

Chapter 17: A Healing Dish

Acorn slept soundly over his little bed, he dreamed about eating acorns and healing his people, or something like that, most likely. He was very tired from yesterday, so not even all the noise I made woke him up.

I decided to walk outside and noticed that the trees were giving out acorns, so I picked some up and decided to crack them until the center, which was edible and had a nutty flavor, even in this game I could eat acorns for free by just picking them from a tree!

I walked back to the home and decided to crack some of the acorns and then put them on the stew before it were to boil completely, while I also decided to roast some in the bonfire.

Time passed flying, after ten minutes, the stew was boiling hot and ready to eat, and the roasted acorns had become toasty brown and were also very soft now.

Acorn had woken up by all the delicious smells, and jumped out of bed.

"W-What is this?! Eh! Ah... Planta! D-Did you cook all this tasty stuff?! T-Those are roasted acorns, my favorites! And... stew? Rabbit stew with mushrooms... It is red?" he wondered, as he walked to my side.

"Good morning little Acorn," I said. "I cooked something up so we can start the day off with some energy! Oh, look, this is Belle, I think you remember her already, and this one is Loki, my new plant companion."

"O-Oh, you summoned another monster? Amazing! With Loki, we are a four-men team!" said Acorn. "Like this, most of what we have to do will be a breeze! Ah, I am so hungry..."

"Here you go."

I served Acorn a big plate with stew, a lot of meat, acorns, and mushrooms. The stew was slightly spicy and flavorful, the broth from the rabbit and the

mushrooms were really good, and the last addition of acorns made the food even tastier.

Aside from that, there were the roasted acorns to snack on and lastly, the fish, which was already grilled now and ready to eat.

"S-So much food... Since my grandma died, I've barely been eating acorns all day... I remember she used to make a mushroom stew with bird meat before... It was very tasty," he said.

Acorn quickly took a spoon and decided to drink the soup, his eyes opened wide as he drank it and he even licked the spoon.

"T-This is tasty! So tasty! Planta, you're amazing at cooking!" He said. "You also added Peppering, right? That's the red color!"

"Yeah, I found it in your kitchen, sorry for using your things without your permission..." I sighed.

"There's nothing to apologize for!" He said happily. He took big chunks out of the rabbit meat, ate the acorns in the soup, and then the mushrooms.

He was enjoying everything together, and the flavors melded together perfectly. After that, he also ate the grilled fish and seemed happy to be alive by how tasty it was.

"D-Did you go catch fish?" He asked. "I never knew you had the knack for fishing too... Amazing, you're really the daughter of the goddess!"

"Hahah, little one you're really praising me way more than you should," I said. I also decided to taste this food, even if it was a game, the scent, the warmth, and everything was very realistic.

I began with the broth... it was spicy, a bit sweet, and had a smoky flavor as well, and lastly, the flavor of the rabbit meat was really nice too. The mushrooms gave a good touch to it as well... After that, I ate the horned rabbit meat, it was soft and it literally tore apart without me even having to bite it off... the mushrooms were soft and chewy. I liked filling my cheeks with them, and lastly, there was the boiled acorns added to them, which were also very delicious and with a nutty flavor.

Acorn decided to make some tea, and he quickly gave me a cup of a very fragrant aromatic tea with mint, which was sweetened with honey. It went well with the stew and the grilled and salty fish!

When we finished eating everything, I felt like I had been reborn, it was way too good! It has been a while since I ate such freshly caught fish, even less rabbit meat and such big and high-quality mushrooms, oh right, and the acorns as well!

Phew, I ended up eating like two more plates until my satiation meter reached 100, and Acorn too, so we emptied the entire pot... I also shared a plate with Belle, and she ate it all without caring if it was meat or not. I guess the goats in this world ate meat... a single plate increased her affection for me, and her satiation filled up completely as well.

That was really amazing... While I relaxed after the meal, I checked into some weird system windows I ignored for a while until now.

Ding!

[You have prepared a [Horned Rabbit, Walking Mushroom, and Acorn Stew] and [Salted Grilled Fish]!]

[You gained 400 EXP]

[You gained 200 EXP]

[You acquired the Title [Beginner Cook]!]

[Your Cooking Is improving!]

[Keep cooking more tasty meals that make others smile after eating them!]

Oh?! I got EXP from cooking?! What is this?!

"EEEEH?!"

I ended up crying a bit out of surprise after seeing this, but what was happening right in front of my eyes wasn't an illusion, it was real life, I had gained EXP by cooking...

"W-What's happening, Lady Dryad?!" asked Acorn. "Did the Pepperine make your stomach ache? There's a bathroom there!"

"N-No! That's not it!" I cried. "A-Actually, sorry for making a fuss, never mind me..."

The Guide Spirit spoke to me about stuff I had actually not bothered researching.

"Using Production-based Skills grants EXP after using the "System" linked to them, such as the Fishing System, the Cooking System, the Crafting System, Alchemy System, and so on..." said the Guide Spirit. "This is how those that main Chefs or Fishermen and more can level up after all... Now that I realize it, the farmer Job Class is... a bit broken in this area, the other players look down on it alone but isn't this amazing? If you're good at these things like you, you can just gain EXP by doing things that are not even killing!"

"Hehehe, see? The combination of Dryad and Farmer is amazing! I totally didn't do it on a whim," I said. "Y-Yeah!"

"You're terrible at lying, you obviously did it on a whim..." sighed the guide. "Nonetheless, you got very close to leveling up again, you just need to cook something else I guess..."

"I guess I can leave that for later then," I said.

For cooking I needed more ingredients, and even then, I had to concentrate on the game's quest now, not cooking or fishing, that was just some side fun I have.

"W-Well, now that we are done here, we should get back to what we were doing yesterday! Let's go meet my grandpa before going, is there any food left?" asked Acorn.

"N-No, we ate it all... Wait a second, I'll prepare him a small fish stew really quick! I know a simple recipe," I said.

At the end, I ended cooking for the Elder, and I added my own Green Magic as an experiment too. I ended up making the Catfish as a stew, while adding some acorns and more mushrooms. This time it was a smaller pot, so it was prepared quickly.

Ding!

[You have prepared a [Delicious Catfish, Walking Mushroom, and Acorn Stew]!]

[You gained 400 EXP]

[Your Race and Job Level has increased from Level 3 to Level 4!]

[Your Stats have increased]

[You gained Stat and Skill Points]

No way, I just leveled up... Ahh... Cooking was the best.

We moved the stew towards the room of the Elder, where we found him resting.

However, the smell of fish and mushrooms quickly woke him up in an instant, as he sat down in the bed and greeted us.

"W-What is this enchanting smell?! F-Fish?" he asked.

"Yeah fish! Elder, Lady Dryad made some catfish stew for you, it got mushrooms and acorns too." said Acorn. "I also got you some mint tea for your sore throat."

"Oh my, what a blessing from the heavens!"

The Elder seemed to have suddenly regained his youth as he began to eat the stew rapidly. The fish, mushrooms, acorns, and soup, all of them were eaten in an instant, he was really hungry! Had he only been eating acorns? For such big squirrels, that was really not enough.

He suddenly regained part of his vitality, and seemed way younger and... way more energetic as well! Was this how the Elder truly was?! He left me shocked.

"A-Ah... Amazing... The sickness effects almost dissipated completely... the miasma is still there but... I feel way better... Lady Dryad... Y-Your food is an excellent treatment to lessen the effects of the disease!" He said desperately. "I-I don't know what kind of power you use on it but... It doesn't take out the disease or something, but it certainly makes you feel better..."

"I-It does?! I never knew my cooking would do such a thing," I said in surprise. "I suppose I can cook for all the town after we go out! How about it? I actually caught a very big fish some time ago!"

"Oh, interesting! I-If you could give your food to the people, I would be forever grateful!"

And like that, my journey as a chef in a game world started! A healing chef!

Chapter 18: Green Magic Spells

It seemed that my cooking actually can... heal? Well not exactly heal but it could maintain the people's health! I never expected that, I mean, real life food didn't do that, right? Well, kind of, it could maintain people's health with calories, vitamins, proteins, and more... But it was still not the same as this, right? There was certainly something magical about this whole situation. I asked the Guide about this, and he quickly answered.

"I have never seen this happen before with a Quest," he said. "Nor I've seen this happen in a character that cooks... But I think your food gained some healing power because you used Green Magic on it, didn't you?"

"Oh, I did," I said.

"Well, that must be it!" He said. "You must have used some healing spell on it... I had not thought about it because actual people that pick a Job Class that can learn the Cooking Skill are very, very rare... Like, I think there are less than 40 in the whole server."

"W-What? That's a lot... Anyways, where do you get all this info from?" I wondered.

"I have some partial access to the database, and also I was loaded with basic info." said the Guide. "Nothing strange, all of us Guides are like this, but there is a large quantity of the players that completely ignores us, as they find us annoying, another part of them end up selling us as an item in a random shop."

"EH?! That can happen?" I wondered. "Why would they do that?"

"Well, they feel like they know everything because they read forums online or something," said the Guide. "They also dislike our presence... People are often not like you, Planta. You have a lot of patience."

"Haha, it comes with being a mother, I guess." I said. "I had to get used to my baby crying, getting hungry, having to breastfeed her, changing her poopy diapers, and more... So that really fortified my patience..."

"...Mothers are truly monsters of their own," said the Guide.

"What?!"

"N-Nothing!" He said. "A-Anyways, check which spell ended doing this to the food..."

"Okay..."

I had gained some new Spells after Green Magic was raised to Level 3, but I had not checked them yet, although I had used Wood Shield Before, and while I made the food I randomly conjured whatever "healing" spell I had, sprinkling it on the food like a spice.

[Plant Boost]

Cost: Varies.

Cooldown: 30 Seconds.

A Special Spell that every being connected to nature can easily conjure, with this Spell you're able to boost the growth of plants comparably to the amount of MP you utilize. However, there is a certain limit per day.

[Wood Shield]

Cost: 150 ~ 500 MP

Cooldown: 5 Seconds.

Gather your Magic and channel the connection with Nature that you have, as long as there are nearby trees within 20 meters of you, you're able to conjure a wooden shield to protect yourself from upcoming attacks. This shield durability is based in your INT and WIS Stats. The More MP you use, the larger the shield becomes.

[Seed Creation]

Cost: 200 ~ 1000 MP

Cooldown: 1 Hour.

Utilize your great connection with nature to plants to generate new seeds from the plants you have raised previously, these Seeds will have the lowest possible rarity rank, but will grow at twice the speed of other seeds.

Huh, all these spells seemed useful but none of them was the one that helped at cooking. If there wasn't any of the new ones, then the Spells that I ended up conjuring were... Verdant Recovery Light and most likely Accelerated Growth! Those two were supporting Skills that enhanced a target's regeneration and stats and growth, so there wasn't any other alternative than these two...

"I think it wasn't anything new, I used Verdant Recovery light and Accelerated Growth," I said.

"I-I see..."

The guide looked at the Elder and Acorn's Status, as he found they had a status that said "Satiated" and another that said: "Accelerated HP Recovery"

They seemed to last for a long time, not just a few minutes like the raw spells... I think they emerged because of the food. Well, I should check the stew then, there was still a bit left on the pot, maybe the item info was still there?

[Delicious Catfish, Walking Mushroom, and Acorn Stew (Rare Rank)]

A delicious stew cooked with love and care by a great cook using freshly caught Catfish, Walking Mushroom Caps of various colors, and Acorns, it has a delicious fishy flavor that is combined with the earthy flavor of the mushrooms and the nutty flavor of Acorns, making for a perfect combination of flavors converging together.

This Plate has been enhanced with magic and can increase the recovery of health and mana for 48 hours upon consumption, alongside increasing the growth speed and the resistance to negative status ailments.

Eat while it's still warm!

Recovers: 50 of Satiation and 200 HP, and MP.

I see! So everything in this game has its own status, it was kind of fun, wasn't it? This one stew got its own description and, just as I thought, it said that it can enhance and heal people! That was wonderful, wasn't it? With this we could really help the Squirrel-folk resist the disease while we searched for the items.

I am so happy... It meant that if I work hard, I won't see anyone dying... Hopefully.

In fact, we should make stew for everybody right now. I wanted to prioritize people's health while I could, to think that my cooking would be able to do something good for others... It only made me very happy.

Now, I should get to cooking. I guess I was going to make a massive stew using the giant fish I got! Well, I wouldn't use it all, but I'd chop it down into pieces! Meanwhile, I could also get some goat milk from Belle, so I can leave some cheese in the making.

"Let's cook something together, Acorn!" I said.

"B-But what about going to gather the materials?" He asked.

"We'll do that after everybody eats their fill!" I said. "Don't worry, we'll do it!"

"O-Okay then!" said Acorn. "Your cooking is really amazing, so I trust you!"

And like that, we moved towards Acorn's house again and I immediately asked him to take out Belle's milk. Acorn was very nervous while Belle looked at him with her menacing goat eyes. For an instant he couldn't really grab her tits because he was too scared of getting attacked.

"Belle, allow Acorn to take some milk."

"Meee!"

Belle let Acorn do it as she licked his face, it seemed she was friendlier than he thought she was. At the end, Acorn gained the courage and began forcing her milk out. The white-colored liquid began to quickly come out of her tit, and fell over a wooden bucket.

"Do that for a few minutes while I am busy here, okay?" I asked.

"O-Okay! I got it..." said Acorn nervously.

I moved to the kitchen as the giant blue Pike was atop the table, I took out my washed knife and quickly began butchering it out. I slit open the stomach with a single slice and let out all the innards, and after that, I began cutting down on the fatty meat directly, it was almost as big as a Tuna, so they could be cut down into large chunks of pure meat, the bones of the Pike were very big as well, so it was easy to detect them.

Like that, I ended up piling dozens of chunks with a large bone piece attached to them. I also cut the entire head into four chunks and added them to the stew to add a lot of flavor. Lastly, I added the shrooms, acorns, and the spices. Pepperine was the way to go as well, I guess it was the same as the others. I wished we could have potatoes, carrots, and other things too, but maybe I could plant some or something one of these days.

I left the large pot boiling. There was more meat to work with, of course, I wasn't going to just leave it at that. I decided to cut steak-shaped slices of the pike's meat, and poured some salt on them, and a few other spices and left these steaks resting for now. After the stew was almost ready, I would fry them over a pan using some acorn oil.

"How is the milk extraction going?" I asked.

"G-Good, I think I got a few liters now..." He said.

"Nice, now that's enough," I said. I looked at Belle who was eating a big pile of grass I picked for her beforehand. Taking milk out of her takes out her Satiating, but that was easily resolved by letting her eat grass while milk was taken away.

That way, Acorn gathered around 8 liters of goat milk while she still had satiation above 60! And it was slowly increasing as well.

"Excellent! Now, want me to teach you how to make goat milk cheese? It is very tasty and goes well with bread—Ah well, you guys don't get bread." I asked.

"Y-You know how to make goat milk cheese, Lady Dryad?" asked Acorn. "It is impressive how much you know about everything!"

"Ahaha... Well, I guess," I said.

I used to live in the countryside with various farm animals, so I naturally learned how to make cheese out of cow, sheep, and goat milk.

Now it was time to prepare cheese and even butter while we were at it! It was a good thing to do as the stew boiled~!

Chapter 19: Grinding EXP By Cooking?!

While the large pot of stew currently boiled in its place, I decided to move into another recipe and make some cheese. Of course, making cheese was not something instantaneous, it took a lot of days for it to get ready, and we also needed specific bacteria for it, so I was mostly trying it out for now to see if it works. This game was very realistic, but I don't know if they added cheese-making mechanics into it, so it was worth a try!

First of all, I decided to filter the milk out of any crumbs it might have, and then, I put it to boil, for a few minutes until it boiled. After that, the goat milk was going to be left resting and that was where you're supposed to cover it with this bacteria, which separated the proteins of the milk and other things. The idea was to leave it until the goat milk slowly separated from the liquid and the solid, and this solid part was what was concentrated into making some cheese.

For now, I left a few liters boiling for cheese, while the rest was boiled in a smaller pot so we could drink it with some tea later, it must be pretty good just like that! As I waited for the milk, I moved towards the stew and sprinkled it with my magic. The spells that I used were Verdant Recovery Light and Accelerated Growth! That was more than enough to make the food glow with a mystical color. After that, we sat down over the table as we discussed a few things about our journey and where we should go after this was done. However, the stew was getting ready, so our discussion was interrupted midway through.

"Lady Planta, I think the stew is ready!" said Acorn.

"I know! Let's turn off the fire then," I said.

When the stew was done, I took out the steaks of Pike I had saved and began to roast them over a pan with some Acorn oil, which was good enough to fry these thick chunks of meat shaped as steaks.

"Uwah, that smells so nice!" said Acorn.

"Acorn you already ate before, this is for the rest of the people, remember that!" I said.

"I-I know that!" He said, a bit embarrassed that he let himself get so tempted by the food.

When the steaks were done, we quickly served them in a small plate and then the stew in a larger wooden plate, and we began to distribute it around all the houses, it was convenient that I was able to make the plates and they instantly turned into a singular item, so I stored them all inside my Inventory and then just had to take them out to distribute them to the people.

Many of the Squirrel-folk had been eating just acorns lately because they couldn't even wake up to cook anything for themselves, and they were also not that good at hunting either, so they had nothing to eat other than water and dry acorns, which perhaps wasn't the best for people that were not really like normal squirrels.

There were a lot of families in quarantine inside their homes, and we entered them leisurely, as we distributed the plates and made them eat the stew and the steaks. Some seemed a bit dizzy and we didn't even know if they should eat or they might throw up. Luckily it turned out to be a pointless concern because these Squirrel-folk ate happily and at the end, they didn't throw up anything, so it was all good and dandy!

"After this, it seems everybody ate a lot and are pretty happy, aren't they?" I wondered.

"Y-Yeah, it's all thanks to you, Lady Planta, everybody feels way better and might be able to resist the disease a bit better..." sighed Acorn. "It really means a lot what you've done!"

"Ah, don't worry about it, it is nothing," I said with a smile.

I looked at the System windows showing what I had earned.

Ding!

[You have prepared a [Blue Spike Stew with Walking Mushroom and Acorns]!]

[You have prepared [Blue Spike Steak Fried On Acorn Oil]!]

[You gained 450 EXP]

[You gained 200 EXP]

It seemed that they gave me all some EXP, the steaks were various, but they all counted as the same food preparation interestingly enough. And with that, I had prepared even more food and gained some EXP in the process! Like this I didn't even need to fight anymore, I could just continue cooking and... No, wait... I still needed to hunt monsters for food, fishing is also like... technically hunting monsters, fish monsters at that. So... Ah, I guess I was not really escaping this at all, aren't I? Yeah, it was still pretty much the same! I still needed to hunt monsters and other things to gain materials and cook them.

Damn... Oh well, that was how life is, you couldn't really expect it to be all made, you sometimes still had to keep working hard and everything else. Even in a game! I just had to deal with it, and just think of these monsters as food... Ah, I guess this game was helping me surpass this fear I had from taking another animal's life better than my actual real life. I was about to continue our journey with Acorn, but suddenly, the alarm clock sounded within the game settings. It was possible to put an alarm clock in-game too, so when a certain time came, you could log out.

Acorn was inside of the Elder's home as of now. I was watching him preparing some concoctions he wanted to make to help us out on our journey, but now that I have to leave, I will have to sadly leave him behind for a few hours.

"Sorry Acorn, I must go do something right now, can you wait a few hours? I promise I'll come back as early as I can!" I said.

"O-Oh! Sure, I am busy here so don't worry, whenever you come back the potions should be ready then!" said Acorn. "Please, take care, Lady Dryad!"

"Thank you! You too!" I said.

I quickly logged out and then took the VR Helmet out of my head. That thing could get a bit hot sometimes, and when you took it out after playing for a few hours, your head got all heavy.

Ah! I forgot something important while I was in the game. I needed to research my daughter's player avatar... I knew her name... It was Reaper? Dark

Reaper, I think? Well, I remember that the Guide said that he could research players as long as he had the names.

I should do that later though. I had to go make lunch now. Today I'll make croquets and... Hm, what else should I add? Perhaps mashed potatoes? That sounded nice... I could also make some salad and so on, and that should do it! Even though Mark was coming to eat, I told him that I wasn't really going to cook anything too fancy, so I hope he didn't expect a big fancy dinner or something.

I walked outside my room as I found my daughter and her friend inside my daughter's room. The two girls were sitting over the bed while resting with these helmets on, they seemed too peaceful, as if they were sleeping, Full Dive VR was really something else... I remembered that my husband always dreamed of Full Dive VR like in his fantasy novels like SAO, but that never became a reality while he was still alive, sadly... It only was around four years after he passed away that it finally became true.

I smiled sadly.

I wish... you could be here to enjoy one of your dreams, dear.

It truly became real and... It was as fantastic as you always thought it would be. I remembered that he always followed the Twitter of all these big game companies to see how the progress of Virtual Reality continued, but aside from head-set VR, there wasn't the "true VR" that he had seen from his novels and anime. However, who would have known that the true VR would become a reality but not by any of these big gaming companies but by another completely different and new company named Nexus Corporations... It wasn't Sony, nor Nintendo, nor Microsoft, and certainly it wasn't Valve.

Now all these old games based in the old VR and the game console had received a pummeling hit in the market, their games were not selling as much as before and most of their clients all moved to Full Dive VR, buying Nexus Corporations products and even games they themselves made, such as Brand New Fantasy Online, their most popular game so far.

These other gaming companies have announced that they have managed to make some contracts with this corporation and they'll produce games for their console, but it seems that they have yet to even be capable of replicating their consoles... Nintendo was the only one of them that was refusing to embrace Full Dive VR and it was still producing games on their Nintendo Switch V2...

Nintendo would always stick to old school, even now when they're earning less than 10% of what they used to earn five years ago.

Full Dive VR has really hit the gaming market pretty hard... I was never an addict for games, but my cousins always brought their games to my house when I was a little girl, and my husband also had a big collection of gaming consoles and games, which he loved to play, so I kind of know all of that, he also made me play with him and I eventually liked a lot of the games, sometimes I ended playing some all by myself, but I enjoyed them the most when we played cooperative games. I suppose Nintendo was still pretty good with those sorts of games, most of my memories were about playing such games with him.

Sigh... I miss him.

Now all his gaming consoles were collecting dust, and so were his video games too, but I couldn't really bring myself to throw them or sell them, they're... the treasures of my husband, I would never do such a thing. All of his anime figures and everything else... I kept them inside of his room and cleaned them once a week. In the future, I was going to give it all to Elena and leave it up to her to decide what she wanted to do with them, but I was sure that she'll take care of her father's collection. She loved him a lot after all, and always played games and watched anime with him.

... Anyways! I needed to get ready and prepare some lunch for my precious little princess and her friend, and Mark too, my good friend from work, which I inadvertently invited to eat with us... I was a bit dummy there, but he seemed to be happy to come, so it was a good ending.

I took out the croquets from the freezer, they were as fresh as always. I eyed the appliance with a smile. This freezer was the latest generation one and possessed a technology that seemed to be able to neutralize bacteria inside, which makes it possible for food to not rot for a while, these croquets were as fresh as yesterday, even more as I wrapped them with plastic foil. This freezer was also made by Nexus Corp, they're the biggest corporation as of now, even beating Sony, Samsung, and Android, and they make most of the "Next Gen" technology, although it didn't have the most affordable prices, they're not completely expensive that only the rich can afford.

I took out some fresh potatoes and began to peel them nicely, after that, I cut them into medium-sized chunks and began to boil them in a pot to make mashed potatoes. Meanwhile, the croquets were covered in flour and a bit of

more spices and salt, and then, I left the oil to heat up in order to deep fry them. While doing that, I cut some onions, lettuce, and tomato to make a nice and fresh salad, and of course, we couldn't forget the lemon!

Chapter 20: A Wandering Ent

After being asked by Elayne to come eat lunch with her and her family, Mark hurriedly moved back home to prepare. He took a warm bath and washed himself well enough, after that, he changed clothes into some casual attire that made him look good, then he shaved and put on some perfume as well... He was pretty much ready by now.

He took out a fine wine from the storage room inside of his apartment, where he stored food and wine, and he took the most high-quality bottle he could find, one that cost hundreds of Canadian dollars. He would have never drunk it in such a casual situation as of now, and he actually wanted to save it for New years or Christmas, but he really wanted to use it now to enjoy this special day with Elayne as much as possible.

Mark lived alone inside of his apartment, which was rather close to the market where he worked as the manager or "boss" as they called him, although he didn't really own anything there. But he did decide who he would hire or even get someone fired as well, so every coworker was always forcefully nice to him due to his position, and because of that he could never make true friends. Everyone was always just interested in his position.

But when he contracted Elayne almost five years ago, things changed for his life. At first he had pitied the woman because her husband had recently passed away due to terminal cancer, and although she was left with some money, that would certainly not be enough to maintain her and also pay the bills. The bill included her daughter's high school, which was quite an expensive and prestigious one, and then there was the need to save money for her college... Due to that he ended up hiring her and looked to see how she would work.

He had found her attractive from the get-go, but there were also many pretty women in his work, and most of them were just nice with him because he was the boss. Some had even attempted to seduce him in very direct ways, which only made Mark feel like people were only interested in him due to his position... Of course, those women were later on fired for misconduct.

However, Elayne was truly different, she was gentle and nice, and although Mark thought she was like that out of interest like every woman he had met in the work, he later realized she was simply put... innately nice. He had seen her acting nice with everyone, not only for the first months to make up appearances, but she kept being nice with everyone for years, and years... five years have already passed, and she was still the same, with a gentle nature, a nice personality, a motherly and lovely smile and... honestly, she was way too nice for her own good, and Mark even began to worry that someone would take advantage of her personality.

Without realizing it, all this time he had been slowly falling for her more and more, until this year, where he had finally kind of realized his feelings for her, and had been thinking on ways to approach her more. The two were in a friendly relationship for a long while, so he didn't know if Elayne had any feelings for him. But the thing about her husband was something big, it wasn't realistic to think that she would develop feelings for him when she was married for over ten years with her husband before he passed away, and even had a daughter with him.

Because of this, he always kept himself prudent with her, and didn't want to abuse his position to force her into doing something unwilling either... He was also a good and gentle man, as good as a Canadian man can get. His parents had taught him well about life, and he wasn't someone that abused his position to get what he wanted but used hard work to reach the position where he was now.

He also was perhaps just as nice as Elayne, or perhaps a bit less, but he and Elayne really had matching personalities in various things, and the other coworkers all knew that he was in love with her. Whereas Elayne seemed always oblivious about these things because she believed herself to be an unattractive old woman most of the time, probably thinking that because of having a daughter, she had already stopped being attractive... Well, she still believed herself to look nice and not like a grandma or something, but she never thought too deeply about others watching her intensively.

Mark just wanted to get a nice relationship, he had been living alone for way too long, and the creeping of old age was slowly approaching, he didn't wanted to reach 40 while still being single and a virgin, and although he might had such opportunities in the past, all of them would be fleeting moments with women that were not really interested on him romantically, and he really wanted his first time to be special.

However, he really didn't thought much about sex but more about love. He just wanted someone to be at his side, to hug him when he needed, to kiss him and comfort him when there was nobody else, and to simply accompany him through the long journey of life itself, which was always filled with arduous challenges.

Mark sighed. He just wanted the time to hurry up so he could go meet her... There were still two hours left before the meeting, but he was already very nervous. The young man didn't know what he would say when they met or what they would talk about after all, so he was looking forward to seeing what he would do...

"Sigh... I am really nervous, maybe I should relax a little bit and play something."

The man sat down over his bed and put on his VR helmet, quickly logging in. The first thing he did was put on an alarm clock for the hour he should go out back to his work where Elayne said she would meet him.

And then, he clicked on the big logo saying; "Brand New Fantasy Online" and logged in with his freshly made account around a week ago. He had recently bought the game online when it was finally on stock again. Since its launch that the game and the VR Helmet had been selling like hot cakes and people were having a very hard time buying it because it was always out of stock, this incident reminded Mark of the times the PS5 came out, and how it was never on stock or when it was, it only lasted a few minutes at most.

There were also a lot of scalpers, people buying the console and the games en masse and reselling them at insane prices that desperate people end up buying anyways. But Mark wasn't someone that would buy from a scalper, he had his principles, so he waited patiently all this time until he could finally get his hands into the products.

When he opened his eyes again, he found himself in the middle of a small forest. His entire body was covered in wood, branches, and leaves, and his head was covered in the large skull of a goat, with broken horns and glowing red eyes beneath the eye sockets of the skull, his body was around two meters big, and his arms and legs were as thick as logs, while he had large hands with sharp wooden claws. In the middle of his chest, there was a large glowing, red-colored jewel, overflowing the rest of his body with Mana.

"Ah, back again... Hm, this body is as uncomfortable as always... Ah, well, I've gotten used to it..." He sighed. "I really liked the Ents in Lord of the Rings, but I really shouldn't have chosen this race on a whim... Now I have to delete all my progress if I want to create a new character or just stay as an Ent... I read in a forum that it can eventually evolve to shape its body into something like a human... I really hope so." He thought internally, moving his enormous and cracking body covered in wood.

Mark had made himself into an Ent, a Race of tree people. They were similar to Dryads in that they were considered the spirits of the forest, but just like Dryads being a female-only Race, Ents were a male-only Race that only males could pick.

He was a big fan of the Lord of the Ring books and had chosen this Race on a whim because he wanted to see what it felt like to be a tree man, and it was honestly a bit annoying, his body was very heavy and slow, and it had some difficulties in having proper detection abilities.

Ents were not liked by any player, and there were less than ten of them all around the entire game composed of millions of players, this was because they were too slow, and had way too many weaknesses outside of forests. In a game that was dedicated to exploration of new areas, traveling across savannas, deserts, the sea, or even the sky was expected, an Ent won't be able to be as strong in such places.

However, he had progressed quite a lot, and he really liked the bonuses he got by being an Ent. Although it also had many weaknesses, its abilities that benefited him by being in the forest were amazing. Not to mention that his physical defenses were also quite insane, coupled with an amazing regeneration of both HP and MP and also great Magic such as Green Magic? He planned to stay in this Race and embrace it, becoming one of its players to represent it.

He was already midway through the levels, his Race Level and Job Class Level were both at Level 12, and he was slowly leveling up more around the "Forest of Ents" which was said to be close to the Forest of Beginnings where Dryads spawned. Dryads were just as rare as Ents, so he hadn't met any player since he started playing, but he was fine with just being with himself as he played this game to mostly relax and leave out his stress.

Although his Class was quite... conflicting with his Race, he had still been training it, and its abilities were pretty interesting to play around with, but it

was still a very unusual class. Yes, the class he had chosen was one that was not picked by many either. And no it wasn't anything generic like warriors, mages, or necromancers, the two to three job class-types chosen by literally every player.

His Job Class was...

"Spirit Beast of Wind, come."

FLASH!

Suddenly, he conjured a special Skill, as his Mana materialized into a creature. A large bird made of golden and green light emerged, it resembled a one-meter-big hawk, and it now sat over his head.

"CRYAA!"

The hawk cried loudly, making a fuss. This was his Spirit Beast of Wind, one of the Summons of the complicated and underwhelming Job Class named "Druids".

"Scout the area around, this forest is way too small, I think we should move out... Thankfully there are a lot of forests in this area, and I am strong even outside of it mostly, so leveling shouldn't be hard..." He thought as he walked around the forest as his Beast Spirit quickly flapped its wings and flew as if it were the wind itself.

FLAAAASH!

Mark looked into the distance with a smile as he continued walking through the forest, until he saw what seemed to be a dark beast lurking around, in the shape of a tiger...

"Another miasma beast?" He wondered. "Spirit Beast of Earth, come."

FLASH!

Mark quickly summoned another Spirit Beast, as the ground in front of him gathered together and formed into a three-meter-big bear made of stone!

"GROOARR!"

