time a few players were casting their lines into the water.

"The heck... This is impossible!"

Only for their lines to snap instantly, leaving them stamping their feet. I, for one, was genuinely happy to see some other fishermen on the battlefield.

I should strike up a conversation with them next time.

"By the look in milord's eyes, I daresay he thinks he's found a comrade!"

"Do you really want fishing buddies that badly?"

"Of course I do! Who else is gonna spend a month at the underground lake with me...?"

It'll be like, you know, a fishing festival. That sort of thing.

"I daresay, who would want that?!"

Well, me, for one.

For the record, I asked later. They all turned me down. One of them even flat-out told me, "I know it's a request from my idol, but please cut me some slack." I guess I was loved... Let's just go with that.

That said, my fishing style started to gain attention. People began to acknowledge the amount of effort it would have taken to

reel in something as formidable as the Dimension White Whale.

There! Another bite!

I fished up the white whale again, creating the perfect opportunity for an all-out attack. By then, a solid pattern for attacking had started to form, and the process had become pretty standardized for most of the players.

By the third time I'd reeled it in, the Dimension White Whale's HP finally hit zero…

"…?!"

It let out a scream I could barely describe as it collapsed, defeated.

A brilliant white light swept through the area, giving way to clear skies and fluffy white clouds—it was just like what had happened after we'd cleared the first wave.

That seemed to be the end of it, if the pristine, sparkling sea was anything to go off of.

Oh? What's that sound? There was a loud splash near the Dimension White Whale's body as a lone ship emerged in a dramatic spray of water.

"Oww… Where are we? Huh? Weren't we just doing battle inside it…"

"We were so close to reaching its heart…"

The people on the ship cocked their heads in confusion. *I'm pretty sure you guys were fighting it the way the devs intended.*

I could imagine them being shot out of the blowhole after striking its weak spot, letting them rejoin the battle after that.

"Victory!" Sheryl proudly proclaimed, raising her Ahab Spear as she stood at the bow.

"Y-Yeah!"

The victory cries that came back sounded a little flustered.

"Right."

"Good work."

"Yeah, good work."

"GG."

"G."

`The Third Dimension Wave has been Cleared!`

A system window confirmed it.

“Phew… We won! We won! I’ll bet we got a pretty good score this time.”

“Indeed.”

“We were unstoppable, I daresay.”

“Naturally.”

“We did it!”

“The little lady stole the spotlight this time, but it was fun.”

“That was a blast!”

After striking some celebratory poses, we all checked the results screen.

Oh? Oooh? Ooooooooohhh?

First, I needed answers.

“How did I rack up numbers like this? I mean, I wasn’t clearing out mobs or doing as much damage to the boss as Yamikage or Sheryl…”

“Perhaps the contributions of the Pekkles are being factored into your score?” Shouko suggested.

“I…see.”

Believe it or not, I’d secured first place in damage dealt. I didn’t want this to feel like it was some kind of bug, so I needed a reason to accept the results.

I see, I see. The Pekkles are practically my arms and legs, and they were dealing countless blows on my behalf.

“All right!”

This was probably one of the most brilliant moments of my entire life. I switched to photo mode and captured a fair few screenshots of the results screen.

“Oh! Milord! You’re incredible!”

“You need to check the other categories, bro. Your name’s all over them too.”

“That’s pretty incredible.”

“It’s almost refreshing to see him this far ahead.”

“At least you didn’t end up as the World’s Biggest Damage Sponge this time!”

“I daresay, how long are you going to drag that out?”

“Actually, most of our names are listed in most of the categories.”

“Uh-huh…”

Sure enough, most of our names were prominently featured in

a lot of the categories—the positive ones, thankfully. And to top it all off, I ranked first overall for this wave.

What is this feeling… I've almost never been number one in a game that had a leaderboard before.

In a way, it felt like I was getting payback for being forced to sit out on the second wave.

I'd ultimately taken first place in five categories: Overall Rank, Damage Dealt, Livelihood, Logistical Support, and Race.

It went without saying—this was the good kind of first place.

Livelihood probably also encompassed things like money earned and stuff like that.

Damage Dealt—as explained earlier—came down to the Pekkles doing most of the work. The runners-up were Sheryl, Shouko, L'Arc, Therese, Yamikage, and Tsumugi.

It was only natural that we'd output more damage, given we'd been grinding out on the island far longer than any of the other players. Though L'Arc and Therese had joined later, we'd given them a warm welcome with some boosted equipment. That probably played a part. After all, we were pretty much one-shotting the mobs.

Next, the Livelihood category… Shouko, Sheryl, Romina, and Alto were all ranked in the top ten.

Presumably, the category reflected various noncombat activities we'd done in between waves, but…yeah, the things we did to develop the island were bound to increase the score. This was where fishing factored in… It was a category I'd usually be gunning for first place in.

As for Yamikage not being on the list, that was likely because I'd only called her at the end.

For Logistical Support, of course, Alto's and Romina's names were listed there too.

My first-place ranking in the category had to be because…I'd opened up Cal Mira, securing it as a base for all the other players to operate out of. Since I'd effectively supported every player who came to Cal Mira, that surely boosted my score. Probably.

And reeling in the Dimension White Whale surely factored into support as well.

Naturally, I ranked first in the Race ranking too. With all these first-place finishes, it was no surprise I'd secured the top overall

spot as well. At least now I would be able to shake off that title of World's Biggest Damage Sponge.

"So it ended with the Pekkle Master being the uncontested top, huh?"

"Well…after all those volleys…"

"How much Serin do you reckon she invested into this one battle?"

"With that much investment, anyone could have taken number one."

Pretty much. Yeah. I think so too. But I'm not paying attention to the peanut gallery.

Wait… Pekkle Master? Is that my name now?

"Yep, Pekkle Master. I can see it," said L'Arc.

"A new title. Wouldn't it be better if they called you the Fishing Master, though?" Therese suggested.

Erk…another embarrassing nickname to add to the list. Why isn't Therese the one picking nicknames? At least I'd get a cool one.

Chapter 16: To the New World

With the wave behind us, it was time to go through all the new updates.

Hmmm… New skills, unlockable secret skills… New items too, of course.

We finally had the proper introduction of Machinery and enchantments, on top of a massive expansion for the refining system. The list of new recipes was massive—so massive that I couldn't be bothered to read it all.

But what does a massive expansion mean exactly? I'll have to ask Romina about it later.

In terms of combat systems, it seemed they'd added combo techniques. Skills and spells unleashed in tandem with party members could merge together to create bonus effects. That sounded like it'd be powerful if used correctly.

There was also an expansion on racial abilities. Demihuman players would be able to undergo a beast transformation after reaching a certain Level and completing a quest. For Spirits… *Hmm, we can collect the souls of defeated monsters?* That one was a bit unclear—I'd need to test it out later.

Other than that… Oh? The Cal Mira Instance Dungeon has been expanded.

It was probably referring to the locked door on the lowest floor. Maybe we'd finally be able to pass through it.

"And now the fun part—bonus rewards."

Since I ranked first overall, I'm bound to get something good!

I checked the reward screen and pressed the accept button.

The slots are spinning! I can see them—a fishing rod symbol and a fish symbol! You gotta land it this time! C'mon! Hit! Hit! Use my first-place buff to hit it big!

I watched the slots in prayer, and just when it looked like the fish icons were lining up…they slid down at the last moment to show dual blades.

Quit giving me hope! I'm not even surprised at this point! I thought, my head slumping in disappointment. But then a "+"

symbol and a fourth spinning reel appeared next to the initial three. This one stopped on the fish mark.

```
High-Density Enhanced Energy Blade Attachment Acquired
```

Again with the Energy Blade?! So, what's with the bonus fish?

Just as I pondered the bonus wheel, Brave Pekkle tugged at my sleeve.

"Hmm?"

"A reward for a hardworking penster, pen."

Then, from behind his shield, he handed me a ridiculously shiny, gaudy lure that practically screamed "filthy rich." *So you're the one giving it to me?*

As I took it in my hands, it glowed softly before fading away.

```
Secret Skill: Fever Lure Acquired!
```

It happened just like when I'd been given the C'mon Pekkle skill.

I'll have to test it out to see what it does later.

"Did you get something from Brave Pekkle again, Kizzy? I'm so jelly—he's a great Pekkle... He makes amazing accessories like a master craftsman."

Therese seemed envious, but unfortunately, I couldn't lend him out.

"Maybe I'll just start calling him master."

"And since you have the Cal Mira Fishing Line, you should take this too, pen," Brave Pekkle continued, handing me a weight.

```
Cal Mira Inline Weight Rank: Epic
Equipment Type: Fishing Gear/Accessory
Equip Conditions: Fishing Mastery IX+
Expanded Hit Detection (Medium), Tangle Prevention (Medium), Lure Performance Boost (Medium)
Synergy: Cal Mira Fishing Line
Synergy Effect: HP Absorption (Medium)
A masterpiece, something the hero of Cal Mira put their heart and soul into making. Fixing this weight
```

to a fishing line will prevent tangles. It also has the power to boost the performance of lures.
It has the potential to grow based on the fish caught.

An inline weight was a weight threaded onto a line for lure fishing. *That makes the third epic-class piece of fishing gear I've gotten... The special gear from these quests keeps piling up. Looks like it's for lure fishing this time.*

Since I used Lures pretty often, that was all well and good...but the Synergy effect was HP Absorption. It was almost like they designed it to be used in battle.

Well...let's just call it a bonus. I can pull out my fishing rod if I'm ever short on HP.

"You're really gathering a lot of strange stuff, Kizzy."

"Thanks to everyone, yeah."

"I was thinking about trying fishing too, but...just hearing your stories is enough to fill me up, so I think I'll pass. It looks like the Craftwork skill's been added, so I'll try seeing if there are any hidden quests related to it."

It wasn't like fishing was all the game had to offer. L'Arc and Therese both seemed to enjoy quest-hunting, in any case. Perhaps they'd stumble upon some hidden quests tied to their hobbies.

Aight, I ought to check out the Energy Blade too. I pulled the High-Density Enhanced Energy Blade Attachment out of my inventory.

It looked like...another Energy Blade? Seeing as it looked like it would fit into the port on the original Energy Blade just right, I tried sticking them together. As expected, they clicked together with a nice, meaty sound.

Huh?! A glow ran along the Energy Blade as it shrank in my hands.

Prototype Variable Energy Blade IV Acquired

Variable? I checked the details of my new weapon. Immediately, I was met with a sword, a spear, a bow, a staff—icons for all sorts of weapons. There was even a fan. It had become a weapon that could take on all sorts of roles. But...there didn't seem to be a

fishing rod. There weren't any dismantling weapons either.

It doesn't really overlap with anything I use… Well, I guess I could use it as a bow if I really have to.

At this point, it was probably better if I just handed it off to Shouko or Yamikage to use in a pinch.

"Everyone did pretty well, huh?"

"What did you get this time, Kizuna?"

I showed Shouko the improved Energy Blade.

"Again?"

"Yeah. I asked around, and apparently it's a weapon that Spirits pull pretty often. It's a bit awkward to use, so most people end up letting it sit in their inventory."

"That figures."

Awkward was an understatement. Each and every swing consumed Energy.

"Also—Therese was watching, so she already knows—but I got a lure and weight from Brave Pekkle."

"Sounds like an island lord bonus. Knowing you, bro, I'm guessing you're happier with that."

"No doubt about it, I daresay."

Oh, you all know me too well… Now then…as per usual, let's check Kanade's performance…

```
Overall Rank 89: Kanade†Exceed
```

She's dropped compared to last time. That's odd. For Kanade, wouldn't this be about the point in the game where she starts standing out? Oh, I found another category with her name—looks like there's a Spending ranking too. She's ranked fifty-forth for that.

If that's a category, my name must be… It's not there.

Neither Alto nor Romina nor Sheryl was listed there either. I was sure we'd all spent a fair amount. I mean, with all the ballista bolts I'd fired off… What exactly was the criteria?

"Whew! It's tough… I can barely cut it!"

"Erk… I guess we can't take any more than that."

There were a few players standing on top of the Dimension White Whale trying to dismantle it.

"So the MVP goes to the island lord's team? I dunno what I expected."

We seemed to be getting some attention.

I guess it's true that information about Dismantling's spread. Then I don't have to do it in secret.

"In that case, how about I get to dismantling right away?"

I drew my Isana no Tachi, leaped onto the Dimension White Whale, and positioned the blade for dismantling. *It's like it was made to dismantle a monster like this!*

The edge easily sank into the meat... *Is this supposed to be tough? Maybe you need a high Dismantling level to do it?*

Perhaps feeling like they lacked the proficiency, the dismantling players stepped aside for me.

What's this? I can see dotted lines indicating where I'm supposed to cut.

Using Fast Dismantle, I quickly cut up the whale and stuffed its parts into my inventory. Not that I'd ever taken one apart before, but it seemed to work out if I handled it as I would a fish. Unlike a fish, I did get an insane amount of blubber, though.

"What's the deal with the island lord? She can fish *and* dismantle too?"

I'll have you know that's all *I'm good for! Carving up fish for cooking is directly related to Dismantling!*

With that said...the dismantling work felt pretty gruesome this time. There was no blood, and the internal organs were turning into something like crystals, but still.

Once I got the hang of it, there wasn't much left to say. It wasn't long before I could call it a job well done.

With the dismantling over, the Dimension White Whale still remained, but in a half-transparent form now.

I gathered quite a bit of material. I should ask Romina what we can make from it.

"Hey... After I dismantled it, the whale is looking transparent. What's that about?"

"I daresay, boss-class monsters can be dismantled by anyone who contributed. Not just the first person."

"Yeah, the secret about Dismantling was out by the last event. Everyone was doing it."

"So it's a proper distribution system."

Oh, so the spoils are properly divided. Not too many people were using Dismantling skills back when we fought Cerberus, so it kinda felt

like it was just left behind for us.

I quickly finished up the dismantling and returned to Cal Mira.

When I checked the spoils later, I found a few non-material drops on the list.

There was the Nemesis Suit, a decently powerful diver suit. I couldn't equip it yet, and since it enhanced diving, I decided to give it to Sheryl. Next, the Figurehead of Revenge, an ornament that boosted a ship's speed when fastened to the bow.

Finally, a weapon: Revenge God's Sword. I had no idea what to do with it, so I decided I'd have Romina break it down and turn it into another weapon.

What can we make with a weapon from the Dimension White Whale? Honestly, probably the same thing we can make from the drops…

And so, we returned to Cal Mira Castle—our guild home—and threw a celebration.

"'Twas a perfect victory, I daresay!"

"It all worked out!"

"Yes, I don't believe there is any fault to be found this time around. But let's not get cocky—we should try to win like this next time too."

"Heh heh heh heh… We've got plenty of funds. Just thinking about how we can turn this money into even more money is giving me chills."

"Alto. Calm down, would you? The update's given us more options for item crafting; as for how things will go from here…I can see an exciting life ahead."

As for me, I think it's about time I fished up the Lord of the Second City, I thought as I stared out from the viewing platform, my eyes taking in all of Cal Mira.

What a long journey it had been, though you could also say it was all smooth sailing.

I glanced over to see that Sheryl's eyes were fixed on the distant sea. She kept the Ahab Spear propped against her shoulder.

"Now that the wave's over, we should start deciding what we're going to do until the next one…I guess."

"Uh-huh…"

"Sheryl, what do you want to do?" I asked, even though I knew the answer.

Without a shred of hesitation, Sheryl pointed at the ocean.

“I want to find out what lies beyond. I’ve made the preparations already.”

“Right. We might find ourselves adrift again, but if it leads to results like these, we should definitely keep challenging ourselves.”

“I would prefer to avoid it if possible,” said Shouko. “After all, didn’t we set off for untapped lands to find an efficient hunting ground?”

“I know the island’s dungeon has expanded, but that’s something for the hardcore players to take on.”

Our calling was elsewhere. We couldn’t forget our initial motivation. We couldn’t lose our sense of adventure.

I didn’t want us to become the sort of players who simply took down monsters like it was busywork to boast about their strength. That wasn’t why I was playing this game, in any case.

“Shouko, Yamikage, Tsumugi, you can do whatever you want, you know. I mean, my goal is mainly fishing.”

I wanted to catch fish I’d never caught before. That was why I was setting out for new lands, and—if I hadn’t tried them out yet—I was fine with circling back to hunting grounds that we already knew about.

In that sense, going around the hunting grounds near the Second City didn’t seem like a bad idea. Especially now that the place would be less crowded.

Fortunately, returning to Cal Mira was easy enough.

“I have this gut feeling that I’ll find some undiscovered quests if we stick around the little lady.”

“Same. Hey, could you invite us along for the ride?”

“Of course. You’ve both been very good to us.”

“Oh, thanks for that. The pleasure’s all ours! Though there might be times when we can’t join in. It depends.”

“No worries, no worries. Everyone here does their own thing.”

“Lately, I’m starting to think it’s better to play for fun than to dive straight into combat. Right, L’Arc?”

“Yeah, we should try to take a page out of their books!”

“Aight, then tomorrow, let’s set out for new horizons. If something happens, we can always just return.”

We had return items, after all. Though there was a chance we’d

be unable to escape, just like last time. Actually, there was a concerningly high chance of that happening.

"Okay."

"Understood... I knew what I was getting into," Shouko sighed. "In a way, it's no different from the Pekkles' desire to develop the island."

"Don't lump us together."

"Heh heh heh heh... I'll be staying behind on the island. I need to wring some more money out of those players."

Alto seemed dead set on managing the island.

Well, sure, whatever floats your boat.

"Don't go making more enemies."

"Ha ha ha, I only do that when I'm strapped for cash. And I happen to be loaded right now. I just saw a few interesting trade options, so I want to test them out."

Something smells fishy.

Romina lightly shrugged. "I'll stay on the island too, making equipment for everyone. Luckily for me, some blacksmith pals moved over, and there are some things I can't do alone. Looks like every day will be a challenge for me."

"Please don't leave me behind again, I daresay."

Yamikage wanted to tag along, and Tsumugi seemed to be on board too.

"Looks like it's settled."

With that, we finished up our modest victory celebration and boarded Sheryl's ship, setting off for somewhere new.





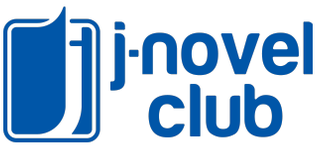












Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!
Newsletter

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 4 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:
J-Novel Club Membership

Copyright

Dimension Wave: Volume 3
by Aneko Yusagi
Illustrations by Ryo Ueda

Translated by Roy Nukia
Edited by Ambriella Ceridwen

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

ディメンションウェーブ 3
Copyright © Aneko Yusagi 2021
All rights reserved.

Originally published in Japan by Imagica Infos Co., Ltd.
Through Shufunotomo Co., Ltd.
This English edition is published by arrangement with Shufunotomo Co., Ltd., Tokyo
English translation © 2025 J-Novel Club LLC

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property.

J-Novel Club LLC
j-novel.club
The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.
Ebook edition 1.0: April 2025