


Another World Survival

Min-maxing
my Support and
Summoning
Magic

Author: Yokotsuka Tsukasa

Illustrator: Manyako



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7

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World Tree Resident
Rushia

1st Year - High School Student
Kazuhisa Kaya

1st Year - Middle School Student
Mia Takamiya

3rd Year - Middle School Student
Arisu Shimozono

3rd Year - Middle School Student
Tamaki Ryuki



"It's alright, don't worry.
Everything is going to be alright..."

"Rushia..."

World Tree's Shrine Maiden

Leen

1st High School Student

Shiki Yukariko

"An army of
monsters has reached
the World Tree."





"The joy, the fulfillment
as a woman——"

"I never imagined I would
experience a day like this."

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ANOTHER WORLD SURVIVAL

MIN-MAXING MY SUPPORT AND
SUMMONING MAGIC

STORY BY YOKOTSUKA TSUKASA

ART BY MANYAKO



Chapter 154: A Desperate Infiltration Mission

I was awakened by a knocking noise coming from the wall.

Wait... What time is it? It's still bright outside; what was I doing?

Still in a daze from my slumber, I collected my thoughts and tried to recall how I'd ended up in this particular location.

Oh, now I remember. It's been four days since I was summoned to another world, and I'm in a corner of the World Tree Forest on the second floor of a cottage I summoned that is hidden in the shade of a huge tree. This morning, we played cat and mouse with Azagralith on the school mountain, and we barely made it back to the World Tree in time. After that, we conquered the Storm Temple of Gal Yass. Then, the exhaustion of having such an eventful day took over, and I had a short nap.

Having successfully recalled the day's previous events, I sat up in bed, then glanced over at the latticed window. A hawk caught my eye, perched on the windowsill.

Is that Leen-san's familiar?

"We want to discuss our next move. Could you come over?"

"Ah, yes, understood."

The day was already fading; I wondered what Arisu and the others were doing now, and headed downstairs to the first floor to find out. There, in the middle of the living room, three girls were sleeping, their bodies huddled close together.

They sure are fast asleep.

"Hey," I muttered, summoning a sheet and draping it over them, "You guys are going to catch a cold."

After that, I scribbled a note and then left the cottage. Soon, the familiar hawk who'd been sitting on my windowsill had landed next to me.

"Is it okay if it's just me?"

"It's just a briefing for now." The hawk said, spreading its wings.

A transfer door opened, and moments later, a pale blue light enveloped my body.

※ ※ ※

In the hollow of the tree where Leen resided, Rushia was already waiting. Just a few hours ago, she had collapsed after firing a barrage of powerful magic spells, but now her complexion looked much better. A good rest must have relieved her fatigue.

"I apologize for the inconvenience earlier," she said.

"It's okay. Thanks to you, Rushia, we were able to come to a conclusion quickly. We were able to protect our elite forces because of it."

"You could say we were lucky then."

I sat down on a cushion, facing Leen.

The battles would continue in the coming days, I knew, and the people of this world had no other way to survive but to keep winning. It could be said that Rushia's efforts had raised our hopes a bit for the days ahead.

"Let's get right to the point," Rushia declared, adjusting her position so that she was sitting beside me. "We've hit a dead end in our quest to conquer the Underground Temple of Rown. We need your help."

"Please fill me in. I've heard that there's a mist trap around the Underground Temple of Rown that distorts one's senses."

Rushia nodded. "We managed to break through it with a compass and a radio, but the current problem is the monsters guarding the entrance to the underground cavern."

By “underground cavern” I knew Rushia was referring to the huge cave where the Underground Temple of Rown was located.

“How many enemies are we talking about?” I asked.

“There is an army of arachnae, about a thousand of them. We’ve also confirmed the presence of several divine-class soldiers.”

That’s a pretty formidable force.

“So, several Legend Arachnae?”

“Yes, and there are also a significant number of mages. To make things worse, arachnae excel at coordinated attacks.”

If multiple Legend Arachnae come at us together, even with all our combined strength, it would be difficult to defeat them. And if the army of arachnae work together and plan their attack...

Even if all the elite troops, advanced division members, and regular troops sent to the Underground Temple of Rown fought their hardest, there would still be significant casualties.

We might not necessarily lose, but the damage would be immense, I thought.

“So,” Leen cut in, “I’ve come up with a plan. The main force will create a diversion for the arachnae, while a covert team will infiltrate through a secret passage to reclaim the Underground Tree of Rown, which is at the heart of the temple.” Leen looked at Rushia. “Rushia, with your abilities, you should be able to harness the divine power of the Underground Tree of Rown, purify the land, and defeat the arachnae. Currently, none of the Four Heavenly Kings are in this area.”

“That is correct, Leen. And while I can’t suppress monsters stronger than divine class, I can deal with opponents up to that level by borrowing the divine power of the Underground Tree.”

I blinked in surprise at their conversation. *Wait, hold on. Does that mean...?*

I’d heard it said that the surface of the Underground Temple of Rown had once been a lush forest, much the same as the prosperous elven kingdom where Rushia had once lived as a princess.

“Leen-san... Could it be that the place where the Underground Temple of Rown is located is...?”

“Yes. That land was once home to Rushia’s kingdom.”

The usually stoic girl from the fallen kingdom nodded a little more firmly than usual, and when she spoke, her eyes seemed to boil with emotion. “Inside the Underground Temple of Rown, no transfer gates can be opened. It serves as a protective measure against external threats, but it’s quite the hindrance now that we’re on the offensive.” Pausing for a moment, Rushia pulled out two rings. “In addition, only the royal family can use the secret passage, which is inaccessible unless you wear a ring like these. There are only two left now.”

“So, you’re saying—”

“Yes. If we proceed with this plan, only two of us—that is, me and one other—will be able to infiltrate the Underground Temple of Rown.”

I finally understood. *Since Rushia is the only one who can harness the divine power of the Underground Tree, she’s indispensable.*

Once inside, there would surely be a huge number of monsters. We’d either have to sneak past them or kill them one by one to get to the enemy’s core.

This mission was reckless indeed, I thought, shaking my head.

“Isn’t there another hidden passage besides the one you mentioned?”

“I am not aware of any,” Rushia replied firmly.

“Then do you think this plan could work?”

“I believe that if it’s just the two of us, it’s possible,” she declared.

I looked deep into Rushia’s ruby eyes. She stared back at me without blinking.

“It has to be you, Kazu. Considering our limited fighting power, without your Summoning Magic to strengthen our forces... That said, this is an extremely dangerous mission. You have the right to refuse.”

“I’ll go,” I said, voice strong with determination. Rushia had already made up her mind, and she was one of my irreplaceable comrades. “It’s fine. To ensure the success of this mission, I must be the one to go. Otherwise, this continent

may not last another day. Plus, even if I *do* have the right to refuse, what would be the point?”

Leen gave me a wry smile. “That’s true.”

“You also believe that this is the best strategy, don’t you, Leen?”

“I can confidently say that given the current situation, there’s no strategy with a higher chance of success,” she replied, nodding.

“If we hadn’t returned from the school mountain, would it have been possible to find a replacement?”

“We would have sent one of Rushia’s royal relatives, accompanied by another. However, that royal relative is an elderly woman with no combat abilities.”

Oh. That would have been a really pointless suicide mission...

“No matter the cost, we must win. In that case, a frontal attack will have to be carried out simultaneously to draw the arachnae’s attention.”

“So, without Rushia and me working together, there’s little hope of success.”

It feels strange, talking about us like that, but...

“In the case of a direct confrontation, a very tough battle was expected. Though of course it wasn’t guaranteed that the monsters would fortify the entrance to the Underground Temple.”

It seemed that the worst-case scenario Leen and her team had come up with was being attacked by the enemy first. Which would explain why she was playing her trump card—us.

“About Arisu and the others... If possible, could you let them rest for this operation? Exclude them from the frontline troops as well, I mean.”

“Are they tired?”

“Yes, quite a bit. Of course, if we fail, then...”

I trailed off, my mind focusing back on the mission. According to Rushia, if the situation hadn’t changed by the time an hour had passed after we’d infiltrated the Underground Temple through the secret entrance, then we’d have failed.

She'd said the whole thing shouldn't take us more than twenty minutes without any interference.

Hmm. There will definitely be interference though, so an hour seems short.

"The location is to the west of here, but there's not much time before night falls. Fighting the arachne army in the dark would be extremely disadvantageous."

Indeed, if we were going to challenge those spider humanoids, it was best to do so in daylight.

"Then Kazu, please be careful," Rushia said as she took my hand.

It was warm.

※ ※ ※

After leaving Leen's place and getting a backpack full of equipment from Sumire, who told us to be careful, Rushia and I went to the tree hollow that had the transfer gate.

"Are you sure you don't want to inform Arisu and the others?" she asked.

"I left a note. Plus, they were sleeping soundly, and I want them to rest as much as they can."

After a moment of confusion, Rushia nodded. "Understood. If that's what you've decided, Kazu. But they'll be angry."

"Then I'll apologize. I promise I'll come back and make amends."

That said, we stepped into the transfer gate, both of us determined to succeed in our mission.

The beastman soldier standing by began to sing loudly, and soon our consciousnesses faded, our bodies transporting to a distant land. To Rushia's homeland, a land scarred by the tragic remnants of the past.

Chapter 155: Ninja Warriors

Rushia and I found ourselves in a barren wasteland shrouded in mist. It was the kind of place where not a single blade of grass dared to grow.

Beside me, Rushia's shoulders slumped in dismay.

"Rushia," I murmured.

I instinctively reached out to grasp her left hand with my right, and before I knew it, I was holding her. I couldn't bear to see her like this.

"I'm sorry," Rushia whispered, her voice tinged with confusion. "I just... didn't expect this."

"We can't dwell on it now," I replied, trying to sound more confident than I felt. "We have a mission."

I made my way forward, determinedly pulling Rushia along behind me. We'd only taken a few steps when a soldier emerged from the mist, pointing to a section of a sudden cliff face.

"This way," he declared.

"Is this the entrance to the infiltration route?" I asked.

"No," he replied. "Once you climb this wall, the Coortub team will launch a diversionary attack. You'll have to break through the enemy lines and reach the infiltration route from there."

Coortub...? Ah, the elite squad. I understand.

"Summon Griffon!" I shouted, and a majestic creature, half lion and half eagle, appeared before us. It was massive, easily over five meters long.

I climbed on and Rushia followed, wrapping her arms around me. The soft pressure of her chest against my back made my heart race, but I forced myself to ignore it as the griffon launched into the air and soared into the misty sky.

Soon, we reached the top of the cliff, and the sounds of clashing swords and battle cries filled our ears. Screams of rage, cries of pain, and roars of triumph echoed around us.

Somewhere ahead, a fierce battle was clearly raging. But the dense fog made it impossible to determine its exact location.

“Once we’re past the cliff, we should dismount from the griffon,” Rushia suggested. “I can guide us from the ground.”

“Even if the forest disappears?”

“I know this land. I know its soil.”

I nodded, deciding to trust her.

Seconds later, the griffin landed at the edge of a steep cliff, and I used a spell to turn the summoned creature back into MP. Meanwhile, Rushia picked up some of the earth at our feet and tasted it.

“This way,” she declared, confidently heading to our left.

She can tell the direction from the taste of the soul? I wondered. *Is it because she’s an elf? Or maybe it’s some special kind of skill she was trained to use since she was a member of the royal family?*

I hurried after Rushia, debating whether to ask her. In the end, I decided to stay silent—her expression had been so grim ever since we arrived. She looked more serious than I’d ever seen her before.

As I searched for the right words, a clear voice interrupted my thoughts. It had a distinct, formal tone, and came from a young man dressed in ninja attire who had just emerged from the mist.

“Oh, it’s Kazu-dono, I see.”

“Yuuki-senpai. Good to see you, as always.”

“Indeed. We’ve been waiting for reinforcements. It’s good to see you doing well, Kazu-kun. By the way, about the note you gave to Mia...”

“There’s a lot I want to discuss with you, Senpai, but first, I’d like to thank you for the gasoline.”

Yuuki mumbled something incoherent and started whistling to change the subject.

“You don’t have to worry—I’m not holding a grudge. In fact, I owe you my life.”

“Ah, well, when you put it that way...”

“Oh? What’re you guys talking about?” A female voice asked from behind Yuuki, causing the fearless ninja to visibly jump.

It was Keiko, Yuuki’s senpai and fiancée.

“Th-There’s nothing to discuss!” Yuuki stuttered, clearly flustered. “Come, Kazu-dono, Rushia-san! Let’s continue at once!”

“Oh my, Yuu-kun seems nervous. Kazu-kun, tell me what this is all about later, okay?”

Keiko, her hands stained with the blue blood of a monster, flashed me a bright smile. Overwhelmed by her presence, I could only reply, “Okay.”

The look that Yuuki sent me seemed slightly annoyed, but I’d felt I had no other choice. Even I couldn’t stand up to Keiko.





“Currently, several large monsters are lurking near the entrance to the hidden infiltration route,” Yuuki reported.

“Does that mean that they’ve discovered the entrance?” I asked.

“That *is* a possibility, but—”

Rushia raised her hand, cutting him short. “I think that’s unlikely.”

“Could those monsters be the Crimson Turtles?”

Yuuki looked thoughtful. “The local soldiers mentioned seeing something like that. They described the beasts as massive turtles, over five meters long.”

“In that case, there’s no problem,” Rushia said confidently. “Our kingdom deliberately built the entrance to the infiltration route in the Crimson Turtles’ habitat.”

According to Rushia, although Crimson Turtles were territorial, they were gentle monsters that didn’t usually disobey anyone’s orders. They had been summoned by the elves a long time ago and had decided to settle down in this land on their own, and weren’t dangerous unless provoked.

“There are monsters like that here?” I asked.

“Using the term ‘monster’ makes it a bit confusing,” Rushia admitted. “Basically, they’re more like familiars. They took a liking to the mana in this land, however, and stayed even after their summoners left.”

So, they were brought here as part of a summoning experiment, huh? I didn’t know ritual summoning was actually a thing.

“So, if you’re with us, Rushia, we can handle the Crimson Turtles?” Keiko asked.

“If by ‘handle’ you mean ‘crush them with Fire Magic’,” Rushia replied, her tone innocent.

Damn, she took her literally, I thought as Keiko chuckled softly.

“I think Keiko meant to ask if there’s a way for an elven royal like you to control them,” I clarified.

“While the royals who once resided in this land may have known such magic, I...” Rushia trailed off.

Well, Rushia isn’t exactly your typical royal. Fortunately, she at least seems to know how to control the Underground Tree of Rown.

“In that case, it’s our turn to shine,” Yuuki declared.

The two ninjas then offered to create a distraction for us. I didn’t want to use up my MP here, so taking them up on their offer seemed like the best option.

“Just don’t overdo it,” I warned.

“Of course! For elite ninjas like us, distracting a lumbering monster is a breeze!”

“That’s right! And Yuu-kun has always wanted to do the whole ‘Leave this to me and go ahead’ thing,” Keiko teased.

I gave Yuuki a skeptical look, to which he responded with a playful hip sway and an “Oh my!”

“That’s creepy,” I said with a shiver. “You’re acting like Mia.”

“Don’t you dare mock my sister!” he retorted.

“Really? You’re getting defensive now?” I sighed.

Suddenly I remembered something. Reaching for my backpack, I pulled out a clay-like package that contained plastic explosives.

“Rushia’s Fire Magic will be more useful to us, so please take these,” I offered.

“Ah, that will be helpful,” Yuuki said, gratefully accepting the explosives.

The four of us stopped at the entrance to the fog-covered valley. Beyond it lay the Crimson Turtles’ habitat and the secret entrance we sought.

“Crimson Turtles breathe fire, so be careful,” Rushia warned.

She cast a High Resist Fire spell on all of us. It wouldn’t last long, but it should be enough for a quick distraction and breakthrough.

“We’ll attack in thirty seconds,” Yuuki instructed, and with that, he and Keiko dashed into the valley.

Soon after, the roar of a beast came from the distance, and a gust of wind howled by, blowing away the fog. Seconds later, a wave of heat washed over us.

“Is this the aftermath of its breath?” I asked. “I hope they’re okay...”

Well, I can’t really imagine those two losing...

“Thirty seconds have passed.”

I snapped back to reality at Rushia’s words. “Let’s go then,” I replied.

I cast Haste and launched forward. The two of us charged into the valley, straight into the stretch of land still being swept by the hot winds.

Chapter 156: The Underground Temple of Rown - Part 1

In a round bowl-like space shaped like a mortar, four huge red monsters were rampaging around. They were Crimson Turtles, turtle-shaped monsters that were over five meters long.

Between these giant turtles ran Yuuki and Keiko. As they nimbly skirted by the monsters, explosions erupted from various parts of the Crimson Turtles' shells.

Could those explosions be from the plastic explosives I gave them? I wondered.

Regardless, they seemed to have little effect on the massive turtles. It was enough to infuriate the monsters though, and they began to relentlessly pursue the two ninjas.

This's our chance. We have to act now.

"Where is the entrance?" I asked Rushia.

"On the other side of the plaza," she replied.

So, we need to cut through the chaos to get there, I pondered. *But what would be the best approach to doing that?*

Coming to a decision, I determinedly summoned my familiar.

"Summon Familiar: Phantom Wolf King, Sha-lau."

A giant silver wolf appeared, and Rushia and I quickly jumped onto its back, clutching its thick fur.

"Cut straight through for us," I ordered.

"Leave it to me," the Phantom Wolf King replied, then dashed off as fast as lightning.

Rushia and I held on desperately to the familiar, but things quickly grew grim. We were just about to be thrown off when the Phantom Wolf King stopped abruptly, sending the two of us flying forward. I managed to grab Rushia's hand just before she thumped to the ground, and we clung to each other as we rolled off the wolf's back.

Seconds later, the two of us slammed into the earth. I groaned at the force of the impact, then realized that my face had ended up buried in Rushia's chest.

I'll apologize for that later...

"Ouch," I grunted aloud. "Rushia, are you okay?"

"Yes, thank you, Kazu."

Fighting the depraved desire to remain wrapped in her warmth, I stood and offered Rushia a hand and helped her to her feet, then looked over at two of the Crimson Turtles. They seemed to glance in our direction, but just then...

"Over here!"

"Hey, hey! If you get distracted, you'll get blown up!"

The two ninjas quickly attacked, drawing the monster's attention back before it strayed too long.

This is our moment.

I turned to what looked like a mere rock face in front of us. "Rushia, can you tell me where the entrance is?"

She nodded. "Just give me a moment."

Rushia placed her right hand on the wall and mumbled something softly with her eyes closed. A faint blue glow emanated from a section of the wall to our left.

"Kazu, the ring."

"I've got it on," I confirmed, double-checking that it was on my right hand.

If things were as Rushia had described earlier, there was no way I'd be able to enter the secret passageway without it.

Rushia and I nodded to each other, silently acknowledging we were ready to go. I sent Sha-lau away, then grasped her hand.

Rushia and I touched the blue glow together, and all at once I felt like I was being pulled forward, into the wall. The familiar sensation of teleportation came over me, and for a moment, my consciousness seemed to fade. The sounds of the battlefield dimmed behind us.

In the next moment, our surroundings changed.

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We found ourselves in a dimly lit stone room. The sound of dripping water echoed from somewhere, creating a serene atmosphere.

“So, this is the entrance to the underground temple?”

“It seems so.”

The moss on the walls pulsed with a yellowish light, illuminating even the ground beneath our feet, and despite being untouched for years, there wasn't a speck of dust to be seen. On the other side of the room, a wall glowed with a faint blue light.

That probably leads outside, I thought. But we aren't heading out at the moment.

My mind turned briefly to Yuuki and Keiko, and I wondered if the ninja couple had escaped safely. But, considering their wits and skills, I thought they'd probably be fine.

My attention returned to our current situation—there seemed to be only one exit from the room we were in. The corridor was about two meters wide and stretched straight ahead.

“We don't have much time,” I said. “Shall we go?”

“Yes, let's. Please follow me.”

Rushia, who was presumably familiar with the layout of this place, took the lead. I followed her, glancing back occasionally to make sure we were safe.



As we walked, I asked Rushia about her home, my eyes occasionally drifting to the gentle sway of her hips. While I knew she might not want to recall memories of her country, I still wanted to know about the land that gave birth to her.

“In the past, this land was called Aulnaav,” Rushia explained. “In our language, it means ‘Forest of the Divine Tree People’.”

“Does the ‘Divine Tree’ in the name refer to the Underground Tree of Rown?”

“You saw the heart of Gal Yass, didn’t you?”

“Yes, it was a massive ruby.”

“In the past, we referred to it as the ‘Godstone.’ Both the World Tree and the Underground Tree of Rown have one embedded within them as well. Or maybe it’s more accurate to say that the trees have swallowed them. Gal Yass is different, however, in that the Godstone remains a symbol, worshiped in its original form.”

In essence, the massive ruby we’d seen was a Godstone. It had also been referred to as a “wedge” in this world’s legends, and it seemed that both the World Tree and the Underground Tree of Rown had one as their heart.

This felt like important information. Why hadn’t Rushia shared it earlier?

Maybe she didn’t feel the need to say anything because it was common knowledge to her, I pondered. The things the people of this world consider common knowledge are probably different than what the people of Earth do. I should investigate further.

“Aulnaav was a land of elves,” Rushia continued. “While there were many who lived in the forests and served Alvana, many others were respected throughout the continent for passing down ancient knowledge.”

Alvana... I’ve heard that name before. They’re the deity of the elves and the forest dwellers. It was Alvana who gave the royal family Rushia was a part of the divine mandate that led to her transformation into a weapon. And, judging

by what we've learned, this deity seems to have known of our arrival in this world. According to previous discussions, elves in this world don't live very long... In fact, Rushia is about my age. On the other hand, the People of Light, like Leen-san, have incredibly long lifespans.

“About twenty years ago, the then king of Aulnaav saw an opportunity when he observed how exhausted a number of countries were from fighting monsters and how the arrogant citizens of his kingdom blamed their deteriorating security—which was exacerbated by the number of refugees coming into their home from other countries destroyed by monsters—on the laziness of others.”

It was a familiar story, even in the modern world: impoverished people would flee from their countries to new ones, leading to a decline in the living standards of the places they took refuge.

Wasn't it only recently that the monsters became much stronger? I mused. Yes, it was about five years ago that the monsters suddenly began to act in a more organized manner. Before that, they moved individually and didn't form large groups. But then they started forming massive armies.

Considering the slow dissemination of information in this continent's civilization, this recent shift might only feel like a minor change to them. Of course, the People of Light, with their established system of teleportation and familiars, may have felt a growing sense of urgency, but the nation known as Aulnaav probably hadn't shared that sentiment.

“Was Aulnaav a prosperous nation?”

“It was a bountiful forest, and the wisdom of those who lived there had been honed by a long history, giving them profound knowledge. On that basis, they established a robust regime that relied heavily on a large number of slaves.”

Given the wars and destruction caused by the monsters, there was never a shortage of slaves. Perhaps their prosperity blinded the people of Aulnaav to the suffering around them? Even as they witnessed the horrors of war and the plight of the refugees, they may not have truly understood the gravity of the situation. They probably saw it as someone else's problem, not realizing that all of humanity was on the brink of extinction. Their ignorance and incompetence cost them dearly.

“In addition, the advanced knowledge of the Age of Myths gave Aulnaav a sophisticated culture and formidable military strength. Yet despite the fact that they were one of the most powerful military nations on the continent, they rarely ventured out, knowing that their forest, their homeland, was unparalleled.”

This part sounds very much like the fantasy of this world, I thought. It's a little hard to relate it directly to our world.

“But wait, why did they seek even greater military power?”

“The wealth of their forest was dwindling. Even with the power of the Godstone, the growing number of refugees was eventually going to exceed the forest's capacity.”

“Didn't they consider expelling the refugees or something?”

“For the nation's elite, industries that employed refugee slaves were like gold mines.”

Ah, so the idiom “money doesn't grow on trees” applies to this world too. Maybe it's an obscure reference to this particular situation...

“This is why Aulnaav's foolish king decided to eliminate the monsters and rule over all human nations. He hoped to restore peace to the forest.”

Chapter 157: The Underground Temple of Rown - Part 2

“Before we continue, let me tell you a little bit about the Underground Temple of Rown,” Rushia said as she guided me forward. “With the infinite mana generated by the Godstone, Aulnaav acquired a lush forest, which led to the development of the elven capital of Aulnaav. With a population of around two hundred thousand, it was said to be one of the most prosperous cities in the world.”

In many stories, forest dwellers weren’t typically associated with urbanization. The common perception was that living in forests equated to a more hunter-gatherer lifestyle, which was seen as primitive. But Rushia’s home had been different.

Perhaps the combination of a rich forest that could be harvested and then quickly rejuvenated by mana made Aulnaav an unbeatable powerhouse, I mused. A rapidly regenerating forest with fertile soil would indeed be a tremendous advantage.

Imagining such a scenario in the world back home was difficult to imagine, but with mana, a resource that could do anything, it would actually be possible to create such a powerful nation. It was a bit overwhelming to think about. Honestly, it made the vibrant world of *The Lord of the Rings* almost pale in comparison. That wasn’t exactly something you could hold Rushia or her people accountable for though.

“The Underground Temple of Rown was at the heart of Aulnaav’s prosperity, and was a symbol of the royal family. They managed the place, housing their royal wives in the temple—effectively, it served as a harem. The reigning king fathered over two hundred children with over a hundred wives. A number of them were known as the Squadron, and among them, I was considered the most superior.”

“You mean...”

“Basically, I was a member of the royal family who was subject to experimental treatments. There were about a hundred of us, including me.”

The story reminded me of a certain Kido whatchamacallit, who had sent a hundred orphans to train and earn mystical Cloths in the hope that one of them would become a Knight of the Zodiac.

“Research was being done to unlock our abilities without the need for an Otherworldly Visitor. But before they could achieve that, the monster invasion happened.”

The rest of the story I knew. Aulnaav had fallen, and Rushia, a member of the Squadron that carried royal blood, had found her way to Leen. Eventually, Rushia had met us, the Otherworldly Visitors, through her.

“The Underground Temple of Rown, off limits to all males outside the royal family, boasted the tightest security in the nation. It was impenetrable from the front and able to repel any form of attack... or so it was believed,” Rushia finished, a hint of melancholy in her voice.

Considering the entire kingdom of Aulnaav has fallen, it's unrealistic to expect this one place to remain untouched, I thought.

Rushia went on to admit that she didn't know the details of how the temple had been breached, but that it must have been, as it was certain that the Godstone, which had once blessed the land with its bounty, was no longer functioning.

That might explain why the surface had turned into such a wasteland...

“The Godstone in the Storm Temple of Gal Yass was used by the monsters,” I remembered.

“Probably out of fear,” Rushia mused, her voice tinged with bitterness. “Even my arrogant father, I believe, was worried about the fate of the world in his final moments.”

It wasn't the first time I'd heard Rushia speak critically of her homeland.

“Leen believes that the Godstone was sealed here,” Rushia continued. “The royal family of Aulnaav had a sealing ritual handed down for emergencies—all of the nations that inherited one of the five keystones should have a similar one. If the keystone was ever at risk of falling into the wrong hands, it should have been sealed immediately. That was the duty of those entrusted with the care of the keystone.”

“So, in Gal Yass, where the Godstone was clearly used with ill intent... Does that mean that the people at the Storm Temple failed in their duty?”

“Yes. Their corruption must have been even worse than ours,” Rushia replied with a hint of disdain.

That might explain the way the undead we faced endless respawned, I thought. If another divine-level necromancer had been present, who knows what would have happened. We might not have been able to counter that.

“Does that mean we don’t have to worry about the enemy using infinite mana this time?” I asked.

Rushia nodded. “So far, there’s no confirmation that the seal has been broken. If this Godstone was activated, its effects would surely be visible on the surface.”

That was reassuring. With just the two of us here, if our opponents ended up having some cheat-like abilities, we’d be in big trouble.

“So, Rushia, you plan to break the seal and use the power of the Godstone to trap the enemy?”

“If the plan goes well...” she agreed.

“You don’t think it will?”

“I want it to succeed, but...” Rushia stopped and turned to me. Her crimson eyes, usually so steady, wavered with uncertainty. “The operation at Gal Yass was a success. If necessary, we can call for reinforcements from there. We might even be able to break through from the front.”

“But that would likely prove too much for us, right?”

“If we fail... Kazu, we’ll lose you.”

I gave her a wry smile. That was old news.

“Rushia, if the worst happens, you’ll die too. Either way, it’ll be over.”

“But I’m just a princess from a fallen kingdom. Kazu, you—”

“Listen, Rushia. We’re comrades. To me, the lives of all my comrades are equal, and I don’t want to lose any more of them.”

Rushia stared at me silently. I could tell that she was holding back words. She probably wanted to say that the both of us surviving was an idealistic dream, but it *wasn’t*. It was my resolution.

“Just remember, Rushia—you’re just as important to me as Arisu, Tamaki, and Mia.”

“You don’t mean that... in a romantic sense, do you?”

“No. I mean it as comrades.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Rushia nodded. “Understood.” Her usually stoic face seemed to soften a little.

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At first glance, the end of the corridor seemed to be a dead end, but of course it couldn’t just be a wall. When Rushia touched the surface, the entire thing glowed blue.

“Beyond this is the enemy’s lair. Kazu, are you ready?”

“It’s a little late to procrastinate now,” I quipped, taking Rushia’s hand in mine.

She gripped mine tightly in return. “Let’s go.”

Together, we placed our hands on the wall. The familiar sensation of teleportation washed over us, and moments later, we emerged into a stone room that resembled a storage area. The only door in the room was open, revealing another corridor beyond from which a faint light, reminiscent of candlelight, streamed in. The illumination revealed the remains of what might

have once been a number of wooden crates scattered around the room, now covered in dust.

So, beyond that corridor is just a dusty room, huh? I thought.

Just as I came to that conclusion, a pungent stench that reminded me of excrement wafted in from the corridor.

Wait... Are there living creatures here? Not undead, but maybe animal-like monsters? I should probably summon a guard, just in case.

“Summon Paladin,” I murmured.

A soldier in full armor appeared. He had the skills of a Rank 7 vanguard, and though he might seem a less reassuring companion compared to Tamaki or Arisu, he should be sufficient enough for us unless we encountered a divine-class enemy.

“I’ll scout ahead using Invisible Scout and Remote Viewing,” I told Rushia. “Keep watch for me.”

She nodded in agreement. “Understood. Please be careful, Kazu.”

According to what Rushia had told me, there was a large hall on our left, and behind it was the Underground Tree of Rown. I switched to the Invisible Scout’s perspective and sent the familiar down the stone corridor toward the hall.

The transparent scout, making no sound, slowly made its way forward. From time to time, the discarded wooden boxes that lay scattered about obstructed the Scout’s view, but it also gave it some cover.

Soon, the large hall Rushia had mentioned appeared. Wooden boxes were piled high near the entrance, and the Invisible Scout climbed onto them, stealthily peering into the room from above.

The walls of the hall were adorned with lantern-like fixtures that cast a dim orange glow. They seemed to be magical lighting devices, and thanks to them, the room was surprisingly well lit.

What lay inside the hall, however, was a terrifyingly familiar sight. Throughout the space, more than twenty women were entangled with monsters. Each woman wore a collar that was dripping with filth.

The monsters attacking them had dark green skin and were the size of small children, and looked to be more than forty in number. Upon closer inspection, they appeared to be small humanoid creatures with lizard-like faces.

Two or three of the small creatures swarmed over a single woman and began to rape her.

These little humanoid monsters... Are they what we would call goblins? But if I thought of them that way— Whatever. If the higher-ups have already encountered them, it won't matter.

I described the situation in the room and the monsters to Rushia in whispered detail. I refrained from using the term “goblin,” however—I was curious what Rushia would call them.

“They’re probably goblins,” Rushia finally said. “They’re known for their agility and excel in group fights. Individually, they’re not very strong, but they are agile and cunning creatures.”

“And such tiny little creatures have such dark desires?”

“The reason they act this way is to gather mana. Isn’t there a magic device somewhere in that room that can store it?”

“Mana, huh? If they were originally supposed to get their mana from the Underground Tree of Rown, maybe this is their alternative method. Now let’s see, a magic device, a magic device... Oh, maybe over there? Some goblins are picking up the women and carrying them to the far left corner. I can’t see what’s there from where the Invisible Scout is at.”

“That’s probably where the magic device is set up.”

“All right, but then why do the goblins need to violate these women?”

“I don’t think you’re fully understanding what’s happening in there,” Rushia explained, seeming to catch on to my confusion. “The goblins aren’t attacking them to reap mana—it’s the other way around. Goblins don’t need much mana to sustain themselves, and they produce more mana internally than they consume, so they can supply it externally. It’s said that the most efficient way to do this is to first infuse a human with mana.”

“So, they’re infusing the women with mana and then extracting it with the magic device?”

“Most likely. We should aim to destroy the device.”

I nodded. No matter what the enemy’s goal was, our mission was to thwart it.

“I wonder what they’re going to do with all that stored mana,” I said.

“Well, the creation of high-quality magical devices requires an enormous amount of mana, for one.”

“Do you have any idea what kind of device they might be making here?”

“There are several possibilities, but one might be a device to break the seal that the royal family placed on the Underground Tree of Rown,” Rushia replied.

“Right. If they can break that seal, they’ll have unlimited access to mana. Maybe that’s why they’re harvesting it like that.”

Chapter 158: The Underground Temple of Rown – Part 3

In order to destroy the mana-storing magic device, we're going to have to destroy the goblin army first, I thought. Hmm... How do we defeat over forty of them with just us though?

"It would be easier if we could burn them all at once," I muttered. "The problem is all the women with them."

"It might be kinder for us to kill them," Rushia murmured quietly.

If Arisu were here, she might have been able to heal the women's bodies and minds with a single spell, but Rushia's Fire Magic could only heal physical injuries.

I can somewhat understand the feeling of not wanting to see the women trapped in this underground temple suffer after they've been rescued, but they're probably acquaintances of Rushia's, I thought. Personally, I'd rather avoid having Rushia burn people she knows to death.

"I'd like some inside information," I finally said, still observing the situation through the eyes of the Invisible Scout. "I'd be grateful if we could get some details from the captured individuals. Our situation doesn't allow us the luxury of considering the feelings of others, and besides, your sisters are members of the Squadron like you, right? That means they're able to access the White Room, and if they can level up, they could be valuable assets in future battles."

That would mean pushing people who had already suffered so much into even more brutal battles. Nonetheless, Rushia nodded.

"That's a good point."

"Still, if we don't kill all the goblins at once, it will be problematic. We can't let any of them escape. What's the plan?"

“We could use Candle Days to blind them and then take them out one by one,” Rushia mused. “How does that sound?”

Candle Days was a spell that summoned magical candles into the air, dazzling those who saw them. Still...

“I doubt that would hold them all,” I thought aloud. “We might end up letting some get away.”

That was, unless I thought of a way to block their escape routes in advance. No matter how many goblins there were, there were only so many exits.

Let’s see... Excluding the passage we’re in, there are three escape routes. That’s a lot for us to cover, but it’s better than just letting Rushia attack randomly.

“I’m going to block off all the goblins’ escape routes,” I announced.

When I explained the exact method I was planning on using, Rushia thought for a moment and then replied, “Understood. I agree with your strategy.”

“If the goblins are as weak as you said,” I continued, “it would make sense to summon higher quality familiars instead of a large number of lesser quality familiars. If we place one Wind Elemental and one Earth Elemental in each passage, that should be enough.”

At Rank 5, Summon Elemental requires 25 MP. That means that in my current state, I can summon more than ten and still have plenty of MP left. That should be just right, especially since I couldn’t use Summon Legion anyway—it would summon more familiars than I could use in a place like this.

The plan thus decided, Rushia and I—along with the Paladin—moved through the passage stealthily, not making a sound. Despite his metal armor, the Paladin walked much more quietly than I expected.

Is this another Rank 7 skill? I wondered.

I wished I could ask him, but now wasn’t the time for such idle chatter—we’d reached the entrance to the room where the goblins were.

As we drew closer, the strong smell of male and female bodily fluids intensified. It was a smell I’d breathed in many times while the threat of death

hung over me. On reflex, my body tensed.

Peeking into the room from behind a wooden box, I saw the naked bodies of many exhausted women. The light of the magical lanterns illuminated them enough that I could tell that they all appeared to be in decent nutritional condition, but they were far enough gone that they offered no resistance to the goblin's attacks other than the occasional moan. Their lives were entirely under the control of the goblin's whims.

The temperature in the room was also higher than in the passage, and as the women's plump breasts moved up and down, beads of sweat dripped down them. I peered past it all to try and get a view from what was going on in the far left corner of the room, where the goblins had gathered away from the women, but couldn't get more than a glimpse from where I was standing.

I'll just have to get into a position where I can see, I decided.

In addition to the opening I was peering through, there were three exits to the room—one to the back, the left, and the right. I instructed the Invisible Scout to break through to the corridor at the back, and the transparent familiar boldly began crossing the vast room. Before long, it had reached the far end, and I made it take cover behind a number of scattered wooden crates.

The distance between the Invisible Scout and me now was less than forty meters, and thanks to my See Invisibility spell, I could clearly see the familiar.

"Transposition," I murmured.

My view shifted, and in the blink of an eye, I had teleported to the opposite corridor. The positions of the Invisible Scout and I had switched in an instant.

I grinned. I hadn't used this magic much before, but when used at the right moment, it was incredibly useful.

If I'm remembering correctly, Rushia said that this corridor bends once, then leads to another room. If I end up making any noise, I can take care of the reinforcements that come after me then.

Hidden in the shadows of the wooden boxes, I went ahead and summoned my Earth Elemental and Wind Elemental. The former appeared as a giant made

entirely of stone, while the latter manifested as a semi-transparent woman dressed in wind.

Perhaps this is a rather trivial piece of information, but the Wind Elemental had remarkably large breasts. I remembered the first time I had summoned her, right after Arisu had rejected me. The memory of the two events seemed to be linked now in my head, as the sight of the Wind Elemental's breasts reminded me of Arisu. I felt a wave of disgust.

None of that is relevant now though, I reminded myself.

I called the Invisible Scout back to my side and told it to go to one of the adjacent corridors. Then, using Transposition, I swapped places with it again. In this way, I strategically positioned the Earth Elemental and the Wind Elemental, and two other familiars.

Now I had familiars on all three sides of the room, leaving only the exit Rushia was by unguarded. And all this time, the goblins hadn't noticed us at all.

Thus prepared, I cautiously peered into a corner of a room that seemed to contain the mana-storing artifact. To my horror, a grotesque mass of flesh laid there that resembled exposed intestines. A young girl was embedded in it, writhing in agony as the flesh pulsed, almost as if it were chewing. She let out a scream of pain.

That thing looks like a miniature version of Globster, I mused. *I'd probably understand more if I looked at it with Mana Vision, but...*

"It doesn't matter," I whispered to myself.

It was time to carry out the plan.

I signaled Rushia—who was hiding near the Paladin—to launch her attack, then moved the Invisible Scout to the center of the floor. Once in place, the transparent familiar clapped its hands loudly.

Startled by the sudden sound, all the goblins turned their attention to the center of the room.

That's when Rushia unleashed her magic.

“Candle Days,” Rushia proclaimed, and flickering phantom flames appeared about a meter above the center of the floor, forming a Rank 4 Fire Magic spell.

Seeing the illusory flames, the goblins were mesmerized—for a moment, I almost was as well. Regardless, all the monsters stopped in their tracks.

“Wow, that was close!” I muttered to myself. “I can’t let myself get caught by my own tricks.”

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The Paladin charged into the immobilized swarm of goblins. One by one, he decapitated the small monsters that had frozen in place around the women. Blue blood spurted in all directions.

It wasn’t long before some of the goblins noticed the commotion and spotted the Paladin. They began to scream and tried to flee the room, but the Earth Elemental and Wind Elemental were already blocking the exits they headed for. The goblins who tried to rush out were quickly defeated by the elementals.

Even though they were over forty monsters, the strength of each goblin was at best on par with an orc. Considering that my familiar, the Paladin, was at the level of a General Orc, and my elementals were slightly weaker than Elite Orcs, the side that would win was clear. It hadn’t been a fair fight at all.

Two of the goblins approached Rushia.

“Leave them to me,” she said, pulling out a black rodlike weapon from her waist and twisting her wrist.

The Bone Whip flexed like a real whip, stretching to many times its original length, and struck down the goblins. Those hit by the whip fell to the ground.

With a fluid motion, Rushia wrapped the Bone Whip around another goblin’s leg, causing it to topple over.

“Flame Arrow,” she proclaimed.

Nine fiery arrows materialized, and shortly after, they rained down on the fallen goblins, burning them to a crisp. Needless to say, they stopped breathing.

After defeating nearly twenty goblins in the room, I leveled up.

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The only two people in the White Room were Rushia and me.

Come to think of it, this is the first time we've been alone together, I thought.

After all, we had only met the previous afternoon—we hadn't even spent a whole day together at this point. Our lack of alone time made sense.

I hit the room transformation switch as I eyed Rushia, whose face was dejected and clouded with gloom. The adjacent room changed from a pool to a vast meadow.

"What is this?" Rushia asked, looking up. Her face was filled with surprise.

"Mia requested this function," I explained. "I bought it by chance at the Mia Vendor, since I thought it might come in handy in a number of ways. After all, being in this room for too long feels suffocating. So, Rushia, let's change our mood once in a while in a more spacious place."

I gestured for my silver-haired companion to follow me, then stepped out into the meadow. The sun was shining directly above us, its gentle rays pouring down and leaving us with a warm and comforting feeling.

I lay down on the grass and Rushia hesitantly sat down next to me.

"Can I tell you something?" she asked.

"Of course."

"Many of the prisoners back there... They were acquaintances of mine."

I had suspected as much. That was why I hadn't wanted her to burn them.

"Some were born and raised like me, as holy sisters who were weaponized from birth. Some became concubines of the king. Others served the royal family..."

"Were they originally residents in the temple here?"

“Yes, they should have been,” Rushia said calmly, her tone as mellow as usual. “All the royal women were gathered here, in the safest place in Aulnaav. That’s what I heard, at least, when the kingdom fell. When we defeated the goblins just now, I recognized one of their victims. She was my maid, a girl four years younger than me. She was always cheerful and curious, and her eyes were always darting from one thing to the next. She used to always say she wanted to repay her parents’ kindness, even though she was the daughter of a lowly noble. Now... Her eyes are empty, devoid of emotion.”

“I see.”

“I once had a nanny as well. During my childhood, when my abilities didn’t develop as expected, she was the only one who told me it was okay and not to rush. Every time I came back from a hard training session in tears, I cried in her arms. I needed an escape then, and she was my only refuge. Even after I realized everything was staged, the comfort she provided never faded. She always stroked my head gently, and when she smiled, her teeth were so white and clean... Now she doesn’t have a single tooth left; she lost all of them. I can’t imagine the violence she had to endure, but when she saw me, she smiled as if she were relieved...”

“That’s understandable.”

Inwardly, I cringed at myself, despising my lack of vocabulary. *Why can I only reply with such bland answers? There must be something more comforting I can say at a time like this.*

Arisu would probably have had something better to say, and Tamaki would have certainly tried her best to cheer Rushia up. As for Mia... she’d probably play the fool to make Rushia laugh, even if it felt forced.

“You don’t have to say anything,” Rushia whispered. “I just wanted someone to listen... I’m sorry for burdening you, Kazu.”

I shook my head. “You know, I’m actually glad that you relied on me. I promise.”

Rushia looked down at me as I lay sprawled on the grass. With my hands tucked under my head as a pillow, I looked up into her clear, red eyes.



Chapter 159: The Underground Temple of Rown - Part 4

When Rushia began to speak again, the words poured out of her like a dam bursting. She spoke of herself, as if to make up for her earlier reticence.

“I have often questioned my role as a member of the Squadron,” she admitted. “But the maids and servants I was given were to be dismissed the moment I failed as a candidate, so whether it was fortunate or unfortunate, I couldn’t disappoint those who served me.”

She hadn’t been diligent for her own sake, she seemed to be saying. Nor had she worked hard to fulfill the role the kingdom had given her. She had simply wanted to live up to the expectations of her maids and servants.

“My father, the king, spoke to me for the first time when I was fourteen in his audience chamber. All he said to me was: ‘I have expectations of you.’ I nodded silently, as was customary, and in the end... In the end, he never even heard my voice.”

Rushia told me that her father, the ruler of her kingdom, had perished when Aulnaav had fallen, according to the testimony of surviving soldiers. I attentively listened as she recounted her life’s story, responding only with the occasional nod. That’s all I thought she was looking for, in truth.

“My mother died when I was born,” Rushia continued. “I had an older sister from the same womb, two years older than me, but she failed early at her role as a member of the Squadron and was married to a noble in another land. I heard that nation was destroyed overnight by monsters in a surprise attack two years ago.”

It seemed Rushia had only learned of this after taking refuge with Leen. The flow of information into the elven nation had been quite slow—since the place was originally deep in a dense forest, that was perhaps to be expected.

“Also... There was something I lied about,” Rushia admitted.

“You lied?”

Rushia nodded. “I wasn’t telling the truth when I said that the fact that I was the only direct descendant of the royal lineage to escape the calamity was a result of chance and my own cowardice.”

Rushia had mentioned how she’d survived once, briefly. If I remembered right, she had been taken away alone through a teleportation gate, and her country had only had enough power to open it for her and her alone.

“To be precise, at the time the floating fortress attacked Aulnaav, I was in a town at the edge of the forest, discreetly meeting with a representative from another country. That representative was Leen.”

“So, the teleportation gate you used was...”

“Hers, yes. No one in my country could actually use a teleportation gate. Leen gave me a choice: return to the Underground Temple of Rown immediately or go with her. I didn’t realize the full extent of the war situation at that time, and...”

Ah, so what she’s trying to tell me is that she ran away because she was afraid of the war, I realized.

“That was a wise decision,” I said.

“I-It was?”

“As you were only able to analyze the information available to you at the time, you couldn’t have determined which choice was right. But you chose to survive, even if it meant bearing the shame of desertion. As a result, you’re here now—you’ve returned as a liberator. Thanks to you, we may even win this battle. At the very least, we’ll reduce the casualties considerably.” Lying down, I looked up at Rushia with a grin. “Without you, we probably wouldn’t have survived yesterday or today.”

“You’re trying to encourage me,” Rushia said.

“You made a wise choice. I’m very grateful to you. I don’t know what a burden of responsibility you carry, as I was never born into royalty, and I don’t

really understand hierarchical systems, but..." I shook my head. "I'm your leader now. After we leave this room, you will follow my orders. The Underground Temple of Rown may have been your base once, but now, your place is at my side."

"Kazu..." Rushia looked down at me where I was lying on the grass. Her cherry-colored lips parted several times as if she was going to speak, but each time, they closed tightly.

After a short bout of silence, the corners of Rushia's mouth tilted upward just a little.

"You and Shiki are both so clumsy."

"Leave me out of it," I said with a laugh.

"I appreciate that kind of stubbornness, though."

I gave Rushia a wry smile and took her hand, then pulled her forward gently so she'd lie down beside me. Soon we both lay on the grass, looking up at the sky.

"Let's not think about it too much. How about a nap?"

"So, you just lie down and sleep when you're alone with a woman?" asked Rushia. I detected a teasing tone in her voice.

I snorted amusedly. "What's the point of cheating when Arisu and Tamaki aren't around?"

"I'm sure Mia would say, 'What a coward'."

Rushia's voice had that teasing tone again.

I wish she hadn't learned that from Mia, I lamented.

"Besides," I said determinedly, "I like you as a friend."

"Not as a companion?"

"No, since that'd be just a professional relationship, and I really enjoy your company. That makes us friends, right?"

Rushia thought for a moment before answering, "Maybe you're right."

“Shall we rest together then?”

I closed my eyes. Soon, the sound of Rushia’s soft breathing drifted to my ears and the faint scent of her body tickled my nose, and I...

No. She’s a friend. Just a friend.

With sheer willpower, I suppressed my desire and waited for sleep to come.

Perhaps because of the constant tension, I didn’t have to exercise much patience—the moment I relaxed, an overwhelming drowsiness washed over me.

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When I woke up, Rushia’s face was right in front of me. She had propped herself up and was looking down at me, her ruby red eyes staring intently into mine.

“Uh, Rushia? Staring at someone’s sleeping face is kind of naughty, you know.”

“Yes, I’m aware.”

“When you answer so seriously, it’s really disturbing.”

Rushia tilted her head and gave me a puzzled look. “While I have desires like any other person, I’ve often heard from Mia that it’s important to show restraint. Being embarrassed is essential, right?”

“Slow down, Rushia. We need to talk.”

Rushia looked at me with a serious expression. Her lips trembled slightly, seductively. Mesmerized by her gaze, I...

My train of thought was interrupted when a loud rumbling came from the young girl’s stomach.

“Rushia, do you want something sweet?”

“Yes!” The princess of the fallen kingdom agreed, clenching her fists and nodding enthusiastically.



I summoned a number of cakes and desserts, allowing Rushia to indulge to her heart's content. I nibbled on a few myself, but two cakes were my limit. I didn't dislike sweets, but I wasn't overly fond of them either.

After eating, Rushia wiped her mouth and with a neutral but satisfied expression looked at me again. "I feel reenergized."

"That's good to hear," I said with a laugh.

"Such distractions are surprisingly useful, aren't they?"

Rushia seems like a pretty serious person after all, I thought. She's ashamed to have fled her homeland with Leen, but from my perspective, escaping to ensure one's own survival seems only natural. But if Arisu, Tamaki, and Mia were left behind with the monsters... could I say without a doubt that I wouldn't hesitate? Would I still say without a doubt that I believed the same thing? Even if I finally put my own safety first, I might be tormented by regret forever. I shook my head at myself. *I should stop. Such hypotheticals are pointless and even unhealthy.*

"Shall we go back then?" I asked her.

"Yes."

We nodded at each other, but before we went back to the original room, I had a suggestion for Rushia.

"Rushia, you're about to level up. How about using suppression now?"

Of the two special abilities that Rushia possessed, the one I was referring to was the more understated one. Level-Up Suppression was a special ability that allowed Rushia to enter the White Room at any time. Once used, it couldn't be activated again for twenty-four hours.

Yesterday, Rushia had used it to release all the experience points she had accumulated over the years, raising her to Level 10. But by having her suppress her level-up today, we could make sure that we can go to the White Room whenever we need to.

"That sounds like a good idea," she agreed.

“All right, let’s do that then.”

Since my skill points had increased to 8, I went ahead and upgraded my Support Magic to Rank 7. This would add some versatility to my combat kit.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 37	SUPPORT MAGIC: 6 → 7
SUMMONING MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 8 → 1

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The battle resumed, but at this point, it was more accurate to call it a massacre.

The Paladin methodically slaughtered the stunned goblins, who were still under the effects of Candle Days. Any that managed to escape the brutal onslaught were efficiently dispatched by the elementals I’d strategically placed in the three exits or by Rushia.

Rushia alone performed at a level comparable to that of the elementals. In fact, even without her weapon skill, she seemed to have the strength of a Rank 3.

I wonder how strong she’d be if she acquired a weapon skill, I mused. Her weapon, the Bone Whip, is so unique that it’s hard to determine which skill would be the best fit. I’m not even sure what type of weapon it would be classified as... Maybe a staff?

Watching Rushia fight with her fluidly moving whip was like watching a dance. Ruthlessly, without mercy, she eliminated the goblins. The last two were killed simultaneously by Rushia and the Paladin.

Just like that, we had successfully annihilated over forty goblins.

Chapter 160: The Underground Temple of Rown - Part 5

Each goblin had dropped a single red gem as they fell, but now wasn't the time to collect them. After all, if there was no change on the outside once we'd been inside the secret passage for an hour, the allied forces planned to switch to a full-frontal attack strategy. The time constraint meant that we couldn't afford the luxury of thoroughly caring for the women sprawled on the ground—Rushia's only healing spell was Rank 5 Flame Heal, and as we were still unaware what we were to face going forward, we couldn't just use a spell that mana-intensive on everyone. Nor did we have an alternative to Cure Mind, which was designed to calm the psyche, but we still needed information.

Rushia nodded to the young handmaiden she had mentioned earlier, then ignored her and walked further into the room. Without hesitation, she approached one of the weakened women and cast Flame Heal on her. Then, without worrying about getting dirty, she picked the woman up.

"Olar-neesama, it's me," Rushia said.

"You are...? Ah, the counter-offensive has begun. And your use of magic means that the prophesied outsider has—"

"Yes. I serve the Hero of the Outsiders now. My name is Rushia."

Olar seemed to understand quickly. If she was Rushia's sister, that made sense.

"Then that is what I shall call you," she replied. "You need internal information, right?"

"Yes, starting with the enemies further in," Rushia agreed. "What else is here apart from the goblins?"

Olar told us that there were two main groups of monsters that guarded the Underground Temple—the goblins, who served the dual purpose of completing

menial tasks and guarding the prisoners, and the zoraus, who were supposedly researching how to unseal the Underground Tree.

“What’s a zoraus?” I asked.

“The zoraus are creatures skilled in manipulating mana,” Rushia quickly explained. “They appear as gelatinous, amorphous beings, and though at first glance they appear to be mindless, in reality, they are believed to possess intelligence equal to or greater than that of humans.”

So, they’re like intelligent slimes? I mused.

I couldn’t think of any monsters that fit that description as far as I knew. Maybe Mia or Shiki would know; they both had an extensive knowledge of fantasy lore. Regardless, now that I’d recognized these intelligent slimes as “Zoraus” for the first time, they would unfortunately retain that name in my mind. This seemed to be part of the nature of the translation magic that allowed us to understand the people of this world.

“So, how strong are they?” I asked.

“It’s unclear,” Olar replied. “Rumor has it that they use some kind of attack magic, but Zoraus are researchers by nature. They rarely come to the front lines.”

Researchers, huh? I pictured a slime in a lab coat. The image was... messy. *Never mind that. Neither Olar or the others seem to know what kind of magic the Zoraus are using. Although, there’s a chance that those who were taken away and never returned found out first hand... Either way, if they’re a race of researchers, it’s unlikely that they would fight, I would think.*

“Do the Zoraus also guard the Underground Tree of Rown?”

“Yes, Hero. According to those who were taken there, besides the Zoraus, several monsters resembling armored knights guard the tree,” Olar informed us.

“Some of you were taken there? Are any of those people here?”

Olar gently closed her eyes.

The gesture alone spoke volumes. Rushia had mentioned that the monsters had taken over this place a month ago. These women had survived an entire month in this harsh environment, but not all of them had made it.

“Do you have any other information about these armored knights?” I asked.

“I haven’t seen them myself, so...” Olar trailed off. “I’m sorry. But I’ve heard that they’re about the size of a human.”

So, they aren’t of the giant variety, I concluded.

Still, in a world that had quite the variety of different monsters, that was hardly reassuring. What mattered was the skills these knights possessed and their respective ranks. For example, it was possible they could throw fireballs. The armored exterior might be an illusion, with a skeleton hidden on the inside. Considering these possibilities was only natural, given that we’d been thrown off by an enemy using illusions only just a few hours before.

After that, Rushia bombarded Olar with a barrage of questions: she asked the layout of the passages and rooms ahead, whether there were other prisoners, what their locations were, where the enemy primarily gathered, and if there were any possible detours we could take. Olar answered with remarkable efficiency, as if she had anticipated Rushia’s inquiries.

Honestly, perhaps she had. In the midst of the adversity Olar had faced, it was likely she had always held onto the hope that help would come. She must’ve been constantly simulating scenarios, strategizing how to effectively defeat the monsters and liberate the temple when that day came. She was truly strong-willed.

What struck me most, though, was Rushia’s determination. She had gone straight to Olar even after finding her maid and wet nurse, acknowledging them with only a brief nod. Rushia knew that consulting Olar was the best course of action, as she’d provide crucial insight.

“The fleshy creature in the corner of this room seems to be a device that drains mana from women,” Olar pointed out, referring to the thing that looked like a small Globster.

So, it does drain mana, similar to the cave at our school mountain, I thought. Once a certain amount of mana is accumulated, the Globster takes it. Then, after the women are drained of their mana, it is pumped into the goblins.

As Rushia had mentioned earlier, the goblins, being energy-efficient monsters, took advantage of the fact that they needed less mana to function. That was why there were so many Mage Goblins around. However, these mage types wouldn't waste their mana in a place like this, so there were none in this room.

They act completely different from the orcs, who seem to act purely on instinct, I mused.

"Can we destroy this mini Globster?" I asked Olar.

"No, Hero," she replied. "We believe that the mana absorbed by this device is sent directly to the Zoraus. If we destroy it, they might discover our intrusion."

"Oh, that's problematic," I muttered, giving the mini Globster a closer inspection.

A fleshy tube extended from it and was connected to a vent near the ceiling that led out of the room.

Perhaps it functions as some sort of power cord, I thought.

"So, you're saying we shouldn't help the one who is buried in there either?"

"No," Orla said grimly. "I'm afraid we'll have to ask Ariha to hold on a little longer."

The girl currently trapped inside the mini Globster looked young, almost childlike. She was writhing and moaning in discomfort.

Can we really leave her like that?

"I-I'm fine," the girl said bravely, forcing a smile.

I felt a pang of regret, but for now we'd have to appreciate Ariha's sacrifice. It was humbling to think of her continued endurance. Her prolonged suffering greatly increased the chances of our mission's success. At least she'd be able to be released in another ten minutes or so, though she'd have to be replaced by another suitable person.

While I understood the rationale of leaving Ariha where she was, implementing it was another matter entirely. If she were one of my own group from the Cultural Arts Center, I was sure we would have hesitated and rescued them immediately.

“Rushia, be careful out there,” Olar said as we prepared to leave. “And Hero, concentrate on your mission without worrying about us.”

Our swift exchange over, Olar nodded, signaling the end of our conversation.

Yes, her focus is truly admirable.

“Let’s go, Kazu,” Rushia prompted.

“Yeah, I got it,” I said with a nod. “Let’s wrap this up quickly.”

As Rushia and I moved to head out, I couldn’t help but think that both she and Olar exuded a sort of regal determination. I had the feeling they wouldn’t hesitate to make sacrifices if it meant achieving their goals.

Now that we have that kind of determination behind us, we have to make sure we don’t waste it.

I recalled most of the Earth and Wind Elementals I’d summoned, leaving behind only one of each. That left the Invisible Scout, the Paladin, and a single Earth and Wind Elemental by our sides.

Rushia and I, leading our familiars, navigated past the scattered women and entered the corridor. Instead of heading straight for the Underground Tree, we decided to take a detour. We wanted to use a secret weapon that the captured women had cleverly hidden.

That said, even though I thought of the thing Olar had told us about in my mind as a “secret weapon,” it wasn’t really a weapon per se. You see, apparently, the temple was riddled with hidden passages. Only a few members of the royal family knew about them, and even Rushia had been unaware of their existence before this moment. Now, we were now on our way to retrieve the key that would give us access to these secret passages.

Chapter 161: The Nightmare Slime - Part 1

Rushia and I moved forward, relying on the Invisible Scout's reconnaissance to get a sense of the enemy's position and numbers. Using that method, we'd gone through three rooms, killing just over twenty goblins. Our primary strategy had been to use Rushia's Fire Magic to capture them all at once. Sure, using Rank 5 Fireballs against what appeared to be Level 1 goblins might seem like overkill, but for a Level 23 Rushia, the MP consumption of such magic could be considered a necessary expense.

Although we had been cautious of the potential danger of running into Mage Goblins, it seemed we'd dodged that bullet. All the goblins we'd encountered had only dropped a single red gem once we'd killed them, which indicated that they were probably all regular goblins.

"Didn't you say that there are usually a higher number of Mage Goblins?" I asked Rushia.

"Usually, yes," she replied. "But the ones gathered here might be different."

"Why is that?"

"If the goblins were brought here primarily to infuse the women with mana, there would have been no need to bring skilled mages too."

That made sense. Even monsters wouldn't keep a surplus of valuable personnel in one location. Especially those who could use magic; they'd be useful everywhere.

"We still can't let our guard down," Rushia warned.

"Of course; that was never my intention."

Regardless of whether Rushia's speculation was correct, I planned to remain cautious.

"There's a staircase ahead," Rushia suddenly pointed out. "It leads to the upper level."

We were currently located in the second basement level of the temple, but as the name “Underground Temple of Rown” implied, the entire temple was buried underground. The first and second underground levels were where daily activities took place, whereas the Underground Tree of Rown was located on the third and lowest level. That said, going up to a higher level was a clear detour from our destination.

Rushia had decided, however, that it would be quicker and safer for us to get the key to the hidden passages and travel to our destination through them. I had no objection to Rushia’s judgment, as she was familiar with this place. The real problem was with the current masters of the temple: the monsters.

Just then the Invisible Scout, who had been leading the way, returned and reported the presence of an unfamiliar slime-like monster on the floor just above the stairs to us. There was no mistake; it had to be one of the zoraus Orla had spoken of. That meant it was a slime with intelligence and the ability to use magic.

“Hmm. Just to be safe, we should cast some resistance spells,” I mumbled.

I decided to cast a four-element resistance spell off of the Deflection spell, which would grant the buff to everyone, including the familiars. The MP consumption was a bit high, but 28 MP was an amount of mana that I’d be able to recover in less than ten minutes.

According to the Invisible Scout, there were three zoraus waiting for us ahead. They didn’t seem to have noticed his presence, but he felt that they had very sharp senses. The fact that the Invisible Scout could sense such things was what made him so excellent at his job.

“According to Olar-neesama, the zoraus can sense mana,” Rushia informed me.

“With their eyes?”

“They seem to have sensory organs similar to eyes, but it’s unclear where they are located,” she explained.

I remembered Olar mentioning something like that earlier. To be honest, her information had been relayed so efficiently that I hadn’t fully absorbed all the

details.

“Kazu, what’s the plan?”

“I figure we’ll handle this basically the same as we did with the goblins. We’ll get as close as possible, and then you can use Fireball. After that, the Paladin will charge in.” I paused, then shook my head. “Wait, don’t use Fireball. Use Incinerate instead. It might be overkill, but it’s better than underestimating the zoraus and letting them get away.”

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I gave Rushia the signal to attack about twenty steps below the entrance to the next floor, and Rushia took off. The Paladin followed right behind her, with me and the rest of the familiars chasing after.

With so many of us running, our element of surprise would surely be lost. But the right decision was clear—better to hurry than to approach slowly and risk being spotted by the enemy.

Having sprinted up the stairs, Rushia burst onto the floor above. “Incinerate!” she cried.

A whirlwind of flames erupted, and a disturbing sound, like the scratching of glass, reached our ears.

Could that noise be the zoraus? Their dying screams, perhaps? That’d be convenient if it is.

The Paladin charged forward, brushing past Rushia. Without him in front of me, I could finally catch a glimpse of the scene above.

The room ahead was about the size of a school classroom, built of stone and devoid of any warmth. Magic lanterns hung from the walls, illuminating the room with an orange glow. Now, however, something even brighter dominated the scene: the inferno unleashed by Rushia.

Inside the flames, three semi-transparent gelatinous figures writhed in agony. The shapeless beings were about as tall as a person and about a meter wide, their forms contorted by the engulfing fire.

So those are zoraus? I wondered as the closest one was attacked by the Paladin, who delivered a slashing blow.

A single blow like that from the Paladin should have split the monster in two, but somehow it didn't. The Paladin's movement stopped, and his sword slipped from his grasp.

Damn, could those zoraus be...

"A psychic type?!"

To my horror, they seemed powerful enough to affect even my top-tier familiar, but thankfully, they didn't seem to be powerful enough to entirely turn the tide of the battle.

The Paladin drew his spare dagger, moving stiffly. He tried to strike again, but in that brief moment, the zoraus he was targeting managed to dodge out of the way.

Just when I thought the monster was going to escape...

"Flame Cutter!" Rushia cried.

The blade of fire conjured she summoned sliced the gelatinous creature in half.

The remaining two zoraus' forms were distorted. Parts of them seemed charred, but I suddenly had a feeling that didn't matter. I could sense that they were up to something.

What the hell was I doing? I thought, frustrated. *I screwed up. I have ways to resist psychic magic, but I didn't use them...*

Something crept into my mind. A vile sensation, a dark malevolence. It felt like my thoughts were being replaced by something else, and a curtain of fear enshrouded me. Shiba's haunting voice echoed in my head, and I saw myself, humiliated, crouching on the floor as jeering classmates surrounded me.

"Ah... A-Aaah!"

One by one, the wounds my trauma had left were ripped open. Shudders ran through my body.

This... This is bad.

“Gaaah!”

A strong dizziness washed over me. I felt as if I was losing myself.

“Kazu!” Rushia screamed.

Clutching my head, I fell to my knees and let out another scream of pain. Immediately after that...

“Burn!”

Just like that, Rushia unleashed her spell on the zoraus. She didn't hesitate, not even to take into account the potential danger she presented to the Paladin.

Hellfire consumed the room, and a sound like the scratching of glass echoed—the dying throes of the zoraus.

I leveled up and was transported into the White Room.

Chapter 162: The Nightmare Slime - Part 2

Inside the White Room, I found myself sprawled on the floor, gripped by a powerful dizziness. Sweat was pouring out of my every pore, and my entire body was shaking uncontrollably.

“Kazu! Kazu, what’s happening to you?”

The warm hand of a worried young girl touched my cowering form. I shivered violently at the touch. Even her worried and confused voice filled me with a deep sense of fear.

Had the Zoraus attack triggered not only my trauma but some serious side effects? Even in the midst of fear and panic, a fragment of my mind struggled with this realization. The sensation was unbearable, driving me to the brink of madness. I writhed and groaned in agony.

“I understand,” Rushia said, her voice full of determination.

I heard the rustling of cloth, then the dry sound of her leather armor falling to the floor. It felt like I was listening to something happening in another universe. And then, when I looked up...

Rushia embraced me. Her ample breasts, shielded only by thin white fabric, pressed against my chest.

“Wh-What’re you...?”

As I sat there, frozen in surprise, our lips met. The feeling seemed to calm the chaotic whirlwind of thoughts in my head a bit, and the crushing weight on my psyche lightened. Desperate for relief from the pain, I kissed Rushia back fervently.

A tingling sensation spread through my brain, and after a long kiss, we broke apart to raggedly catch our breaths.

“Why? Why did you do that?”

“Stay still. I’ll take care of everything.”

Rushia quickly removed my clothes, first pulling off my uniform and then what was underneath. I was in a daze, unable to move, feeling as if a dark force was raging inside my head, but even overwhelmed by a feeling of weakness, I noticed how Rushia’s hands were trembling.

“Rushia...”

When she realized that I had sensed her fear, she quickly kissed me again. I couldn’t move; my body felt paralyzed, and not a single limb would respond.

“It’s okay. It’s going to be okay...” Rushia whispered repeatedly, as if to calm herself more than me.

Then Rushia took me inside her, moving with all her strength. Tears filled her eyes from the pain—it must have been her first time.

Somehow, the act of being intimate with Rushia began to dissolve the agony in my head. We ended up coming together several times, and with each climax, the darkness in my heart became lighter.

After some time, I finally regained the mobility in my limbs and took the initiative.

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Some time later, both Rushia and I fell asleep as we lay naked on the floor, wrapped in each other’s embrace. When we woke again, it was almost simultaneously.

Rushia stroked my head gently. “Do you feel better now?” she asked.

“The nightmare... It feels distant now, like a fading memory. It’s strange.”

“I’m glad. For me, it was just theoretical knowledge about magic.”

“Oh, what filled your mind was information about magic?”

“Well, of course it was,” she confirmed. “The zoraus were mentally attacking me, after all.”

I looked over at Rushia. Her cheeks were flushed, her expression softer than usual—it was a rare amount of emotion for her to allow on display. I hadn't seen her like this ever before.

“My thoughts were full of this old story where a wife saves her husband from a monster that preys on the mind like I just saved you.”

“Wait, is that even magic?”

Rushia shrugged. “Originally, the concept of magic—outside of spirit magic—was just like in the story. The way that you and I understand magic through the knowledge we gain in this White Room is quite unconventional.”

After a moment of thought, I nodded. I felt an overwhelming gratitude toward her for putting herself at risk for me. Still, the old story she was speaking about... For a fairy tale, the way the heroine saved the hero was pretty peculiar.

Then again, aren't there quite a few Grimms' fairy tales that were a bit risqué? I mused.

“Kazu, I want to assure you of something. My decision wasn't made just because you were suffering—it was because you're you.”

“I got that.”

Rushia tilted her head in confusion. “Did I mention that earlier?”

“No, but the way you went about it and your assertiveness conveyed that pretty well.”

Rushia suddenly shivered. Her eyes wandered from mine and her lips quivered as her cheeks flushed even redder. For someone who usually had such a stoic face, it was quite a noticeable reaction.

“Uh, Rushia... Are you embarrassed?”

“Yes, very.”

Seeing her shrink into herself so cutely, I couldn't resist giving Rushia a hug.

Hey, this really isn't fair! I thought internally. *This is definitely going to make my heart race, even though I'm doing it to comfort her.*

“Rushia, I have a request.”

“Yes?”

“Next time, can we just... do this without any magic involved?”

Rushia looked down and nodded.

We kissed again, and then... Well, we lost ourselves in the act.

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After a while, I ended up clothed once again in summoned garments. As for my position, I was prostrated before Rushia, who was sitting casually on the floor.

“I’ve heard that’s a gesture of apology in your world, Kaz. Are you feeling guilty about our relationship?”

“I just realize it’s terribly dishonorable, considering I already have two partners,” I admitted. “However, that being said, I will report this to Arisu and Tamaki.”

“You don’t have to apologize. After all, they both told me to take care of you should such a situation arise.”

Come to think of it, I remember the girls having some sort of discussion about this in the past.

“Arisu mentioned that she wanted everyone to support you in your weak moments, and Tamaki and Mia said they felt the same way.”

“Yes, being affected by a minor emotional injury is definitely a weakness for me,” I replied, a hint of sarcasm in my voice.

“Everyone has scars,” Rushia chided. “Comrades are those who can support us until those scars heal.”

The words brought a smile to Rushia’s lips—the most genuine smile I’d ever seen from her. It was a truly beautiful, captivating expression.

“Yes, Mia has said that before,” I agreed. “She probably got it from a manga or something.”



“In your world, you have a wide variety of stories, don’t you?” Rushia pointed out. “Mia must have encountered many stories that speak to the human heart.”

Well, that’s a positive way to look at it, I thought.

In reality, Mia’s insights had helped me a lot. Her judgment, influenced by games and manga, had proven invaluable.

Rushia held out her hand to me. “I was created and trained to support someone. Now I realize that my entire existence has led me to meet you.”

“And... you’re okay with this, Rushia?”

“Okay with what?”

Rushia looked genuinely confused, though I was sure she had thought about what I was referring to.

“When my comrades and I return to our original world...”

“When that time comes, I hope to accompany you.”

“You’d leave this kingdom? We may be on the verge of reclaiming it from the monsters, you realize.”

Rushia nodded. “Now that we have a plan to save many of the royal family, I have no place here,” she said with a touch of sadness.

Hearing those words, I felt as if I had glimpsed the depths of the darkness she carried in her heart.

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Now that we’d gotten that out of the way, Rushia and I had another problem to solve. As soon as we left the White Room, I’d be affected by the psychic attack that those slimes had cast on me once again.

There was a countermeasure, however.

“We’ll use the Rank 7 Support Magic spell, Isolation,” I told Rushia.

“It’s a spell that shields you from all psychic magic, divination, and detection magic, right?” she replied, not hesitating for a moment.

Apparently she learned quite a bit about magic in the White Room, I thought.

“Yes,” I agreed. “The effect of Isolation lasts between ten and fifteen minutes per rank, though the question is whether I’ll have the composure to cast it.”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure you can. Even if it means risking my life.”

That means we might need to resort to what we did before, I thought a bit dubiously. We don’t have much time, and there may not be any other alternatives. Plus, considering that I just spent most of my skill points, I’ll have to be conservative now.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 38	SUPPORT MAGIC: 7
SUMMONING MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 3

Chapter 163: The Nightmare Slime - Part 3

Upon returning from the White Room, darkness immediately enveloped my mind, causing me to fall to the ground and scream in agony. There wasn't even a moment to cast any magic. The pain was unbearable, so overwhelming that death seemed inviting...

That was, until Rushia rushed to my side and sealed my lips with a kiss. Immediately, much of the pain subsided.

This is our chance.

"Isolation."

As the spell took effect, the darkness in my mind dissipated, and my thoughts became clear again.

"Are you okay?" Rushia asked.

"Yes, I'm fine for now. Although some of the traumatic flashbacks are still quite intense."

While Isolation repelled the magical influence on my mind, it couldn't suppress the trauma caused by the memories. Still, I no longer feared the zoraus' mental attacks.

I stood up. The battle was over; we were safe for the moment. Still, as much as I wanted to stay close to Rushia, we didn't have much time. The allied forces would probably begin their attack in less than half an hour.

"Let's move forward," I said, thinking about which familiars I should use as I did.

I needed more melee power, I decided.

After casting Heal Familiar on the Paladin that had been injured by Rushia's Burn, I dismissed the Wind and Earth Elementals and summoned another Paladin.

“Deflection. Isolation.”

Now, with two Paladins, Rushia, and the Invisible Scout—who hadn’t participated in the previous fight—everyone was safe from the attacks of our slimy foes.

The zoraus had dropped three blue gems each, leaving a total of nine. I made sure to collect them all.

“Generally, a Level 5 monster will drop one blue gem,” I said. “So, the fact that these zoraus dropped three each means they should be around Level 15.”

“That may be true, but the rules that connect monsters and mana stones have not been studied in depth,” Rushia pointed out. “After all, we rarely get the chance to defeat high-level monsters.”

Those zoraus creatures did feel like they were at least Level 20 based on their resistance, I mused. Their mental attacks were so powerful that even my Paladin couldn’t resist them. I might have been able to fend them off myself at my level, but my psyche was too fragile.

Rushia had been different, however—despite being attacked by the zoraus, she didn’t seem to have suffered much, and she’d deflected their attack with relative ease.

“This way, Kazu,” Rushia said.

I continued down the corridor, following behind her.

It seems the enemy hasn’t noticed us, even though our battle with the zoraus was incredibly loud, I mused.

“The walls here absorb sound,” Rushia explained, noticing my confused expression.

Perhaps there is some kind of unknown magical technology at work in these walls...

“About those zoraus creatures—if they have the ability to enchant others, why would they bother with torture to extract information? Is it just a sick preference?”

Rushia shook her head. “We elves are especially resistant to mental attacks.”

“Oh, is that so?”

Now it made sense that Rushia had been able to resist them while I hadn't. It was because of her elven nature. Originally, I'd just assumed it was because of her royal lineage or because she was a part of the Squadron.

Zoraus are primarily researchers, so their presence here likely wasn't to extract information from prisoners, I thought. And the elves probably never expected any mental attacks, since they're so resistant.

“So, elves are like the natural enemies of the zoraus?”

“Yes. Our royal lineage, especially in those in which it was enhanced through selective breeding, has especially strong psychic abilities. Before this, I had never been subjected to a psychic attack, so I didn't understand the implications of it.”

Still, I wouldn't want to experience what Rushia went through either. I should just be thankful that her heritage proved useful in battle.

The Invisible Scout, who had gone ahead, returned and told us there were two zoraus ahead. Thus informed, Rushia and I quickly formulated an ambush plan and charged in.

The zoraus seemed to be taken completely by surprise. They tried desperately to fend us off, but with our mental defenses strengthened by the Isolation spell, they were no more threatening than any other ordinary fodder. Both creatures ended up being quickly dispatched by the Paladins quickly on my order.

Once the zoraus were dead, we observed the room—there were several pulsating lumps of flesh located throughout, each about the size of a desk.

What on earth are these eerie lumps?

“Just to confirm, Rushia, those weren't originally in this room, were they?”

“No, they must have been created by the monsters.”

My mind began to race.

“They probably used...” Rushia began, then stopped.

Oh, I think I understand, I thought abruptly. It'd be better not to discuss it.

Even Rushia wouldn't want to express the grim reality that those lumps might have once been the citizens of her kingdom. That would be human experimentation at its most grotesque.

"It's tempting to destroy these abominations now, but let's prioritize our main objective," I decided.

"Yes," Rushia agreed. "We must complete our mission first."

We nodded at each other in agreement and ventured down one of the corridors. Then, following Rushia's lead, I sent the Invisible Scout on a reconnaissance mission and we quickened our pace.

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We went on to defeat five more zoraus and sixteen goblins. In the process, I leveled up, reaching Level 39.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 39	SUPPORT MAGIC: 7
SUMMONING MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 5

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The room we were looking for turned out to be a prison. Apparently, it was convenient to use it as a prison because of its proximity to the barracks, and had once served as a rear palace used to temporarily isolate criminals.

In the deepest part of this prison, in a place that was rarely used, a stone key was embedded in the floor that unlocked the entrance to a number of hidden passageways. But although there were other entrances outside the prison, they were closer to the innermost areas, making them difficult for us to reach.

The zoraus and the goblins had taken full advantage of the room's nature as a prison and had kept some of their captives here. As expected, none of them were in good condition. They were all lying on the floor, their bodies reminiscent of the eerie lumps of flesh we had encountered earlier. After encountering grotesque creatures in the Globster, I was somewhat accustomed to such sights, but the faces of these creatures still radiated an agony that accentuated their monstrous transformations.

At the moment, I was watching as Rushia methodically killed what was left of the creatures that had been turned to lumps of flesh to release them from their pain. Her back was turned to me, and I couldn't tell if she was crying.

Frankly, I couldn't understand why the zoraus would resort to such graphic, horrific acts. I didn't *want to* understand. While my other emotions lay dormant, my anger grew and grew as the victims wept and begged to be put out of their misery.

Rushia granted their wishes, and though she herself had previously stressed the importance of not wasting time, I couldn't bring myself to stop her.

"Sorry for the delay," Rushia said when she was finished, turning back to me after a moment.

She walked toward the prison cell at the back, seemingly ignoring the pile of fleshy remains she was leaving behind. Her demeanor was as casual as if she'd only taken a bathroom break.

Hurriedly, I nodded and followed her.

"I may be... a little broken inside," Rushia murmured softly, unlocking the prison door. "If I ever lose my mind..."

Without thinking, I wrapped my arms around Rushia from behind and held her tight. "That won't happen. I won't let it," I assured her. "You're one of us, and if one of us loses, we do it together. So please... don't bottle everything all up inside."

There was a long silence before Rushia finally nodded. "All right."

Perhaps it was just my imagination, but her voice seemed to have lightened a little.



The key to the hidden passage was a nondescript black pebble. When Rushia grabbed the pebble and touched a certain part of the wall, it instantly disappeared, revealing a corridor.

“The secret passages, including the one we entered through, feel rather out of place, don’t they?” I remarked.

“They were originally created by my elven ancestors,” Rushia explained. “I’ve heard that a lot of lost magical technology was used in their construction.”

We didn’t have much time left to accomplish our mission, and together with our familiars, Rushia and I moved quickly through the dimly lit hidden corridor. The passage—though it was more appropriate to call it a cave—in the deepest part of the Underground Temple was made up of exposed earthen walls. Luminous moss clung to them, giving off a faint glow. The dust that had collected on the pathway indicated that it hadn’t been used for some time, but we’d decided it was safe enough, so we proceeded without even sending the Invisible Scout ahead for reconnaissance.

We continued down a spiral staircase, then chose what path we wanted to take at several forks. Rushia moved with certainty, seemingly having memorized the directions she’d received from her sister in the remarkably short time they’d spoken.

“Kazu,” Rushia began, her voice carrying a hint of gravity. “From now on, I’ll leave all the battle strategy to you.”

“But you know this temple well,” I countered, “and you seem to be quite adept at these things. I’d rather have your perspective.”

“I apologize,” Rushia replied, shaking her head gently at me. “I’ve just realized I’m lacking my usual composure right now.”

“What do you mean?”

She took a deep breath. “To put it bluntly, I’m seething with anger.”

Looking down, I noticed that Rushia had clenched one of her fists. Her nails had dug into her palm, causing blood to seep out. I couldn't tell if she was aware of it or not.

So even someone as cool and collected as Rushia can be driven to anger, I thought. Although, maybe it's more impressive that she can stay so calm in such a state.

"All right," I said, my voice strained as I tried to suppress the weight of the situation. "I'll decide our strategy."

Chapter 164: The Pincer Movement Strategy

You can come up with as many strategies as you want, but you can't actually act on any of them without knowing an enemy's strength. That was why I sent out the Invisible Scout from the exit of the hidden passageway while using Remote Viewing.

Before sending out the Scout, I'd had to turn off the Isolation spell I'd cast on it. It would have interfered with the Remote Viewing spell I was currently using. It made sense—Isolation would have been too powerful without having such a drawback.

Following Rushia's instructions, the Invisible Scout headed forward to an area in the room ahead that was between two large trees. This was where the Underground Tree of Rown was located.

Suddenly, my hand was gripped tightly. As I was currently sharing vision with the Scout, I was startled, but I soon realized it was Rushia. Her hand trembled slightly.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, voice shaking. "I'm scared. Right now, I feel like I might give in to my anger. I'm afraid of letting it influence me into making the wrong decision."

"I understand," I soothed her. "I've acted on emotion alone before. Fortunately, Arisu, Tamaki, and Mia were smart enough to fix things, so it all worked out. Actually, I owe everyone from the Cultural Arts Center for that. So... Rushia, you're not alone."

Rushia was silent for a moment before she answered, "Okay."

The young elf's trembling subsided, and I breathed a sigh of relief. She must have been warned long ago not to act on her emotions—I could tell from the conversation with her older sister earlier.

Maybe that's just what it's like to be Aulnaav royalty. That would explain why she's so confused and afraid of the intense emotions of hate and indignation swirling inside her.

I focused back on the world I could see through the eyes of the Invisible Scout, and found myself in front of a set of wide-open double doors. I cautiously peered inside.

The room ahead was spacious, about fifty meters across, with an exit on each of its four sides, and its high dome-shaped ceiling of white stone flooded the room with light as bright as midday. In the middle of the floor stood a withered tree—it looked so shriveled that it seemed like it might fall over at any moment.

Could that be the Underground Tree of Rown?

“It looks like the Underground Tree has withered,” I remarked.

“The Godstone statue has severed its connection to the outside, which has put the tree in a sealed state,” Rushia said in reply.

“You can unseal it, right?”

“Yes.”

The next thing I noticed was that there were masses of flesh that resembled the Globster around the withered Underground Tree. Tubes of flesh stretched out from these masses and into space.

Is this where those women's mana was being transported? They must have been trying to use those grotesque lumps of flesh to make the withered tree bloom. Ugh, how horrid. Although, I guess the monsters are just doing what they need to do...

There were three zoraus in front of the fleshy masses, which could only be expected. What was less expected, however, were the four knights in deep black armor protecting them. These eerie armored knights had towering figures over two meters tall, and each one was armed with a sword and a shield.

Are there any armed monsters like that in fantasy lore? I wondered. *There are dullahans, I guess, but they're undead. There's Devil Armor, but that's from*

Dragon Quest... Maybe it's living armor? There's so many options—it could be undead, a golem-type, a sentient knight...

I couldn't pin it down; there were too many possibilities. At times like this, I really missed Mia's wisdom.

The armored knights— one in each corner of the room—hadn't moved an inch. Each one stared intently down the corridor before them, watching for intruders, their red eyes gleaming ominously from their helmets.

"So, there are eight armored knights and three zoraus. It's unclear what's inside the armored knights."

Rushia nodded. "I'm worried about the fighting ability of those armored knights."

"From what I can see, I think my Paladin is stronger," I murmured, "but they have numbers on their side."

Given my current MP, even if I sent the Invisible Scout back using Deportation, I could only summon one more Paladin at most, and with the zoraus present, summoning any familiar other than the Paladin was too risky. That meant we only had three vanguards on our side.

"If only Arisu and Tamaki were here... Even if we only had one of them on our side, it would give us a significant advantage."

"Wishing for what we don't have won't help," Rushia pointed out.

"I know, but it's hard to swallow that we don't know what kind of monsters the armored knights are, let alone their levels."

If only I knew their levels... I thought wistfully. *I really wish I had another scout.*

"How about we get rid of the armored knights with Dread Flare and then target the zoraus?" I posited. "Although that won't work if the armored knights are undead... Rushia, do you know any undead that wear armor?"

"Well, there are tales of skeletons that wear armor, or monsters whose main body *is* the armor and the inside is hollow."

"So, there *are* dullahan-like creatures in this world?"

I sunk into thought. *I wonder if those things are dullahans. I have this feeling that they're not undead, though. The aura of the undead monsters I encountered when we were in the Storm Temple of Gal Yass felt different. Ugh, facing an unfamiliar enemy in armor is too cumbersome. Whether it's by design or not, we're completely baffled as to how to estimate the enemy's strength.*

"We should also consider the possibility of reinforcements arriving during the battle," I finally said.

"The passage we'll be using leads to a dead-end storage room on the opposite side, so that shouldn't be a problem," Rushia clarified. "However, reinforcements from other passages are possible."

"How long will it take you to make a connection with the Underground Tree of Rown?"

After a moment of hesitation, Rushia replied, "About a minute in your time measurement."

"One minute, huh...? So, we really need to eliminate everyone in the room before you start."

"Yes, at the very least."

"Oh, right. Is it okay if we burn the withered tree in the process?"

I heard Rushia take a sharp breath. "Please, if possible, refrain from doing that," she said, voice trembling.

Ah, right, of course. Her reaction only makes sense. Even if the Godstone remained intact, the tree still serves as a crucial medium—it's a divine being, after all. But I should clarify just in case.

"Will the Godstone remain intact even if it's burned?"

"Yes. However, if the tree itself is destroyed, there might be some complications when I try to make contact..."

"Got it. We'll rule out that strategy."

I'd thought it would be easier if we could just burn everything at once, but unfortunately, that didn't seem to be an option.



So far, Rushia hadn't used Inferno, the area-of-effect Rank 9 Fire Magic she had learned. It was difficult to use in a space like this, since Inferno caused a roaring sound followed by a massive explosion. When she had tried it in the White Room—which had been turned into a meadow at the time—the explosion had been much bigger than she had expected. Plus, making excessive noise in a dungeon could attract more enemies, so we'd deemed it too dangerous.

Due to those same reasons, it was unlikely that she would use that spell this time either. Instead, she'd be relying on another Rank 9 spell—Prominent Snake. It summoned a flaming snake that danced in the air, and after about three seconds had passed for it to find a target, it would become a lock-on homing spell that relentlessly pursued its quarry. Although it was said to chase “endlessly,” its range was only about two hundred meters or so.

There was also the Rank 7 Support Magic spell called Tremor Sense. Simply put, it detected vibrations. As long as the opponent was touching the ground, any movement would inevitably cause a shockwave, no matter how small.

When we'd been analyzing how to use the two spells, Rushia and I had wondered if we could use Tremor Sense to allow Prominent Snake to lock on to a distant target without seeing it directly. We'd tried the combination several times on the floor next to the White Room, and...

I'd like to offer my condolences to the familiars who became test subjects.

As a result of the experiment, we'd discovered that if a target was within about one hundred meters of where the spells were cast, Prominent Snake would effectively track it. However, Rushia would have to constantly keep track of the target during the chase, and if the target jumped, tracking would become momentarily impossible, meaning the spell could be evaded.

In this case, the enemy probably wouldn't notice during the initial attack, so a curving snipe from a safe distance would probably be enough.

“We’re going to unleash three times the magic power and take out the black-armored knights in one fell swoop,” I said determinedly.

The plan was as follows: Rushia would wait in a corridor two rounds away from the Underground Tree and kill the black-armored knights from a distance with Prominent Snake. After, when the enemy approached her, one of the Paladins would block the corridor and protect Rushia. The remaining two Paladins and I would emerge from another hidden passage on the other side of the Underground Tree.

The two Paladins would wait until the black-armored knights rushed Rushia and the zoraus were no longer protected, then ambush them. This was to ensure that the zoraus wouldn’t flee to another location and call reinforcements. After all, they didn’t seem to be fighters in the first place...

Lastly, I would support everyone with all my might.

It’s a perfect strategy, I thought. I’ll turn a blind eye to the fact that I’m just watching, as usual.

I’d told Rushia to retreat to the hidden passage if things got dicey, and that it would be even better if she could join me wherever I was at the time.

Now that the plan was laid out for everyone involved, I reapplied the Isolation spell, and hid in the shadows of the corridor opposite Rushia, above the Underground Tree chamber. Then, I waited for the moment of execution, until the promised time came.

Cautiously, I peeked out of the corridor and looked into the Underground Tree chamber. In that moment, a roaring sound approached from the opposite corridor, and the black-armored knights all turned in that direction.

A snake of flame slithered through the corridor and burst into the room, colliding with one of the black-armored knights. The unfortunate knight was engulfed in hellfire, and a high-pitched scream echoed throughout the room before it collapsed to the ground and lay motionless.

That killed it in a single blow, I thought, pleased. Just as you would expect from a Rank 9 single-target spell with triple its normal MP output, its power is immense.

The remaining enemies panicked, and the zoraus let out a screeching sound. Four of the black-armored knights tried to charge toward the corridor where Rushia was, but at that moment, another Prominent Snake appeared and took out one of them in a single hit.

At that point, I leveled up and reached Level 40.

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Rushia and I paused the battle to have a brief discussion in the White Room.

“We managed to kill them both,” I said. “That means that there are only three black-armored knights left on your side, Rushia.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “I’ll destroy the rest.”

Each black-armored knight had dropped three blue gems before disappearing, which we took as a sign that they were around Level 15. As I had thought, facing them head-on would have been quite dangerous.

I still have 7 skill points; guess I’ll save them for now, I decided.

We quickly left the White Room and returned to our original positions.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 40	SUPPORT MAGIC: 7
SUMMONING MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 7

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Now it was my turn.

Three armored knights and three zoraus remained on the ground. Their numbers might have been significant, but with all of us under the effect of

Isolation, the zoraus were essentially neutralized. There was no reason for us not to take them all down at once.

“Let’s go.”

At my signal, two Paladins emerged from the shadows of the corridor.

Chapter 165: Battle in the Underground Tree Chamber

The zoraus and the armored knights noticed us as soon as we jumped into the Underground Tree chamber. Their attention, which had been focused on the corridor where Rushia had been, suddenly shifted in our direction.

The slimy monsters contorted their forms and made a wave-like gesture toward me and the Paladins. It was probably some kind of mental attack, but it was of course powerless against us, since we were once again under the effects of Isolation.

When the zoraus realized that their typical mental attacks were ineffective, they let out a sound that sounded like scratching glass. Whether it was an expression of anger or an order to the armored knights, I couldn't tell, but shortly after, three of the armored knights charged us. I had the two Paladins intercept them. We were outnumbered, but...

"Deflection. Haste."

At my words, a red glow surrounded me and the two Paladins. Despite their heavy armor, the Paladins moved quickly, parrying and dodging the knights' attacks and delivering swift slashes in return. This was because the Paladins were already under the influence of my support spells. They had the basic set: Keen Weapon, Physical Up, and Mighty Arm.

Judging from their movements, the armored knights are less skilled than the Paladins. Plus, with the boost from my magic, even the fact that we're outnumbered should be compensated for.

Or at least, that was what I thought until two of the armored knights exploded—or, more accurately, swelled up. A shiver ran down my spine as I watched the scene unfold; the knights were spewing what looked like a mixture of fleshy buds and ropes out from all over their bodies.

"Those are... tentacles?"

My initial impression was confirmed when countless tentacles shot out from the knights and wrapped around the Paladins. As they were caught off guard by the unexpected attack, the Paladins weren't able to react in time, and the knights managed to pin them to the ground.

Even with two of the armored knights preoccupied with the Paladins, there was still one left that could fight, and now that our vanguard was down, it advanced on me. In the blink of an eye, it closed the distance between us.

"This is bad!" I cried as the knight lunged forward, swinging his sword downward in a strike that threatened to slice me in two.

That was when I activated my trump card: "Accel."

Accel was a Rank 7 Support Magic spell that accelerated one's consciousness. It was the counterpart to Haste, which increased physical agility. However, Accel could only be used on oneself, and its duration was only 0.5 to 0.75 seconds per rank. In my case, it would last between 3.5 and just over 5 seconds, but those few seconds would feel like almost half a minute to me.

Now that I was under the spell's effects, the knight seemed to move in slow motion, his actions agonizingly sluggish. I could even feel the air around me becoming viscous, causing my own movements to be incredibly slow as well. That said, being able to closely observe the movements of a skilled knight was invaluable. I might not have any hand-to-hand combat skills, but if I could get the timing right, I'd have the upper hand.

As I drew the knight closer, I chanted, "Reflection."

A prismatic fan-shaped membrane materialized in front of me. The knight's slash collided with the membrane and was repelled, causing the tentacle monster to be staggered by the force of its own attack.

"Now's my chance!" I said with a grin, reaching for the ace I had tucked up my sleeve.

It was a special item I had received from Rushia, a red gem that had been dropped by a monster. That made it sound ordinary, but it was anything but—this red gem had been imbued with both Rushia's and my magic using the Rank

6 Support Magic spell “Charge Spell.” This magic allowed one to store a spell in a mana-rich item like the red gem, preserving it until it was needed.

Still, while Charge Spell might seem incredibly convenient, it had several limitations. First, you could only store use it to store up to three spells at a time. If you had a Heal spell stored in three separate tokens, you wouldn’t be able to Charge Spell a fourth time unless one of those stored spells was used.

Second, if you used Charge Spell to store a long-range projectile spell, when you used your token it would manifest the effect of the stored spell right then and there. For example, if one stored a Fireball spell, it would explode right in front of the caster when released. That meant that most offensive spells couldn’t be stored using Charge Spell.

Third, only spells of Rank 2 or lower could be stored using Charge Spell, which took spells like Reflection off the table.

Therefore, the spell I had chosen for this occasion had been Reflection.

As time seemed to crawl, I chanted the command word for the release of another spell. The red gem in my right hand began to glow, and a sword surrounded by flames materialized in my palm. It was the result of my casting of the Rank 2 Fire Magic spell, Flame Sword.

Normally, a complete novice like me wielding such a weapon would be useless, but in my current accelerated state, things were different.

I thrust the flaming sword straight ahead, aiming for the gap in the knight’s helmet where its twin red eyes gleamed. Everything around me moved in slow motion. Then the blade sunk into the knight’s head with flawless precision.

Nearly the moment my blow landed, my accelerated state ended, and the world resumed its usual pace.

The knight let out a shrill scream and collapsed, and the impact caused his armor to sink to the ground as countless tentacles erupted from its gaps. Its helmet also came off, revealing a writhing mass of tentacles inside.

“Its entire body is made of tentacles?!”

That means that thing is, in essence, a tentacle humanoid, I thought. To think something like that would battle us clad in armor. If I had to give it a name... I'd call it a Tentacle Knight.

It was a grotesque creature, but I felt like I'd become somewhat accustomed to such horrors. That said, I was of course still afraid of facing such a creature in battle. The thought of being killed by such a thing was terrifying.

Speaking of fighting, the Tentacle Knight tried to get back up after throwing off its helmet. Unfortunately, it appeared my attack hadn't been fatal.

"Ugh, just stay down!" I shouted.

But the next moment, I found myself in the White Room.

Wait, did Rushia defeat someone? But I didn't hear the level-up sound...

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I realized almost right away once we entered the White Room that Rushia hadn't leveled up. She was sitting on the floor, clutching her right arm while casting healing magic on herself. Upon closer inspection, I saw her right hand was missing from the wrist down.

"Rushia... What happened?"

"I made a mistake," she replied, her face pained in a strange way I hadn't seen before.

She isn't just feeling physical pain, I realized. Something else is happening.

I finally got what had happened in that moment—Rushia had used her unique ability of Level-Up Suppression to level-up, allowing her to return to the White Room.

"Were you slashed by the armor?" I asked.

She nodded. "I managed to defeat one of them, but the other two black-armored enemies... One of them grew tentacles and held the Paladin down. Meanwhile, the other approached me, and..."

“So you were forced into hand-to-hand combat,” I said with a sigh. “Facing a tentacle knight one-on-one would have been understandably difficult.”

“Exactly,” she agreed. “That’s why I decided that leveling up was the only way to turn the situation around.”

She’d made the right decision. Even with my Accel ability, it would’ve been impossible for me to face one of those monsters head-on. I had still had a tough time fighting one when I’d snuck up on it earlier—I wasn’t sure I could win in a close combat fight. Plus, from our brief skirmish it’d become clear to me that despite the fact that the knight’s were beings made of tentacles, they had the combat power of a Rank 6 warrior. The power scaling was so inflated that it was hard to grasp, but to put it in perspective, the Elite Orcs that had felt so terrifyingly strong to me on my first day in this world had probably been around Rank 4.

So, even if I had a horde of Elite Orcs coming at me, they wouldn’t stand a chance against a frontliner like that, I thought with a shiver. And I, with zero sword skills, wouldn’t fare any better. Rushia might have a chance because of her training, but even then, it would be foolish to go head-to-head with one of them. Man, that’s scary.

These thoughts brought me to the question at hand: what should we do now?

“You came into this room to change our situation, right?” I asked Rushia. “Which skill do you think you’ll choose?”

Thanks to Flame Heal, Rushia’s bleeding had stopped. She tried to get up, but stumbled, and I quickly grabbed her shoulder and sat down beside her. There was a pool of blood at her feet, and my clothes quickly grew stained with it, but... Well, they’d already grown dirty from all the fighting.

Looking at Rushia’s face, I could see her usual stoic expression was back in place. Still, something about it seemed a little off.

Is she feeling down? I wondered.

“To be honest, those tentacles scared me too,” I said, trying to comfort her. “But we can survive this together.”

“Yeah, but...”

“It was my fault. My strategy was wrong. I’m sorry.”

I hugged Rushia. She tensed for a moment, then relaxed in my arms.

Damn it. I’m going all in.

I captured Rushia’s lips with mine. Her ruby eyes widened in surprise, but soon she responded passionately, and we lost ourselves in a fervent kiss.

Rushia had saved me earlier, and now it was my turn to help her, especially since her spirits seemed to be flagging. If we let fear take over our hearts, even the battles we could win would become insurmountable.

“Kazu, I have a request. Please... Help me forget the fear that’s taken root in my heart.”

I nodded in understanding.

Chapter 166: The Weakness of the Tentacle Knight

At this point, we had to make a decision: what should Rushia's second skill be? With this new skill, we had to overcome Rushia's dire situation. Currently, she was Level 28 with eleven skill points to spare. If she invested all of them into one skill, it would reach Rank 4.

Should we invest in a vanguard skill or learn another magic besides fire? I pondered.

"Right now, you're being challenged to melee by a Tentacle Knight, right, Rushia? So should we choose a staff skill that allows you to use the Bone Whip more effectively?"

"I hold the Bone Whip with my right hand," Rushia said grimly, looking at her right arm, which was missing from the wrist down.

Ah, so she lost the weapon when her wrist was severed. This is pretty bad...

"If we improved the Support Magic for Reflection... It's all about timing, but it's a possibility."

"But then our roles would overlap, Kazu."

"If we don't survive this situation, we'll both go down anyway," I pointed out. "And if you can extend the use of Accel, you'll also be able to engage in hand-to-hand combat."

Rushia shook her head. "If we don't have a strategy to survive now that will help us fight more efficiently in the future, I'll just be a burden in the upcoming battles."

"That's not true," I disagreed.

"It is. I realized it when I saw those ninjas. I can't possibly reach their level."

That's not the point, I thought. Yuuki and Keiko are extraordinary. I don't want her to see their abilities as standard.

“It’s not just the ninjas,” Rushia continued. “All of you Otherworldly Visitors can gain the same power as me just by leveling up. Even Magic Release can be obtained by collecting tokens. So...”

Rushia’s desperate eyes met mine. Her demeanor was different from usual, and I could see the signs of panic in her face. She looked as defeated as an abandoned kitten.

Suddenly, I understood the deep-seated desire in Rushia’s heart—she had a powerful need to be needed by someone.

Perhaps it was because of her upbringing. After all, she’d been born destined to be a member of the Squadron, among whom she was considered a slow learner in her younger days. She’d spent countless days rigorously training until the moment she could meet an Otherworldly Visitor like me, hoping that one day her efforts would be rewarded. Waiting all that time to awaken must have made her incredibly impatient.

All those feelings must have blended inside Rushia to create a sense of urgency that had remained in her even after she’d met us. She must feel, almost obsessively, that all her worth was tied up in the purpose that had defined her.

That’s not something I’m going to be able to fix immediately, however... I thought slowly.

“The fact remains that we have to win here, Rushia,” I began again. “Why don’t you acquire Earth Magic? The floor of the corridor is made of earth, and the hidden passage is made of concrete. When we retreat, we could use Stone Bind on it.”

Rushia shook her head again. I stared deep into her fiery crimson eyes, and she met my gaze in return. I could see that she had already made up her mind.

“Tell me, Rushia.”

“I want Water Magic.”

“Can you avert this situation with Water Magic?”

The reason why none of us, meaning the main team, had ever considered Water Magic was simple. Many Water Magic spells were most effective underwater, on water, or against aquatic enemies. There *were* spells like Aqua Blessing that allowed one to breathe underwater that could prove invaluable in certain situations, but we had discussed it and decided to deal with such situations as they arose.

That was, until now.

“I think I can,” Rushia said determinedly. “I already have enough firepower with my Fire Magic, and with Bright Shield, I can summon a shield for my left hand that should hopefully provide me with some protection. But even with that, I can’t possibly stand against the Tentacle Knight without additional help.”

I made a humming sound. “If you had Water Magic, then...”

Suddenly, I had an idea. *Of course! If we used that type of Water Magic on the tentacles, which are exposed flesh...*

“You’re thinking about Geyser?”

“Yes.”

Geyser was a Rank 4 Water Magic spell that cracked the ground and spewed out a hot spring upon use. The temperature of the water exceeded 100 degrees Celsius, and it appeared Rushia intended to soak the Tentacle Knight with it. She was probably prepared to get caught in it herself, which meant she’d accepted the possibility she might suffer severe burns.

“The Tentacle Knight is clad in sturdy armor, but I suspect the flesh inside, every single tentacle, is vulnerable,” Rushia added, confirming my suspicions.

“Is that your impression after the fight?”

Rushia nodded. “Plus, I saw that even though the Paladin ripped off its tentacles, he was still held back by many more. I thought using Geyser might be more effective than using my Fire Magic.”

I let out a short hum. She was right—using Fireball in melee combat would result in being caught in the explosion, and while Prominence Snake needed time to lock on, aiming with Flame Cutter was challenging. On the other hand, a

slightly weaker area-of-effect spell like Geyser, especially if it was lethal to the enemy, might be a desperate, game-changing move.

“It’s terrifying because those knights attack by overwhelming their prey with the sheer number of their tentacles, but if we can vaporize them all at once...” I took a deep breath. “I understand, and I trust you, Rushia. Make sure you survive.”

“I’ll do my best. And you please stay safe too, Kazu.”

We nodded at each other and shared another kiss. Then, before we resumed the fight, we discussed several other things.

Rushia spoke a bit about her future plans. She told me that even if her kingdom were to be restored, she had no intention of returning to her position as a princess.

“My sisters will handle the affairs of the kingdom well. So, Kazu, I want to be with all of you instead.”

“If that’s what you want, Rushia, then I’m happy. Let’s live together. I’ll take responsibility for you.”

“The only time we were intimate was in that White Room, so you don’t have to commit to taking care of me like that... But I appreciate your feelings anyway, Kazu.”

A realization hit me—once we conquered the Underground Temple of Rown, the final battle would be as good as won. The monsters had lost their main forces in the Holy City Akasha and the Spire of Haluran, and we had already managed to avert the destruction that had been prophesied.

We’re so close. The next few moments after we leave this room will determine our fate. Maybe that’s why we talked so much about the future.

Finally, we stood up, nodded to each other, and approached the PC.

Rushia calmly updated her Water Magic, and then we shared the last kiss as she hit the Enter key.

RUSHIA

LEVEL: 28	FIRE MAGIC: 9
WATER MAGIC: 0 → 4	SKILL POINTS: 11 → 1

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Just like that, we returned to the chamber where the Underground Tree was located.

In front of us, one of the Tentacle Knights tried to rise back to its feet. His helmet was off, and where his head should have been, countless tentacles writhed. Behind him, three zoraus swayed as if in a panic. They were probably trying to launch a psychic attack on us or the Paladins, but they seemed to be confused since it wasn't having any effect.

I need to believe in Rushia and do what I have to do. I must live up to her trust—I can't let her down.

"Seize the moment!" I cried, sprinting past the still recovering Tentacle Knight and charging at the zoraus.

The flaming sword I'd summoned before still blazed in my right hand.

Sensing my approach, the zoraus began to sway menacingly. Their gelatinous forms lashed out at me like whips.

"Accel!" I said hurriedly, accelerating my consciousness once more.

The sounds around me became muffled, and the movements of friend and foe seemed to shift into slow motion. A viscous sensation enveloped my entire body.

Even as my enemies approached, slow-moving now that the spell had been cast, I felt no fear. I dodged their attacks by a hair's breadth and swung my flaming sword at the closest of them.

The searing flames consumed the gelatinous creature, and the zoraus recoiled with a sound like scratching glass as the effects of Accel wore off and my

consciousness returned to normal. The transparent fluids of the zoraus I'd hit splattered everywhere, and behind me, the sound of metallic armor grew louder.

"Accel!" I cried again, using up the last of my MP as I activated the spell for the third time.

The Tentacle Knight, now on his feet, was closing in. As I turned, I swung my flaming sword, slicing through the myriad tentacles that rushed at me. Then I continued my attack on the Tentacle Knight, plunging my flaming sword into his head, and...

The acceleration ended.

Black smoke billowed from the tips of the knight's burned tentacles, and the stench of charred flesh filled the air. The Tentacle Knight let out a piercing scream and staggered back.

At that moment, one of the Paladins charged in, while another ripped off the tentacles binding him and came to my aid.

The first Paladin's slash sliced the defenseless Tentacle Knight in two, armor and all. As he screamed in agony, blue blood splattered everywhere. The inside of the armor was also filled with tentacles, but there seemed to be a core of flesh inside, which the Paladin quickly cut through with another slash.

The second Paladin who had managed to break free of the tentacles was now engaged in a fierce duel with the Tentacle Knight that had bound him. Since he hadn't caught the creature off guard, the battle seemed to last for some time, until finally the Tentacle Knight saw his comrade fall in a single blow and lunged forward at the Paladin.

"Forget him and finish off the zoraus!" I shouted.

I stepped forward, positioning myself directly in front of the Tentacle Knight as the Paladin advanced on the zoraus. It was a risky move, but the odds were in my favor. After all, I only had to hold the knight off for a few precious seconds.

"Accel!" I yelled, and my consciousness sped up once again.

The strain of overusing my magic weighed heavily on me, and I could feel my MP running low. A throbbing pain echoed in my head.

Could there be side effects to using Accel consecutively? Well, even if that's the case, it doesn't matter. If we don't win here, everything will be for nothing. Our future depends solely on our victory.

I waited for the creature to strike, then called out “Reflection!” at just the right moment to deflect its attack. Next, I lunged forward, driving my flaming sword into a gap in the knight’s armor.

After delivering the blow, I quickly retreated as the effects of Accel wore off.

Now that I had some breathing room, I glanced back and saw the Paladin still slashing at the zoraus. Then all of a sudden there was an agonizing scream, and I found myself back in the White Room.

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The scream had come from Rushia, who had just leveled up to Level 29. She looked pale, which made sense since she’d fought while bleeding heavily from her wrist.

In addition to her injuries, Rushia was now drenched from head to toe, and her face and limbs had turned a fiery red from being burned. It was the aftermath of her desperate Geyser attack, which had harmed her in the process.

Still, she had managed to take down one of the Tentacle Knights with it. The Water Magic had proven more effective than I’d expected.

That meant that only one Tentacle Knight remained on Rushia’s side, and with the Paladin still in fighting form, we were probably in the clear.

“Just a bit more to go. Let’s finish this, Kazu,” Rushia urged.

“Okay, but Rushia, don’t push yourself too hard,” I warned.

We returned to our original positions, ready to finish this once and for all.

LEVEL: 29	FIRE MAGIC: 9
WATER MAGIC: 4	SKILL POINTS: 3

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The rest of the battle felt like a mere formality, and by the time Rushia and I had defeated all the zoraus and Tentacle Knights, we’d both leveled up once. Our levels were now 41 and 30, respectively.

Using my new skill points, I upgraded my Support Magic to Rank 8, which would provide various conveniences. In particular, I’d be able to use a spell called Power, which increased the output of attack magic. Although it might not be as powerful as Rushia’s Magic Release, it would certainly come in handy.

Rushia, on the other hand, upgraded her Water Magic to Rank 5. Even though there weren’t any immediately useful spells, it seemed like the best choice to continue improving her new skill rather than picking something new.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 41	SUPPORT MAGIC: 7 → 8
SUMMONING MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 9 → 1

RUSHIA	
LEVEL: 30	FIRE MAGIC: 9
WATER MAGIC: 4 → 5	SKILL POINTS: 5 → 0

Chapter 167: Liberating the Underground Temple

After destroying all our enemies, I stood still for a moment, collecting myself. Rushia, meanwhile, made her way further into the underground temple chamber, supported by the Paladin.

Although she appeared unsteady on her feet, most of Rushia's wounds and burns seemed to have been healed by magic. Her right wrist, however, could not be healed by Fire or Water Magic, and the Paladin was holding onto the severed portion of Rushia's wrist with its free hand. To reattach it, we'd need Arisu's Healing Magic, since she'd cultivated higher ranking healing skills.

Rushia briefly touched the Underground Tree of Rown with her left hand and closed her eyes, but quickly reopened them and looked back at me.

"Is there any chance it won't work?" I asked from where I was watching over her.

She shook her head. "But please deactivate the Isolation spell. It seems to be interfering with our telepathic connection."

"Ah, I see," I said, acting on her words at once.

The Isolation spell not only protected a person from mental attacks, but prevented telepathic connections as well. From what I remembered, it even hindered divine oracle magic and Remote Viewing, which I'd confirmed in a Q&A session. It was a double-edged sword, so to speak, but given its power, such drawbacks seemed inevitable. After all, creatures like the zoraus became mere fodder once the spell was cast upon them.

Rushia touched the withered tree again, and her body slowly began to float. Then, with a soft puff, she vanished. Before I could even comprehend what was happening, she was completely gone.



“Wait, Rush—!”

“It’s okay, Kazu. I’ve successfully connected with the Underground Tree,” said Rushia’s voice. It echoed through the room, coming from seemingly nowhere.

The next moment, the withered tree that had been standing lifeless suddenly glowed with a pale blue light. It quickly sprouted green leaves and its branches stretched out, turning lush and vibrant in mere moments. It was like watching a fast-forwarded segment of an educational television program.

Within ten seconds, the magnificent tree had reached almost to the ceiling.

“So, this is the result of unsealing the Godstone?” I wondered.

If I were to use Mana Vision, I’d probably see an immense outpouring of mana. I decided not to; the brilliance might be too blinding and harmful to the eyes.

“Speaking of which, it’s been an hour,” I muttered. “I wonder how things are outside.”

“There’s a battle going on near the temple entrance,” Rushia reported, likely having checked because she shared my concern.

“How is your control of the Underground Tree?”

“Not perfect, but I can intervene a bit.”

“Then please continue.”

The Underground Tree radiated a blinding light. I shielded my eyes and watched Rushia’s efforts as best I could.

Suddenly, there was a commotion at one of the exits of the chamber. It wasn’t the way I had come, nor the way Rushia had come.

Ah, this must be the work of those who noticed the anomaly with the Underground Tree, I thought.

“Intercept them,” I ordered the Paladins, directing two of the three of them toward the entrance.

I kept one Paladin at my side as a guard. I didn’t have any other choice—seriously, I was *completely* out of MP.

As expected, a number of zoraus entered the room—three of them in total—and the Paladins quickly cut them down.

I leveled up again.

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Now that we were back in the White Room, Rushia sat down on the floor with a slightly tired look on her face. It was an uncharacteristically sloppy move of her. Perhaps she felt deflated.

“Thank you for your hard work,” I told her sincerely. “Can you tell me exactly what’s happening outside?”

“Yes,” she agreed. “The vanguard of the allied forces attacked the swarm of Arachnae. I saw Arisu and Tamaki, and right behind them, Mia was providing support.”

Oh, so those three were in the battle as well.

“I must have worried them,” I mused.

“Kazu, you should be scolded by them. Leaving without saying anything wasn’t the best decision.”

She’s absolutely right, I admitted silently to myself.

Rushia’s shoulders dropped a little, and she suddenly broke into a smile. “I’ll apologize with you,” she declared.

“Uh, okay.”

Rushia held out her hand. I sat down beside her and held it.

“We have a lot to apologize for,” I pointed out.

Rushia nodded. “Still, when it comes to what happened between us, it might be better to explain it openly than to apologize.”

“Yes, you’re right. But I’m quite shy, you see...”

I trailed off, feeling incredibly pathetic.

Well, I am incredibly pathetic. Really, I’m well aware.

“If you want, you can say that I was the one who pursued you,” Rushia offered.

I sighed. “Mia would see through that in a second.”

“I see. That would only complicate things, wouldn’t it?”

Well, yes, but that’s not the point.

“I’ll say it again—I’ll take responsibility for what we did,” I said.

“Okay.” Rushia blushed and nodded shyly.

Ah, she looks as cute as a small puppy. Oh, but that reminds me. What’s going on with the whole battle situation?

“You intervened in the battle outside, didn’t you?” I asked. “What happened?”

“I took care of everything with the Underground Tree.”

Wait, what? I mean, to say that so casually...

“In the end, the assault team sealed the entrance,” Rushia explained. “The monsters inside will be crushed by the roots of the Underground Tree. We’ve actually already contained about eighty percent of them, meaning we’ve defeated about a hundred creatures.”

“A hundred creatures in such a short time? Is that even possible?”

“Indeed it is, but unfortunately, it seems that we don’t gain experience points when we attack with the Underground Tree. Is it okay if we kill all the monsters anyway?”

If they’re talking about that level of extermination, then taking on even divine-class soldiers would have been a piece of cake for Aulnaav... The power of the Underground Tree of Rown really is impressive. With a fortress like Iserlohn, how did Rushia’s people ever lose? Oh, right, I remembered. They mentioned earlier that Zagarazina attacked. That guy was so strong that he could probably knock out even divine-class soldiers with ease.

I shuddered as I remembered the strength of the monster we had faced back on the school mountain. Even though it had been overconfident, it was a

miracle that we had managed to escape.

Will we be okay the next time we meet? I wondered.

I really didn't want to see it again. But even after today, the battles would continue. We'd have to face it one day.

Today's battle had made it clear—among the current allied forces, there was no one with combat power comparable to ours.

Although, if things continue like this, Yuuki and Keiko might come close to matching our strength.

"You can go ahead and wipe them out," I finally said aloud. "But you can leave some loot for Arisu and the others."

"I will, especially for Mia. She'd probably appreciate that."

Yes, Mia is quite the game addict, I admitted internally. Speaking of which, when she finds out about my relationship with Rushia, she'll probably make a fuss... Well, I'll think about it when the time comes.

"Actually, giving up experience points makes me a little sad," Rushia admitted.

"Huh? Why?"

"I was finally catching up in levels..."

Oh, right. Arisu and the others are all at Level 32 now, aren't they? Rushia mentioned that she had leveled up with me this time, so she just reached Level 31. Just one more level-up, and she would've caught up.

Honestly, since we'd entered the Underground Temple together, the two of us had gained too much experience. We'd have been doomed against the zoraus if I hadn't learned Isolation—anyone without the spell likely would have been. With it, however, they'd become small fry.

We'd just been lucky at the end of the day, since we hadn't had any advance information on the enemy we'd been about to face. Although... maybe it *had* been more than just luck...

I'm starting to think that support and summoning skills are essential for almost every dungeon—or rather, enemy territory in our case, I thought.

While Summoning Magic could be replaced by scouting skills or vanguard-type skills, Support Magic couldn't be replaced by any other magic. Even Healing Magic spells like Heal could be roughly replaced with the four elements' equivalents like Fire Magic's Flame Heal.

I hadn't thought much about the uniqueness of Support Magic when I had first learned it. At that time, I had been focused on just surviving and hadn't been thinking about the future. And yet, the choice I had made that first day, when I had defeated an orc for the first time, was now proving its worth.

Oh, and now that I think about it, Rushia's expression and her general demeanor seem a bit softer now, I realized.

"Rushia, has something changed in you?"

A thoughtful look came over her face. "Do you think so? It's possible, I guess. Perhaps because I've become closer to you, I feel more free in expressing my wants and needs."

"If that's the case, I'm glad. Getting closer than we were before is a good thing."

Rushia leaned against my back. "It's the first time I've felt like indulging with someone other than my nursemaid and maidservants," she admitted.

"Well, you've always been on guard, living with constant tension."

"That's not exactly how it was..." she refuted. "But regardless, I've come to think that this way of living is nice, too."

I see. Well, if Rushia feels that way, it's a good thing, I guess. It just kind of feels like I'm leading her astray. Either way, the fight here is over. And as for the many problems that lie ahead... I'll leave that to others for now.

With that, my moment of intimacy with Rushia came to an end, and we briefly discussed our plans before leaving the White Room.

The long fourth day had ended with a narrow victory for the allied forces.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 42	SUPPORT MAGIC: 8
SUMMONING MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 3

RUSHIA	
LEVEL: 31	FIRE MAGIC: 9
WATER MAGIC: 5	SKILL POINTS: 2

Chapter 168: Arisu's Scolding

In the deepest part of the Underground Temple of Rown, I stood guard in the chamber of the Underground Tree, standing guard as Rushia merged with it. An hour had passed, and during that time, we faced a number of sporadic attacks. Each time, the three Paladins and I had managed to repel our enemies, we'd now managed to defeat seven zoraus and twenty-nine goblins in total. My level had increased by one, growing to 43, while Rushia's level had increased by two to 33, which had enabled her to enhance her Water Magic to Rank 6. This had expanded our tactical options even more.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 43	SUPPORT MAGIC: 8
SUMMONING MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 5

RUSHIA	
LEVEL: 33	FIRE MAGIC: 9
WATER MAGIC: 5 → 6	SKILL POINTS: 6 → 0

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Each time I visited the White Room, I exchanged information about the progress of the search with Rushia, who was now fully integrated with the Underground Tree. Apparently, Arisu and her team had broken through the

arachnae at the frontline and successfully entered the Underground Temple. Rushia also told me that more and more other units were beginning to come inside.

“Actually, I captured some monsters a few times and presented them to Arisu and the others... but Mia scolded me,” Rushia admitted.

“Why?” I asked, confused. “She’s always nagging about experience points.”

“She said that reuniting with you was more important to her right now.”

Normally Mia would just make a joke or two, I thought, discomfited. Sounds like she’s lacking her usual composure. Is she maybe still upset because I acted on my own? Well, I guess I deserve some scolding. I should apologize.

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Soon, Arisu and the rest of her group arrived at the chamber of the Underground Tree, where I was. When Arisu and Tamaki saw my face, they looked like they were about to cry.

“Kazu-san!”

“We were so worried!”

The two of them rushed toward me and hugged me tightly, shedding tears of joy. Tamaki especially seemed moved, burying her face in my shirt and mumbling, “There it is—Kazu-san’s scent...”

Hey, hold on.

Confused, I looked over at Mia, who was standing a few steps back. From Rushia’s tone, I’d thought she’d be pretty angry, but she was just staring at me sleepily like usual.

“Hmm. You should have blown up.”

“I’m really sorry... Were you the one who tried to stop them?”

Mia just shrugged, and I gave her a resigned look.

I always seem to owe her.

“Kazu-san!” Arisu broke in, looking up at me with teary eyes filled with accusation. “Please don’t leave us behind again!”

“I thought you looked tired,” I said, blurting out the first excuse I could think of. “Besides, only Rushia and I could handle this mission.”

“Still, you could have at least told us! I... I...” Arisu burst into tears.

Panicking, I instinctively patted her head, trying to comfort her like a child, but that only made her cry harder.

Oh, this is hopeless.

“By the way, where is Rushia?” Mia asked.

“Oh, well... She’s inside that tree,” I said, pointing to the Underground Tree of Rown.

By now, it had transformed into a large thriving tree, lush with life. Its branches almost reached the room’s domed ceiling.

I explained to Mia that Rushia was controlling countless trees from inside it, fighting against our enemies outside the Underground Temple.

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“On our way here, we were helped several times by trees sprouting from the ground. Rushia-san controlled them directly, didn’t she?” Arisu, who had stopped crying, exclaimed in admiration. “That’s why she would sometimes deliberately bind the monsters and let us deal the final blow!”

I nodded. “I heard Mia got angry about that.”

“Hmm. Well, we didn’t know the extent of the threats lurking in this temple.”

To be honest, I had shared their concerns. The Underground Tree of Rown couldn’t spread its roots inside the temple, so if the zoraus had coordinated their attacks, I might not have been able to protect Rushia alone. Fortunately, the zoraus weren’t strategic fighters. They had only launched sporadic attacks, deploying their forces piecemeal and mostly just charging at us. Thanks to that, we’d been able to successfully defend this room.

“Oh, by the way, Kazu-san! I’ve reached Level 33! And Arisu is at 34!”

The girls informed me that Arisu had upgraded her Healing Magic, Tamaki her Strength, and Mia her Earth Magic, all to Rank 6. Apparently that had seemed the logical choice since they hadn’t seen the need to upgrade other skills.

“But to think that Rushia would merge with a tree... Where on earth did she get exposed to Getter Rays?” Mia asked.

“Let’s not talk about merging or evolving,” I said. “It sounds ominous.”

“Whatever,” Mia replied. “Anyway, back to the point. It’s still not cool that you went off on your own while we were sleeping.”

I was hoping she’d just let it go, but... This time, I should admit my mistake.

“I’m sorry,” I said, chagrinned. “I worried everyone.”

“You should think about your actions before you act on them,” Arisu said, puffing up her cheeks and trying to look stern.

Thankfully, her expression soon softened. Just looking at me seemed to make her happy.

“To be honest, Arisu, I think you have every right to scold me more,” I admitted.

“Wh-When you say that, do you mea—”

“I’ll scold him for you! Kazu-san, close your eyes!”

Tamaki raised her hand, and I obediently offered her my cheek. I thought I deserved at least a slap for what I had done, but instead of a slap, I felt a soft touch on my lips. When I opened my eyes, a blushing Tamaki was standing right in front of me.

“He he... Now, Arisu, it’s your turn to punish him.”

“O-Okay!”

Ah well, this is inevitable, it seems, I thought with a grin. *I mean, it’s my punishment, after all.*

I pulled Arisu to me and kissed her. Then Mia approached, so I lightly pressed my lips to her forehead.

“That’s unfair! Discrimination!” she protested.

“Well... I thought you’d want to add a punchline or something.”

“You say that,” Mia muttered, pouting, “but your eyes tell me you’re just messing with me.”

Seeing how crestfallen Mia was, I gave in and pressed my lips lightly against hers.

It wouldn’t be fair to leave her out of this. Although I do have something to report after we’re done...

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As the girls and I talked, more soldiers had begun to gather in the chamber of the Underground Tree. At the moment, a middle-aged commander was briefing Mia on some information with a tense expression on his face. Mia was leaning back exaggeratedly, responding to the man with an air of command about her.

She really excels at playing this role, I thought, amused. It’s really helpful, too.

“Kazu, the soldiers are saying that the temple is almost completely under our control, and that the hostages were rescued safely. Should we bring them back to the World Tree?”

“Yes, that’s the plan,” I confirmed. “But before that, let’s meet them in here. Would that be okay with you, Rushia?”

I looked up at the huge tree, and its leaves rustled as if blown by the wind.

“Yes, Kazu. Please take care of my sisters,” came Rushia’s voice, echoing through the room.

Right. But who should be in charge of that?

“I’ll leave the security here to the soldiers, and... Tamaki, I’m counting on you to oversee things.”

“Roger that!” Tamaki replied energetically.

“Arisu, Mia, come with me. I want to greet Rushia’s sisters.”

All it took was those few words, and Mia seemed to understand everything.

“So, when you say ‘sisters,’ you mean they’re like Rushia?” the petite girl asked, walking at my side now that she’d quickly caught up with me.

“Yeah. I think there’s a good chance.”

“Hmm... If they can level up, they’ll be a valuable asset.”

Olar and the other sisters, like Rushia, had probably been born to be members of the Squadron and therefore received special training. We had to confirm if they could level up first, but I figured that if they could, we would ask them to join our forces. They might be weakened, but with magic, things would probably work out... Or so I hoped. Truthfully, it all depended on how much Arisu’s magic could heal.

“With a Rank 7 Revive spell, almost anything is possible,” I said to Mia. “But Arisu is still at Rank 6.”

Revive was a spell similar to the Rank 4 spell Cure Deficiency, but more powerful. While Cure Deficiency required a missing body part to heal a wound, Revive could regenerate a healthy body for a person just by casting the spell. Given that, it should be able to cure anything but muscle atrophy... Well, except for baldness. I repeat, it cannot cure baldness.

“By the way, Kazu...” Mia said slowly, “I want to ask you something.”

“What’s with the formal tone?”

“Did you sleep with Rushia?”

I stopped dead in my tracks. Mia stared at me intently, and Arisu, who had just joined us, was giving me a confused look.

“It’s as you guessed,” I admitted.

“I appreciate your honesty.”

“We’ll discuss the details later,” Mia snickered with a smug look on her face.

Damn her.

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Olar and Rushia's other sisters were being meticulously cared for in a separate room. Young girls from the CAC group were busily casting Heal and Cure Mind spells on them.

Maybe we didn't need Arisu after all, I mused.

"You're here," Shiki remarked, her arms crossed. She looked visibly tired. "Did you get a proper scolding from Arisu and the others?"



“I expressed my remorse thoroughly,” I confirmed.

“Good. Next time, try to be a little more reasonable. I wish I could have shown you the looks on their faces when they heard that you’d left them behind.”

Ah, I see. I really screwed up, didn’t I? Once again, I’m falling victim to the results of my own actions...

“Well, let’s put that aside for now,” Shiki said with a sigh. “The sisters’ representative here, Ms. Olar, mentioned that she might be able to access the White Room as well. Kazu, are you aware of that?”

So, the subject has already come up, I thought. That’s convenient, but I bet Olar is already thinking about how to use her newfound power politically.

Given that, was it really okay for me to let Olar level up? I had to consider this matter for a moment.

It’ll be fine, I finally decided. We don’t have the luxury to be picky with our allies right now.

“Yes,” I told Shiki, beginning to explain the situation. “I’ll give you a brief overview.”

Shiki listened intently, nodding occasionally as she did. Her arms remained crossed.

Chapter 169: The Victory of the Allied Forces

After discussing it with Shiki, we'd decided to let Olar enter the White Room for now, and Shiki had gone ahead and formed a party with her and unlocked her level-up suppression.

Olar claimed to have experience points equivalent to defeating seven or eight orcs, which she had earned by defeating creatures like goblins during the battles she'd undertaken defending Aulnaav. It also seemed that she, like Rushia, had acquired advanced skills to protect herself.

To make a long story short, Olar had successfully leveled up. She also seemed to get along surprisingly well with Shiki, and the two appeared to have very engaging conversations.

"Hmm. When two schemers come together, the atmosphere becomes incredibly grim," I remarked.

"Even if you think so, don't say things that could cause diplomatic problems," Shiki quipped.

I mean, it wasn't like I wasn't considering that too! I thought indignantly.

The young girl—who I thought had mentioned earlier that she had once been Rushia's maids—gave us a wry smile. She'd been listening to our conversation this whole time.

Considering how lifeless the girl's eyes had looked when we first met, her swift recovery, even if aided by magic, was impressive. It made me want to reunite her with Rushia later.

According to Olar, there were seventeen surviving members of Rushia's sisters, all of whom had been a part of the Squadron. Some were imprisoned elsewhere, but all of those who were present in the Underground Temple of Rown agreed to cooperate with us, meaning the Otherworldly Visitors of the

CAC group. When Olar had told me this, the mischievous grin that had appeared on Shiki's face had been quite memorable.

"Shiki-san, you'll have to fill me in on the details of this deal later," I told her.

"Sure, later."

"This is bad," Mia muttered under her breath. "That Olar girl is so shady."

She's teasing Shiki-san so naturally, I thought, in full agreement with Mia. *What a fearless girl.*

"Kazu-kun, let's leave the mopping up to the others and return to the World Tree for now," Shiki suggested, jolting me from my thoughts.

"Are we leaving Rushia here?" I asked.

"Politically, it's not advantageous for Rushia to continue using the Underground Tree," Shiki replied.

I looked at Olar, who gave me a wry smile in response. The expression made her look a lot like Rushia.

"Rushia doesn't want to be the pillar of the people, does she?" Olar inquired.

"How did you know that?" I asked, confused. "It's true; Rushia did say something similar."

"Considering her behavior earlier and the fact that she goes by the name 'Rushia,' it's pretty obvious."

Right, the name "Rushia" has a meaning, I realized. *If I remember correctly, it meant "the one who ends" or something like that. It's not really a suitable name for a ruler.*

"Master of the Otherworldly Visitors, please take care of Rushia. Among us, she is the most extraordinary, but at the same time, she has the loneliest heart," Olar told me earnestly.

"Uh... Yes, I understand," I replied, a little taken aback.

Olar held out her right hand. "May we shake hands? I've heard that for you, it's a sign of agreement."

"Yes, well, that's one way of putting it," I said, looking at Shiki.

She was smiling. She must have informed Olar of what handshakes meant during their time in the White Room.

I shook Olar's hand. Her grip was stronger than I had expected.

"We will soon send someone to replace Rushia as the priestess of the Underground Tree," Shiki proclaimed. "But before that, Kazu-kun, you, me, and Leen need to have a meeting."

"Right, we may have won, but we still need to organize and assess the situation," I agreed.

We quickly divided our tasks. Mia would return to the Underground Tree chamber to join Tamaki and Rushia. Then, once Rushia was free, all three girls would return to the World Tree. Shiki, Arisu, and I would return to the World Tree first to report directly to Leen.

"Take care of Tamaki and the others, Mia," I said.

"Leave it to me," the girl replied, giving a mock salute as she bid us farewell.

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Fortunately, in the time it took for us to return to the World Tree, there were no more attacks. Along the way, I had casually explained to Arisu what had happened between Rushia and me.

"If you don't report in properly, I might get a little sulky, you know," she'd remarked.

"Just sulky, huh?" I'd replied.

"But Kazu, you told me right away what happened with Tamaki," Arisu had pointed out.

She wasn't wrong, but there had also been so many other things going on at that time. Remembering them had made me become lost in thought—there were so many life-threatening situations we'd had to face. Undoubtedly, Rushia's dedication had played a key role in our survival and success.

“This is a good development though, isn’t it?” Shiki had asked, having apparently eavesdropped a little bit. She turned to look at us with a surprisingly cheerful expression. “Personally, I really wanted to win this princess over. Both politically and militarily, she’ll be invaluable to us. A perfect pawn.”

“I knew you’d think that!” I’d exclaimed.

After that, we’d warped in a few different places, following our usual routine, before arriving at Leen’s house.

Although Leen was the leader of the People of Light, the area around her office in the tree was usually quiet. But now the area was buzzing with activity and noise.

I wonder what’s going on, I thought.

A guard soon noticed our arrival and informed Leen of our presence. Then, once she’d given her permission, we entered the hollow of the World Tree.

Several armored figures surrounded Leen. Judging by their advanced age and the quality of their equipment, they probably held high-ranking positions—it was possible they were even generals.

The leaders of the People of Light stared at us in surprise as we entered. Then, at Leen’s command, they quickly dispersed, though some looked slightly displeased as they left the hollow.

“What happened?” Shiki asked Leen directly.

Under the illumination of the magical orange light on the wall, Leen’s face looked slightly pale. “A part of the World Tree’s barrier has been breached,” she explained succinctly. Though she tried to remain calm, her voice trembled slightly. “An army of monsters has reached the World Tree. Among them, members of the Four Heavenly Kings have been sighted.”

It was the worst news we’d heard all day.

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It was useless to argue that the World Tree’s barrier was supposed to be perfect—the enemy had simply outmaneuvered us, and we were already too

familiar with the skill and cunning of the monsters.

From what Leen told us, three spots in the barrier protecting the World Tree had been compromised. It had only taken five minutes to repair them, but in that short window of time, over a thousand monsters had entered.

“A thousand... And even members of the Four Heavenly Kings?” I asked, almost gasping for breath. My throat felt dry, and I clenched my fists. “Enemies on par with Azagralith?”

Of the five human strongholds—the keystones protecting the continent—two had already fallen. If the monsters captured the keystone of the World Tree, the prophecy of the continent’s doom would come true. There would be no escape for humanity, including us. The only way to survive would be to defend the World Tree and fight to the last man. But against such monstrous enemies, with our current strength...

“Kazu...” Arisu looked up at me, her eyes filled with fear.

I couldn’t find the words to comfort her.

“Kazu.” Shiki said, her voice breaking through my thoughts.

I came back to myself, and noticed that she had placed her hand over mine. She was trembling slightly.

Is she that afraid to touch me? I wondered. *And she reached out anyway?*

I looked up to meet Shiki’s eyes. The leader of our group smiled defiantly.

“We don’t have to jump to conclusions,” Shiki said. “Luckily, we’re here. Leen is here. And soon, Yuuki and the others will return. Let’s strategize.”

Shiki pulled me over toward Leen, and we arranged ourselves into our usual circle, and a woman who was apparently serving Leen brought us tea, her dog ears twitching. I took a sip. To my surprise, it was cool and slightly sweet, and proved soothing to my parched throat.

“It’s cooled with spirit magic,” Leen explained with a faint smile, taking a deep gulp of her own tea.

Shiki, Arisu, and I drank in silence. Then we all took a deep breath, though it was Shiki who broke the silence.

“Can you tell us about the Four Heavenly Kings who invaded?” she asked Leen. “We need to know our enemy to fight them.”

“Of course. Let’s start with the Plant King, Aga-su,” Leen began.

Aga-su... I’ve never heard that name before. I wonder if it’s the most formidable monster to ever threaten the World Tree...

Chapter 170: The Plant King

Aga-su, one of the Four Heavenly Kings, had once earned the nickname “The Plant King” because of his ability to manipulate trees.

“It is said that Aga-su belongs to the treant species,” Leen explained.

“Weren’t treants also used by our soldiers?” Arisu inquired, remembering our recent alliance with the People of Light.

Indeed, from what I remembered they *had* summoned treants and used them as familiars, and they had been quite formidable.

“Treants are an ancient species native to this land,” Leen continued. “We, the People of Light, have always maintained a friendly relationship with them. Nowadays, however, the original species has dwindled, and those we summon as familiars have become more common.”

“It’s like the Crimson Turtles Rushia mentioned,” I chimed in. “They settled in this land after being summoned by Rushia’s ancestors.”

“It’s possible that treants have a similar history,” Leen said thoughtfully. “They’re mentioned in the oldest records of our people’s lore. It’s a story from the distant past, but...”

At this point, it was hard to tell whether they had been summoned or were native to this land, I finished silently.

The origins of this world and how much of it fit the myths remained uncertain, but regardless of where it had come from, Aga-su, one of the Four Heavenly Kings, was a treant. Treants were monstrous trees that could control the vegetation around them.

“Fighting him in a forest would be risky, right?” Arisu deduced.

“Exactly. And while I doubt he can control the World Tree, the surrounding area is dense with ancient trees, many over a thousand years old,” Leen added.

Perhaps the dense mana around the World Tree fostered the growth of such massive trees, I mused.

“As for Aga-su’s abilities,” Leen continued, “there are reports that when he controls older trees, their movements become sluggish. Trees also show significant weakening as they grow older due to their advanced age. It could be similar to the phenomenon of aging in humans.”

So even treants age, I thought. It seems that aging is a universal truth for all living things.

“More disturbing is Aga-su’s ability to control countless vine-like plants,” Leen continued. “Unlike large trees, these vines are agile, and he can control over a hundred of them simultaneously. Using this ability, known as ‘Rampage Thorn,’ he has wiped out seven forest nations.”

“And he did that all by himself, right?” Shiki asked. “Considering his abilities, it seems plausible.”

It would indeed be more efficient for Aga-su to rampage alone, given that he can continuously increase his allies as long as he’s in a forest, I thought. But that means...

“Could it be that he doesn’t know how to coordinate with other monsters?”

“It’s a possibility,” Leen said, nodding in agreement with my speculation.

If a thousand monsters really did infiltrate through that breach in the barrier, the fact that Aga-su can’t fight as it’s used to could prove our silver lining, I mused.

“We can’t just rely on wishful thinking,” Shiki said sharply, seeming to catch onto my thoughts.

She was right. Underestimating the enemy had never led to anything good.

“The extent of Aga-su’s other abilities remains unknown,” Leen began again. “So far, he’s defeated every army he’s faced using only his plant manipulation. There are scant records of assassination squads that have managed to bypass his guards and challenge him directly, but... Well, none have returned.”

“Are there no records of anyone using observation-type magic, like Remote Viewing, against him?” I asked.

Leen shook her head silently.

Such magic might be a state secret, so it was understandable if survivors from other nations didn’t know about it. Although ideally, we’d want them to have and share such information.

It seems many things will have to happen before the nations of this world can share information and work together in battle, I thought tiredly. *From Leen’s tone, today’s strategy may have been their first coordinated effort.*

Given the circumstances, the lack of information was understandable, albeit frustrating.

“By the way, what other monsters came with Aga-su?” I asked.

“It seems that the main force consists of humanoid monsters that resemble orcs. In addition, there are about a hundred fast quadruped beasts and about fifty giants.”

“Sounds like a brute force formation,” Shiki remarked, implying that the monsters lacked a cohesive strategy.

“Yeah, and taking down orcs is our specialty at the CAC!” Arisu exclaimed.

“Arisu-chan is right, but it’s a specialty I’d rather not have to take advantage of,” I bemoaned. “Still, the only ones capable of defeating generals are my group, Sakura-san, Yuuki-senpai, and Keiko.”

Considering how much we’d struggled on the second day, it was reassuring to know that our members had grown significantly since then. If the CAC team worked together with the senior students, we should be able to destroy the orcs. As for the giant and beast-type monsters, if we focused and divided our efforts, we should be able to handle them. The real challenge would be Aga-su, but if his only ability was to control trees, we should have countermeasures.

The only problem is if they all decide to attack at once.

“As long as all the monsters don’t attack at the same time, we should have an opening,” Shiki said.

I nodded in agreement. “In other words, if we can reduce their numerical advantage, we’ll have a chance,” I told the group.

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Shortly after our conversation came to a close, Yuuki arrived, and with him on our side, we began to draw up a detailed battle plan. The enemy was already on the move, but the Royal Guard of the People of Light had managed to delay their advance.

The casualties on their side were probably immense, but if we couldn’t mount a solid counterattack here and now, it would all be over. We had to make the most of every second the Royal Guard gave us, even if it meant them sacrificing their lives.

“It might not be my place to say this, but we might have to prepare for there to be some casualties this time,” Yuuki said solemnly.

Unlike before, all the Otherworldly Visitors—both the seniors and the Cultural Arts Center team—would have to be on the front lines. Apart from Rushia, the five of us, together with Yuuki, Keiko, and a few others, were the most powerful forces, so it made sense for us to be reserved for the final battle against Aga-su. That meant that others would have to take on the roles we had previously held.

“We must minimize our losses,” Leen explained.

Her forces had been stretched thin by the battles of the past two days, and now, she’d been forced to deploy her last untouched unit, the Royal Guard. Still, she was concerned about the possibility of us suffering losses. The reason was simple: for the foreseeable future, we, the Otherworldly Visitors, were the only beings capable of facing the enemies of the gods beyond the few surviving members of the Squadron.

After a few more days of intense battle, the second-tier group, except for Sakura Nagatsuki, would probably be able to face god-tier enemies as well. The concept of leveling up and the existence of the White Room were humanity’s only hope and the ultimate cheat code in this bleak world.

“If only it were tomorrow,” I muttered unintentionally.

Everyone smiled wryly. Their thoughts were clear: *Yes, if only the monsters would behave according to our wishes.*

That said, our plan was to make them do just that. We had to manipulate the monsters to act in our favor, to lead them in the optimal numbers, along the optimal route, to the optimal location. Then destroy them.

Our plan thus cemented, Leen and the rest of us began pouring over a map of the area around the World Tree, discussing and strategizing.

In the middle of our discussion, Rushia, Mia, and Tamaki arrived. Rushia's right hand had already been healed, not by Arisu's magic but by another healer from the Cultural Arts Center who had cast a Cure Deficiency spell on it.

"I have heard that the enemy has infiltrated the area around the World Tree," Rushia declared. "Leen, my sisters want to join the battle as well."

"Then they should stay in the rear," Leen replied. "We should give priority to those who excel in long-range attacks."

"Understood. I'll pass on the message," Rushia said, then left.

Next, a soldier took her place and informed us that the Royal Guard's efforts to hold off the enemy were nearing their limit.

They've done remarkably well, I thought.

My MP was now fully restored, so I used the surplus to cast Harden Weapon and Harden Armor spells to improve my equipment. Thanks to my recent upgrades, these spells were even more powerful than they'd been before.

Shiki clapped her hands to get everyone's attention. "All right everyone, this is our last big task for today. Let's survive and ensure our victory."

Everyone, including Leen, nodded in agreement, and then we began to leave Leen's house, which had served as our makeshift conference room.

"Hey, Kazu. What should I do?" Tamaki asked as we left.

"I'll explain as we go. The strategy is a bit complicated this time," I replied.

"Oh, you can skip the details! I probably won't remember them anyway!" Tamaki said with a cheeky grin.

This girl... We really need to find a way to make her more reliable.

Chapter 171: Guardians of the World Tree

The combined combat teams of the CAC group and the senior division, which came to a total of just under sixty members, teleported close to the World Tree.

The first thing I noticed was the change in the sound emanating from the World Tree. Previously, it had been a serene melody reminiscent of the Japanese national anthem, sung in a bell-like voice. Now, it had changed to a sound that tugged at the heart which resembled the sobbing of a young girl. It was deeply disturbing.

“Please use these,” said a woman waiting in the hall. She handed us circular objects made of leaves; I noticed she wore a similar one around her neck. “They are protective amulets woven from the leaves of the World Tree.”

Shiki, who had taken one of the charms first, draped hers around her neck. “So, *this* is the boost item that amplifies our power within this barrier.”

A boost item, huh? Well, it does seem to work in a similar fashion, since it's supposed to be a protective charm from the World Tree.

In game terms, the leaf necklace slightly increased HP, boosted MP by 50%, slightly improved attack and defense, and marginally improved magic resistance.

While most of the stat changes don't mean much, that 50% increase in MP is a game-changer, I thought. I'll probably benefit the most from it too, since I often run out of mana.

Having the leaf necklace equipped meant that, at Level 43, as long as I was within the barrier of the World Tree, my MP would increase by 215. That was more than the equivalent amount needed to summon two Paladins. And that wasn't even mentioning the fact that within the barrier, MP consumption was said to be reduced by two-thirds.

That said, the necklace is going to be a tricky item to deal with, I mused. If I summon five Paladins with it on and then remove it, one of them will probably instantly disappear. Plus, the item's effects only work in the vicinity of the World Tree, specifically within its barrier. Well, considering how overpowered this item is, it's only natural that such a restriction exists.

The real problem was that even with such a significant advantage, our enemies seemed overwhelmingly powerful this time. I couldn't afford to be pessimistic, but...

"I'll take command here," announced Leen, who had followed us. She summoned around ten hawks, and the birds took flight before swooping down on key members such as Yuuki, Shiki, and Sakura.

The hawk that approached us, well... Mia tried to grab it, but it flapped its wings in panic and was ultimately able to escape her grasp. After circling in the air, it landed on Rushia's outstretched arm.

"Hmph. Rushia, this isn't fair," Mia said, sulking.

"Considering your actions yesterday, it's only natural," Rushia replied, showing how much she had grown.

Leen watched the playful exchange between Rushia and Mia with a warm look, then said, "I will communicate through these familiars. The faster enemy units are already approaching our location—I need you to intercept them."

Everyone exchanged glances, seemingly unsure of who should take the lead. But just when I thought they were truly struggling, Mia, Yuuki, and Sakura all tried to outdo each other.

"Hmm, experience points..." Mia murmured. "Sounds tasty..."

"Hang on, Mia," Yuuki interjected. "You have all our trump cards; you need to stay put. We should prioritize our level-up—"

"Wait. We'll take care of it," Sakura cut in.



“Hey, you guys. Are you really that desperate for experience?” I demanded.

I got the sentiment, I really did, but... I opted to ignore the three of them, shifting my mind elsewhere.

If these monsters are fast, it probably means they're wolf-types or something, so we can predict their moves a little bit. Still, they're not to be taken lightly, and if there are Hellhounds mixed in, we'll need at least Resist Element: Fire. Oh, and there were those Lightning Wolves as well.

“Keiko-san, could you take some of our rearguard and go ahead?” Shiki suggested.

Ah, I see what she's doing, I thought. She's trying to avoid any petty squabbles breaking out by having Keiko-san, the eldest among us, lead a unit.

Although we had only fought alongside her for a short time, Keiko's quick thinking was evident. If only she hadn't had the fatal flaw of being directionally challenged, she would have practically been a super woman.

If she hadn't gotten lost and had been with the senior group from the beginning, the situation on the second day might have been different. At the very least, she wouldn't have allowed Shiba to rise to power.

“Well, I'll be off then,” Keiko said abruptly, and accompanied by five girls from the CAC group, she quickly turned to leave the tree hollow. “He he, just leave the navigation to me!”

“Wait, please! We'll guide you!” the CAC girls cried out, desperately trying to change Keiko's mind.

I'll pretend I didn't hear that, I decided.

Meanwhile, Yuuki seemed to be busy dividing the seniors into teams, and Shiki had already finished forming her group. Apparently she planned to send out the second elite group, centered around Sakura, as reinforcements.

“Sakura-chan is about to reach Rank 9 in her Spearmanship. I want her to prioritize gaining experience,” she explained.

If Sakura reached Rank 9, it would be very reassuring indeed. Tamaki and I had only managed to reach Rank 9 in our first skills last night, so she was only

about a day behind.

I'd like to cast Support Magic for her as well, but...

As always, my MP was too precious. Basic Support Magic was handled by members of the CAC group who'd learned it. Their ranks were much lower, so the effects of my spells would have been much stronger, but there was nothing we could do about that. I needed to reserve my Support Magic for Sha-lau, Arisu, Tamaki, Mia, and Rushia. I planned to use Deflection as I cast my spells, so in a short while, I'd probably be back to full MP.

The high school boys seemed quite taken aback by the Phantom Wolf King, a creature they were seeing for the first time. I could hear some of them clicking their tongues, and others were whispering and glancing in my direction. The CAC group, meanwhile, seemed to be quietly seething.

Oh boy, this could get ugly, I thought.

The boys didn't seem to want to make eye contact with me, and frankly, I wasn't interested either. I had just decided it would be best not to get involved with them when Yuuki approached.

"Kazu-san, we'll be making our move soon. If you want to attack the enemy at all, now would be the time."

"All right, I got it... Wait, Mia—what happened?"

Mia, who had briefly stepped out of the tree hollow, had just come rushing back.

What on earth was she doing?

"The Royal Guards are being pushed back more than expected," she said in a rush. "We should go help them."

"How do you know that?"

"I used Wind Magic, just a little."

"Oh, Wind Search?"

With all the nature around, this environment was perfect for it.

"Well done, my dear sister," Yuuki praised.

“Heh, thanks!” Mia said.

She and Yuuki high-fived.

Those two... They really do get along, don't they?

“You’re still annoying though, big brother.”

“Ah, a scolding from my sister is a reward in itself!”

“Seriously, so annoying.”

Mia waved away her brother with a dismissive gesture, and her ninja brother wriggled strangely in what looked like a paroxysm of pain.

Even now, they're playfully bickering with one another, I thought with a smile. That pair of siblings really is something else.

Most of the high school group seemed to be too busy with their own things to notice their ridiculous exchange. At least that was until a woman stepped forward, visibly irritated, and pulled Yuuki's ear.

“Hey, Tagamiya-kun, enough with your sister complex! Give your orders already!”

“I-I understand! No need to be so rash!”

Despite the obvious pain, Yuuki looked strangely pleased.

Cheater. Maybe I should tell Keiko-san about him later.

“Let's go,” Mia urged.

Yeah, I thought. Let's do that.

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The five of us left the massive tree hollow along with Sha-lau. The sun had now fully set, and torches had been lit here and there to light our way. In front of us, illuminated by the flames, stood the colossal World Tree, climbing so high that the side of it appeared like a sheer cliff face. It was the heart of this forest and one of its keystones, the last bastion on this continent that we were supposed to protect.

“Mia, can you point us in the right direction?” I asked.

“On it.”

Mia used Wind Search again, then paused to listen intently. I took the opportunity to cast Night Sight on everyone, amplifying its range with Deflection.

Thanks to Night Sight, the midnight forest now appeared as brightly lit as the world at twilight. Rushia, being an elf, had already possessed decent night vision, but she admitted that the effects of the Night Sight spell were far superior.

After a short moment, Mia looked up. “Over there,” she said.

I activated the Deflection spell again and Mia cast Fly. We soared into the night sky, heading in the direction Mia pointed.

“Arisu, Tamaki—you two ride on Sha-lau’s back.”

In case of an emergency, we’ll rely on Sha-lau’s signature attack.

After about two minutes of flying, it became apparent that even though the enemy had been said to be close, there was still a considerable distance between the World Tree and the frontline. Still, we could hear the sounds of clashing swords and screaming carried to us on the wind.

The dense trees around the World Tree made it difficult to see clearly, even with Night Sight. Nonetheless, I could see the glow of torches and hear the howls of wolf-like creatures. According to Leen, the Royal Guards weren’t using animal soldiers, which meant they had to be the enemy.

“Sha-lau, roar.”

“Understood.”

The Phantom Wolf King, with Arisu and Tamaki still on his back, charged forward as fast as lightning. As I watched the purple sparks it left behind light up the dark night, I felt confident that the team could handle any enemy.

“Mia, use Wind Search again,” I said. “I’ll carry you. I want you to check and see if there are any enemies besides the ones out in front.”

“Got it.”

I held on to Mia and followed Sha-lau. It was hard to keep my balance with her in my arms, and I lost my footing and stumbled several times.

“You know, Kazu...”

“Yes, Mia-san?”

“While I appreciate being held by you, I think I’ll fly on my own.”

I let go of Mia. To my surprise, even with her eyes closed, she maintained a stable flight.

“Sorry...”

“Kazu, what a bad call,” Mia said, snorting. “Oh, and it looks like four creatures are approaching where Arisu and the others are from the left. Quadrupeds. And the ones Arisu and the others are already dealing with...”

I could see them. I stared intently at the battle ahead, focusing my eyes just in time to see Tamaki’s blade cut one of the monsters in half. It was a Hellhound, but its skin color was different than usual. I couldn’t tell exactly because of the Night Sight, but it wasn’t black... Was it green, maybe?

Another Hellhound unleashed its breath attack, and Sha-lau shielded Arisu and Tamaki, taking the full brunt of it. There was a sizzling sound as flesh burned and a sour smell filled the air. Smoke rose from Sha-lau’s body and it let out a low groan.

It’s got acid breath!

“That would be an Acid Hound,” Rushia stated.

Chapter 172: The Acid Hounds

An Acid Hound? Could that be a variant of a Hellhound that spits acid instead of fire?

I wanted to ask Rushia for more details, since she seemed familiar with the monster, but I decided that could wait. If the Q&A had been correct, we should be able to defend against acid breath with water resistance.

As far as I could see, there were still two Acid Hounds attacking Arisu and the others.

“Mia, I’m going to buff. Get close.”

Without a word, Mia grabbed both my hand and Rushia’s.

“Dimensional Step,” I said, teleporting all of us right next to Arisu and the others. “Deflection. Resist Element: Water.”

Now that we were all buffed, I cast a water barrier and expanded it to cover the entire group. Immediately, a shower of acid breath rained down on us.

Instinctively, I shielded my face with my arm, but paused when a thin filmy barrier formed around our group. The acid drops hit the barrier and were repelled.

Is that how Resist Element works? I wondered. *I didn’t notice before when flames hit us.*

It seemed evident that, like the Hellhounds, these Acid Hounds weren’t much of a threat as long as we had protection against their breath. Arisu and the others launched forward to attack them, moving even faster than usual since their speed had been boosted by the power of the World Tree.

Arisu’s blows and Tamaki’s slashes quickly ended the hounds’ lives, and just like that, the Acid Hounds that had attacked the Royal Guards were quickly destroyed. Enemy reinforcements were still approaching, but for now, the battle was over.

“Arisu, heal Sha-lau.”

“O-Okay!” Arisu agreed, immediately beginning to cast a healing spell on Sha-lau.

While she worked, I took a moment to survey our surroundings. The scene was grim—soldiers groaned in pain, some sitting, others lying on the ground. Originally, there must have been about thirty soldiers guarding this place, but it appeared they’d come close to being entirely annihilated.

Apart from the gems that had dropped from the hounds we had defeated, I could see about ten other gems scattered around. Since the Acid Hounds, like the Hellhounds, seemed to drop two blue gems each, it meant that the soldiers must have managed to defeat at least five of them alone.

It was alarming to see how much damage Leen’s elite unit had taken after facing just eight Acid Hounds. If this was the extent of their abilities, they’d surely struggle against enemies like Titans or something stronger. At best, they’d be able to handle some lower-level orcs.

I informed Rushia of the situation through a hawk that had landed nearby.

“We will send a healer,” she replied. “In the meantime, please intercept the remaining four enemies approaching your location.”

“Understood. Mia, how long until the next enemies arrive?”

“Ten seconds.”

I felt my eyes go wide. “You could have said that earlier!”

Exactly ten seconds later, four Acid Hounds burst through the underbrush. We were prepared for them, however, and the Resist Element spell—which lasted between 80 and 120 seconds—was still in effect.

Arisu and Tamaki charged forward, not fearing the hounds’ acid breath, and each of them took down one of the beasts with a single blow.

Both Tamaki and Mia leveled up, and we found ourselves in the familiar space of the White Room.

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We were in the White Room now, sitting in a circle. Rushia and I sat side by side, with Arisu, Tamaki, and Mia facing us. I was sitting in the traditional *Seiza* position.

“First of all, I’d like to apologize to Arisu and the others for making a decision with Rushia without consulting all of you,” I said, bowing deeply in apology.

Mia mercilessly stepped on my head in response.

“Ow, ow, ow!”

Damn you, Mia.



“I told you earlier, but since you explained it properly, it’s all right now,” Arisu said with a smile.

“I can pretty much guess what happened,” Tamaki remarked, her tone surprisingly calm. “Seems like it was a lot.”

Maybe she heard things from the prisoners, I mused. After all, she was with Rushia during the escort mission.

I grabbed Mia’s foot without hesitation, causing her to stumble. Then I quickly stood up and tapped the girl lightly on the forehead.

“You’ve been pretty rough on me lately, Kazu,” she complained.

“Well, you have a knack for playing the fool,” I replied. “I’m grateful for that, though.”

“Half of it is just me being naturally clueless,” Mia declared.

True, she is naturally pretty clueless, I thought. She’s out of it like... 70 percent of the time? She probably wouldn’t dare say anything about ninjas, though. Maybe she has some kind of aversion to her own kind.

“How about we talk about what happened while we were separated,” I suggested.

I began to tell Mia about our infiltration mission, and when I mentioned rescuing Rushia’s sisters, Mia’s excitement was palpable.

“Seriously? That sounds like something out of an adult game,” she exclaimed.

I sighed. “You really are a piece of work.”

“I *do* know that’s inappropriate to say in front of Rushia,” Mia pointed out in an attempt to defend herself.

The fact that she’s aware of that and said it in front of Rushia anyway... I can’t help but admire her courage.

Rushia, thankfully, didn’t seem too bothered. Her perspective on things seemed a bit different from ours.

“At the end of the day, my sisters fulfilled their royal duties,” she explained. “My attendants did the same. I’m proud of them for that.”

“So that’s how you see it,” I mused.

“It kind of feels like that ‘noblesse oblige’ concept,” Mia added.

Tilting her head, Rushia replied, “Yeah, I guess that’s one way to put it.”

From her reaction, it seems that the vocabulary of the people of this world might not have an exact term for “noblesse oblige,” I thought. Perhaps the magic of translation conveyed the nuance?

“I always believed that was the natural and rightful way of things,” Rushia continued.

“That’s something I’d like to hear from those who have taken over the Storm Temple,” Mia quipped.

Rushia gave a rare, wry smile at Mia’s comment.

Ah, she definitely has some feelings about that... It seems she doesn’t think much of the survivors, like the Shrine Maiden and her entourage.

“Speaking of which, Rushia, are you and your sisters planning on restoring the royal family of Aulnaav in the future?” Mia inquired.

“Yes, that is the plan. Of course, it will all depend on whether or not we claim victory over the monsters. But as of now, Aulnaav is one of only three nations left that possesses a keystone. Once it is restored, it could potentially have even greater authority than before.”

“Weren’t the keystones not considered very important before?”

“Correct. Until the recent prophecies came to light, most people considered a nation with a keystone to be nothing more than an ancient land with a powerful mana generator.”

So, the legend that told of the keystones supporting this continent wasn’t widely known, I pondered. That’s why the nations easily surrendered places like the Storm Temple of Gal Yass and the Underground Temple of Rown to the monsters. If everyone had known the enemy’s intentions from the beginning, they might have had more options. Regardless, it seems that Rushia’s kingdom will become a massive power center in the future.

“Was the reason you gave up your royal duties because you wanted to make it easier for your sisters and their plans?” Mia asked.

“You’re asking her things I’ve only thought about but never said out loud,” I interjected.

“It’s better to know,” Mia replied.

She may be right, I thought with a sigh. *Mia’s proactive nature really is commendable.*

“You should fully understand Rushia’s value, Kazu,” Mia insisted. “Then you can proudly say that you’ve made her your pawn in this game.”

“Stop saying I’ve turned her into a pawn!”

Rushia covered her mouth and chuckled softly, making me wonder if our slang had been translated.

“Indeed, I’ve been made a pawn,” she teased.

“I wish you wouldn’t just play along, Rushia,” I said, sighing.

“Shall I put it in non-romantic terms?” she asked. “By acting as a bridge between Leen and Kazu, I can repay my debt to Leen by strengthening the bond between her and the Hero. It also solidifies my otherwise precarious position.”

“I don’t like the sound of that either!” I protested.

Rushia chuckled softly, which promptly made me feel like I was being teased.

“From an outsider’s point of view, I would naturally represent the achievements of our group since I’m the only member of this world,” she pointed out. “Gaining royal authority on top of that might be a bit too much.”

It was an uncomfortable subject, but I could see her point. Just today, our group had achieved so much—I mean, we had almost single-handedly conquered the Storm Temple of Gal Yass and the Underground Temple of Rown, defeating several divine-class enemies in the process.

As the only original inhabitant of this world in our party, Rushia would essentially monopolize these achievements. She would undoubtedly be

considered a hero. She was right in that if she remained royalty, it might complicate the governance of the reborn Aulnaav.

“Anyway all these discussions are for after the battle,” I pointed out, bringing this section of the conversation to a close. “If we don’t win, it’s all meaningless. Our priority now is to protect the World Tree.”

I returned to the original topic and told the others everything, including about the zoraus’ mental attacks, my traumas, and what had happened between Rushia and me afterward. Mia tried to tease me in the middle, which earned her a knuckle to the head.

“Kazu, getting defensive like that is mean,” Mia said, pouting.

“Really? Who here thinks what I did was mean?” I challenged.

Only Mia raised her hand, while the others just grinned.

“This is bullying,” Mia muttered.

“Just let me finish the story before you start bullying me,” I retorted.

“Fine, fine...” The girl sighed and held back her comments.

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Thanks to Mia’s restraint, I eventually managed to finish telling my story.

“You did well holding back, Mia,” I said at the end, patting her head.

She looked up at me, a hint of frustration in her eyes. “I hate that I gave in to your threats.”

I rolled my eyes. “Can you stop being such a contrarian?!”

Chapter 173: Variant Monsters

“Speaking of which, Rushia,” I said, speaking up. “After the encounter with the Hellhounds and the Acid Hounds, it got me thinking. Are there many variant monsters of that type? Like a Thunder Hound that strikes with lightning?”

“Yes, there is indeed a monster known as the Thunder Hound,” Rushia confirmed. “And, as you might have guessed, there’s also a Frost Hound.”

“Seriously?” I exclaimed.

“Sounds like it’s just another case of being lazy and palette-swapping monsters,” Mia chimed in,

I nodded in agreement. “I had the same thought. It’s like they’re constrained by polygon models or something.”

Wait, a world this realistic wouldn’t have those kinds of limitations, would it? So why do the variant monsters exist?

“There are stories that suggest that monsters were originally artificial lifeforms created through alchemical experiments in ancient times or perhaps in another world,” Rushia explained. “So, it’s possible that different variants were created for experimentation or combat purposes.”

Oh, I see, I thought. If they aren’t naturally occurring, that makes sense.

“It’s hard to say how much of that story is true. There are theories that races like the Fire Titans or Frost Titans evolved as a result of adapting to their environment,” Rushia added.

So, the true origin of these creatures might remain a mystery, I mused. I do remember hearing something about monsters being summoned from other worlds, though.

“From what I could tell from our battle, the Acid Hounds seemed almost identical to the Hellhounds except for the acid spitting,” Arisu commented.

If she, who has first-hand experience with them, says so, it must be true.

“What about a Whip Arachne that uses whips instead of strings, or a Marine Mekish Grau with a fish lower half instead of a horse one?” Mia wondered aloud. “Do you think those exist?”

“I don’t know,” I said slowly.

“It would be interesting if they appeared,” she replied, grinning.

It might be fun to imagine, but for those of us on the battlefield, it’d be a desperate fight! I thought with a shiver.

Seeing my reaction Mia remarked, “Look, I’m just all about enjoying life.”

“Well, if you can find joy even in this situation, that’s reassuring to me,” I quipped back.

“Although... Lately, your coldness has been stressing me out, Kazu.”

I gave Mia a wry smile and patted her on the head. “There, there. Is that better?”

She pouted. “I want it softer and more loving.”

“Don’t be so demanding,” I said, chuckling. I continued to stroke Mia’s head as I turned my attention back to Rushia. “Can I ask you something else, Rushia? The Royal Guard of the People of Light—Leen’s guards, I mean. Is what they did at the battle back there the extent of their abilities?”

“You mean how they fought so hard against the Acid Hounds?”

“Well yes, but I’m referring to how they only managed to defeat a few. I’m not questioning the warriors’ fighting skills; I’m just wanting to make sure they didn’t have any water resistance.”

If we hadn’t been able to use the Resist Element: Water spell, we would have had a hard time with the Acid Hounds as well. Earlier on, when we had fought the Hellhounds, their flames had been scorching even with a lower level of resistance.

These monsters didn’t seem like the type you’d want to face without some form of resistance. We’d faced similar monsters before, the zoraus in the

Underground Temple being one of them. In this life-or-death world, magic that provided resistance seemed invaluable.

Since even we understood this, the people who'd survived harsh battles in this world surely must have recognized its importance as well. They would undoubtedly give priority to training mages capable of such spells. However, the guards we had seen didn't seem to have any water resistance.

"You're right. This unit probably didn't have a mage capable of summoning water spirits," Rushia confirmed.

"Speaking of which, most magic in this world is done by summoning spirits, right?" I remembered.

"Yes, but typically a mage can only command one type of spirit. The reality is that there aren't enough mages among the People of Light to place a user of each attribute in all units."

Since there were four attributes, that meant they couldn't even put four mages in every unit. From what I'd heard, a unit would have two or three mages at most. Sometimes only one. This was why units would sometimes merge as needed, giving the entire unit the support of spirits. Such strategic decisions showed the skill of the battalion leader.

In my opinion, they made a big mistake this time, I thought.

"The enemy was advancing so fast that we couldn't react as we would have liked," Rushia clarified. "Ideally, we should've scouted more thoroughly so that we could have prepared to face such monsters with greater numbers."

"That makes sense," I said with a nod. "Leen mentioned something about using the Royal Guard to slow them down."

"They did their best," Rushi agreed. "They bought us the time we needed to arrive. I'd say they deserve our praise."

She was right. They had risked their lives to execute Leen's strategy. And thanks to the Royal Guards holding the monsters back, we had been able to destroy one entire unit of Acid Hounds without any problems.

If they had slipped through, there was a chance that Keiko's unit would've been attacked. Even if Keiko could've managed to defeat them somehow, if they'd been ambushed in the darkness and hit with an acid breath before they were able to cast a water barrier, the CAC group would've been in serious trouble.

"After we take down those Acid Hounds, should we help the other Royal Guards?" Rushia asked.

"That would be best," I agreed. "We can handle them without much effort."

"The experience points are also tempting..." Mia said, practically drooling on the floor.

Mia never changes, does she?

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After deciding on our immediate course of action, we transformed the room adjacent to us in the White Room into a grassy meadow and lined up for a nap. Mia rolled over and hugged me, prompting me to rub her temple.

"Ouchie!"

I cringed. "Don't make weird noises!"

"Ah, Mia's cheating," Tamaki said in a joking tone. She snuggled up to me from my other side. "This looks fun."

Seeing what the other two girls were doing, Arisu and Rushia hesitantly draped themselves over me as well. Their combined weight was getting quite heavy.

"Kazu, I'm pretty light, you know!"

"That's not the point!" I snapped.

In the end, I found myself dozing while being hugged by four girls. Before long, I'd closed my eyes and slipped into sleep.

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When I opened my eyes again, Arisu was looking down at me.

Seems like I was more exhausted than I thought.

That was understandable, considering the intense battle we'd just been through, and the fact that it'd been followed immediately by another mission. Mia and Tamaki were feeling more energetic, reportedly—Arisu told me they were swimming in a pool they'd created in the next room.

They're so energetic, I thought with an inward chuckle. *Rushia is the only one still sleeping.*

It didn't surprise me that she was still tired—she'd been busy controlling the Underground Tree and as soon as she'd taken a break, she'd jumped right into this fight. She probably hadn't had a moment's rest.

It's unfortunate that even if we take breaks like this, as soon as we leave the White Room our physical fatigue will immediately return, I thought. *Maybe that means that resting like this isn't that important, but having a bit of mental respite and a moment of relaxation, even just for a short time... Well, who knows?*

"Haven't you noticed?" Arisu asked with a worried look. "You're tired too, Kazu."

She must have been studying my face as I was sleeping.

"Sorry," I said, feeling a bit abashed. "Seems like I've been worrying everyone."

"Please, just let us take care of you," Arisu pleaded. "Let us worry more about you."

I hadn't thought of it that way. Still...

"If I leave everything up to you, I might end up becoming a good-for-nothing," I pointed out.

"Hmm," Mia cut in. "What do you think—will Kazu become someone who lazes around all day, asks women for pachinko balls and rants in bars?"

"What era are you getting your deadbeats from?" I snarked back at her as she approached us in her wet bathing suit.

For my part, I'd like to fully support you all, I thought wistfully. But I know that in reality, I'm just standing idly by as everyone protects me.

"Speaking of which, Mia," I said. "Lately, I've been leaving all negotiations with outsiders to you, and—"

"That's fine," she cut in. "All you have to do is stand back and watch."

"Well, that's a relief."

Mia puffed out her chest with pride, but the outline of her chest, visible through her swimsuit, was disappointingly flat. "We're a team, Kazu, so it's okay. Plus, objectively speaking, I'm good at negotiating."

From behind Mia, Tamaki, who was also in a bathing suit, burst out, "You're a ninja's sister for a reason!"

Mia turned to her with a blank face, and Tamaki immediately realized her mistake and panicked.

"Um, well... Mia, you see..."

"You know, I don't dislike this ditzy side of you, Tamaki."

"Uh... Thank you?"

"But that doesn't mean I'll permit that sort of behavior."

Using Reverse Gravity, Mia lifted Tamaki off the ground and then blew her away with a whirlwind. Tamaki, screaming, fell gracefully into the deepest part of the pool.

"Phew," Mia said with a grin. "That's a job well done."

"Be careful," I told her with a sigh. "At the very least, don't punish her in a way that could endanger her life."

While we'd been making this commotion, Rushia had woken up. Now that she was alert, we went ahead and went over the final details of our plans, brainstorming various scenarios for the future.

As we worked, Rushia expressed a desire for sweets, so I got an assortment, and we enjoyed a tea break. The princess of the fallen kingdom ate until she complained of a stomach ache.

“I’ve made up my mind,” Rushia declared with determination as she shoved another piece of cake into her mouth. “I’m not going to lie to myself about my feelings anymore.”

This said, she began to eat even more voraciously, indulging to her heart’s content. The usually expressionless girl seemed genuinely happy at that moment.

Well, as long as she’s happy...

After our snack, we continued our meeting. At some point, Tamaki, tired of the discussion, went to play in the pool in the next room along with Arisu, who accompanied her.

The last thing we did before leaving was check everyone’s status. Arisu currently had Rank 9 Spearmanship and Rank 6 Healing Magic, Tamaki had Rank 9 Swordsmanship and Rank 6 Strength, and Mia had Rank 9 Wind Magic and Rank 6 Earth Magic. Even though we had been separated, not only had everyone improved, they’d even remained at the exact same level as us.

Now that that’s confirmed, I guess we should return to the battlefield.

TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 34	SWORDSMANSHIP: 9
STRENGTH: 6	SKILL POINTS: 2

MIA	
LEVEL: 34	EARTH MAGIC: 6
WIND MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 2

Chapter 174: High-Mobility Defense Battle

After we returned to the battlefield from the White Room, we quickly dispatched the remaining two Acid Hounds, and then Rushia reported the situation to Leen through her hawk familiar.

“I understand your current situation,” the hawk said in Leen’s voice. “Leave the soldiers alone and go to the next point. There’s a unit engaged in combat to your north-northwest.”

She must have dispatched familiars throughout the forest after we left, updating each unit on the situation in real time, I realized.

In a world like this, especially when it came to a battlefield within a dense forest, her operations were of immense tactical value.

“Does Leen specialize in giving battlefield orders?” Mia asked.

The woman in question replied, “No, Mia, this is a first for me as well. At the moment, Shiki is standing beside me and is offering advice. It was Yuuki who suggested this strategy during last night’s meeting.”

“Of course, my brother would do something like that...” Mia muttered.

Yeah, sounds like something Yuuki-senpai would come up with, I thought. *The tactics do seem pretty modern.*

After we finished talking to Leen, we used Fly to rise above the trees and soared through the nighttime forest. Mia used Wind Search as we went in order to check our surroundings and make sure we didn’t miss anything.

“Over there,” Mia said suddenly after around three minutes of flying. She pointed to the right. “A battle is about to begin in that direction. Soldiers are lying in wait for the monsters.”

Oh, I thought with a wince. *Seems we were a bit off course.*

Suddenly, explosions erupted below the tree canopy, sending leaves and branches flying. It didn't look like any Fire Magic I knew.

What was that? I wondered as explosions, interspersed with the screams of soldiers, continued to shake the area.

"Sha-lau, take the lead. Arisu, Tamaki, follow Sha-lau."

"Understood."

The giant wolf turned into a bolt of lightning and dove into the trees below. Arisu and Tamaki went after it, and Rushia followed.

Wait, Rushia too? I thought, momentarily confused when she headed forward without my order. *Well, I guess that's fine. She has some self-defense techniques, after all.*

"Mia, let's take it slow. It would be a waste if we got caught and hurt."

"Got it."

Sounds of combat reached our ears as we flew downward and landed on a thick branch to watch the battle below. The enemy appeared to be wolf-like monsters—amidst the trees and dense undergrowth, about fifteen soldiers were engaged in a chaotic battle with them. The torches in the soldiers' hands illuminated the wolves' fur, making it glow silver.

Arisu, Tamaki, Sha-lau, and Rushia each dove in and began fighting the wolves.

Wait, Rushia, why are you fighting the wolves at close range? I thought, growing stressed.

Before I could think too much about it, one of the wolves stopped in front of a soldier, its fur bristling.

"Damn it, not on my watch!" the man screamed, thrusting his spear.

Just before it could pierce the wolf's fur, an explosion erupted around the creature. The blast spread, and screams echoed from some of the other soldiers—they were the agonized cries of humans in their death throes.

“That was a Howling Wolf,” a hawk familiar who had silently approached told us in Leen’s voice.

I jumped. “Whoa, you scared me.”

“My apologies,” Leen said. The hawk perched on a branch next to me, some distance from Mia. “Anyway, as you can see, those Howling Wolves create a shockwave around themselves by vibrating their silver fur. It’s not pure Fire Magic, nor Earth Magic, nor Wind Magic. It’s just a powerful shock.”

“So, you’re saying that resistances won’t work against them?”

“Exactly. However, its power is somewhat weaker compared to elemental magic. A well-trained soldier wouldn’t die from a direct hit.”

Just as Leen had said, the soldiers who had taken the brunt of the Howling Wolf’s shockwave were still standing, but barely—their spears had been broken in half, their leather armor was in tatters, and they were unsteady on their feet. Another Howling Wolf pounced on one of them before he fully recovered, then ripped out his throat. This time, it was a fatal blow.

“They’re good at group fights, huh?”

“Yes. It’s manageable when there are only one or two, but when there are so many...”

The number of Howling Wolves was more than double that of the soldiers—around thirty in total. Facing such a large number of creatures with such a unique ability was daunting. It was no wonder that the average soldiers couldn’t handle it.

Arisu, who was supporting the soldiers, was continually dodging the Howling Wolves’ shockwaves with nimble leaps while delivering the occasional piercing strike to their red eyes. As Arisu struck one down, Tamaki decapitated another Howling Wolf almost simultaneously. Both creatures turned into two blue gems each.

At that moment, I leveled up.

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The brightness of the White Room revealed that both Arisu and Tamaki had swollen, reddened faces upon closer inspection. They seemed to have been hit by the Howling Wolf's shockwave before we'd arrived at the battlefield.

"Are you two okay?" I asked.

"Ugh, it hurts," Tamaki whimpered.

"It hurts a little, but it's not life-threatening," Arisu said, trying to put on a brave face. "I'll heal you now, Tamaki-chan."

I gently stroked Arisu's cheek, making her wince. "Sorry, did that hurt?" I asked softly, having felt her flinch.

"No, it's okay. Just..." She paused, clearly embarrassed. "Please, stroke it some more."

I took Arisu at her word and seized the opportunity to indulge her with more caresses while she healed herself.

The fact that she and Tamaki are only slightly injured is probably due to their high levels, I mused. The soldiers, on the other hand, seem to have suffered greatly from the shockwaves when they got hit at close range.

"Why did you engage in melee combat, Rushia?" I asked her.

"Due to the chaotic battle and the fast movements of the enemy, I didn't have time to control my guiding magic or target them with spells," she explained. "That meant I had to resort to using my Bone Whip to hold them back and then finish them off with Flame Cutter. But even restraining them proved to be a challenge. I was just about to capture one when we came here."

Ah, so she was about to capture one, I thought. That means we can finish it off as soon as we leave this room. But considering the number of enemies, dealing with them one by one would be like a drop in the bucket.

"Maybe we can have Rushia blow them all up with her magic, and if we accidentally hit our allies, just say 'Oops, my bad, teehee' and hope they forgive us?" Mia suggested cheekily.

"That's way too cruel, Mia-chan..." Tamaki replied, laughing, "I mean, I could probably withstand one of Rushia's blasts, but there are a lot of soldiers around

me. I doubt they could handle it.”

“Hmm. But maybe all they need is some spirit and determination? Well, if it doesn’t work, we’ll just have to deal with the consequences.”

Jeez, could you two be a little less murderous? I thought, exasperated.

“Just so you know, Mia, one of Leen’s messenger hawks is watching us,” I reminded her.

“I know,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I was just saying.”

“Try not to be so openly malicious.”

While Mia often made such remarks, she probably wouldn’t act on them unless she was pushed to the brink. Plus, I thought her talk about wanting to be a hero yesterday had been from the heart.

“I noticed when I was watching from above that the Howling Wolves stop moving just before they release their shockwaves,” I told the others. “Rushia, why not retreat a bit and target them at that exact moment?”

“Ah, so those Howling Wolves have a weak point like that, huh?” Rushia murmured. “The one I fought never used a shockwave, so I didn’t catch onto that.”

I wonder if the wolf thought it could defeat Rushia without using its shockwave ability, I thought, a bit confused. *Maybe it was just a coincidence, but it’s hard to tell.*

The more I thought about it, the more I was convinced that there hadn’t been as many shockwaves released during the battle as there should have been considering the number of enemies. After all, it had been a chaotic battle in a confined space with both allies and enemies mixed together.

Oh, now I get it! I thought, realization hitting me.

“Could it be that the Howling Wolves are trying to avoid hitting their allies with their shockwaves?” I wondered aloud.

Rushia seemed to think about it for a moment before she replied, “That could be the case, and maybe those Howling Wolves just don’t like chaotic battles. That would make sense if they can’t resist their own shockwaves.”

“They probably thought they could overwhelm us with their numbers regardless,” I mused.

From what I had observed, a one-on-one fight with a Howling Wolf had looked quite challenging for the soldiers. And since the wolves had the numerical advantage, the outcome had seemed pretty clear. If we hadn’t arrived, the soldiers would have been overwhelmed. The wolves had probably expected fighting us to be the same, but to us they weren’t much of a threat.

If only we could figure out a way to take them all out at once.

“Fighting alongside allies can be quite a nuisance, huh?” Tamaki interjected, like she usually did.

“It can’t be helped, Tamaki-chan,” Rushia replied. “We can’t protect everything on our own.”

“I know, okay?” she snapped back. “It’s just that if the soldiers could buy us some time, Arisu, Sha-lau, and I could probably handle them.”

I nodded in agreement—even though the enemy was currently overwhelming us with their speed, I believed that with a little more experience, Arisu and Tamaki would be able to take them down.

“For now, Rushia, once you’ve taken out the one you’re fighting, fall back and focus on sniping when they stop moving,” I instructed.

“Understood,” she said. “You and Mia were up in the trees, right?”

I nodded, impressed. “You still managed to be really observant, even when you were out on that battlefield.”

A wide field of vision is a valuable asset indeed.

“Kazu, what’s the next step?” Mia asked.

“We’ll play it by ear,” I replied, noticing her narrowed eyes. “We don’t have any other choice. If we get too strategic, it might just confuse our allies.”

“Hmm, true,” Mia agreed.

“Mia, why don’t you try to cut off the enemy with a spell like Lightning Arrow? Let’s avoid area-of-effect attacks for now.”

We’d stay with the Royal Guards for now, I figured, but if they began to fall too quickly, we might have to consider abandoning them. At the moment though, they were holding their own.

“Let’s rely on the efforts of the Royal Guard to buy us time,” I suggested.

“Yeah! And Arisu and I will give it our all!” Tamaki declared enthusiastically.

This decided, we left the White Room.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 44	SUPPORT MAGIC: 8
SUMMONING MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 7

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Upon returning to our original location, Rushia immediately lured a wolf to her using her Bone Whip and unleashed a Flame Cutter on it, cleanly severing its head. Then, without a moment’s hesitation, Rushia retreated and leaped gracefully onto the branch where we were.

Now that she was observing the battlefield from above, Rushia quickly spotted another wolf preparing its shockwave. She dispatched it easily with a second Flame Cutter, decapitating it in a single blow.

“It seems the isolated ones are more likely to use their shockwaves,” I observed.

“Mm-hmm,” Mia agreed. “Does that mean that if we can isolate them, they become easier targets?”

“If only we had a way to communicate that strategy to the soldiers,” I lamented. “It could work quite well if Rushia and Mia concentrate on sniping.

“Actually, there is such a way,” chimed in a new voice. It was Leen, speaking through her hawk familiar. “We have signals that we use on the battlefield.”

Chapter 175: Joint Operation

“So you want me to instruct the soldiers based on the strategy you just mentioned?” asked the hawk in Leen’s voice.

“Please do,” I said, nodding.

After inclining its head in return, the hawk opened its beak and seemed to emit a call. I couldn’t hear anything, but Rushia’s ears twitched in response.

“Kazu, it’s a frequency beyond our hearing range,” Rushia explained.

“Like a dog whistle, huh?” I mused.

“Look.” Rushia pointed a finger. “The soldiers are changing tactics.”

True to her word, some of the guards had begun luring individual Howling Wolves away from their pack. As soon as the wolves felt it was safe to unleash their shockwaves without harming their kin, they’d freeze for a moment in preparation, and in that split second, Rushia and Mia struck.

“Flame Cutter!”

“White Cannon!”

A blade of fire sliced through one wolf-like monster, while a beam of pure white light pierced another. Both attacks were deadly. Arisu, Tamaki, and Shalau, meanwhile, also killed the Howling Wolves in front of them.

Once again, we found ourselves in the White Room.

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This time it had been Rushia that had leveled up. There wasn’t much to do in the White Room, so after a short discussion, we returned to the battleground.

RUSHIA

LEVEL: 34	FIRE MAGIC: 9
WATER MAGIC: 6	SKILL POINTS: 2

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Some of the soldiers had been surrounded by several enemies and brutally beaten. No one could come to the aid of the isolated soldiers either, since the enemy currently had the numerical advantage.

One by one, the Royal Guard fell. But if one could overlook the tragedy of the fallen, spots of carnage like the ones the Howling Wolves left behind were perfect targets for Rushia’s spells. And she didn’t miss a single shot.

“Incinerate!” Rushia cried, unleashing hellfire that consumed three Howling Wolves that had been clinging to a soldier’s throat, stomach, and arm. They found themselves burned to a crisp, just like the already dead soldier.

Depending on one’s point of view, this strategy might seem a bit ruthless, but I had no place to criticize Rushia’s judgment. She undoubtedly had a better grasp of the etiquette of this world’s battlefield than I did.

Immediately after Rushia killed the wolves, we entered the White Room again. It was now Arisu’s turn to level up.

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“Mia, you saw that, right?” I asked.

She nodded. “I’ll take note.”

Now that we were back in the White Room, we were discussing our tactics in detail. According to Rushia, taking out the enemy along with the soldiers who were beyond saving was heroic. It was like carrying out a mercy killing and revenge at the same time.

“If I can get there in time, maybe I can save them,” Arisu muttered, distressed.

“No,” I said, immediately rejecting her kind-hearted suggestion. “Even if you could, you focusing on healing in the midst of the chaos would put us at a disadvantage.”

My response might have seemed cold-hearted, but while Arisu’s desire to avoid casualties on the battlefield was commendable, we were in a race against time. We were the most powerful force fighting against the monsters, so we couldn’t afford to be delayed by a minor skirmish. I made sure all the girls remembered that, and reminded them we needed to be fully aware of our role and act accordingly.

Arisu bit her lip in frustration but nodded. Seeing her reaction, I leaned down and kissed her.

“Kazu...”

“I know it’s a lot to ask, but give me everything. Let go of your kindness and kill for me right now.”

Arisu’s cheeks turned a deep red, and she nodded again.

I heard Tamaki and Mia say something in the background, but I ignored them. Moments later, we left the White Room and returned to the battlefield.

ARISU	
LEVEL: 35	SPEARMANSHIP: 9
HEALING MAGIC: 6	SKILL POINTS: 4

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Rushia’s Incinerate spell ended up being the thing that turned the tide of battle. Once she started using it, she kept going, using it and Mia’s skills to kill

the Howling Wolves that had been feasting on the soldiers. The vanguard team of Arisu, Tamaki, and Sha-lau continued to build on their successes without any significant threats, and Tamaki and Mia even leveled up along the way. Any enemies who tried to flee were relentlessly pursued and killed by Sha-lau.

In the end, we defeated a total of twenty-one Howling Wolves.

TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 35	SWORDSMANSHIP: 9
STRENGTH: 6	SKILL POINTS: 4

MIA	
LEVEL: 35	EARTH MAGIC: 6
WIND MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 4

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Only nine of the Royal Guards survived the battle. Each of them had suffered injuries, and they were completely exhausted. It wouldn't be a stretch to say that they had fought valiantly, given the power imbalance that had existed between them and the enemy.

Arisu cast her Heal spell on each of them, but they'd probably be unfit for further combat, at least for today. It made sense then that the hawk, speaking in Leen's voice, ordered them to retreat.

We cast Fly again and soared into the sky, heading for our next battle.

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Next, we destroyed two smaller groups of monsters—a Hellhound unit and a Thunder Hound unit.

Myself, Arisu, and Rushia each gained a level, and having finally amassed enough skill points, I enhanced my Support Magic to Rank 9.

With both my Summoning Magic and Support Magic at Rank 9, I had fulfilled the requirements for a derivative skill. Unfortunately, acquiring a derivative skill also required additional skill points, with each rank increase in the derivative skill costing a fixed number of five points. That meant I’d have to be at least Level 48 to acquire one. I had a long way to go. Ideally, I wanted to gain three more levels before our showdown with Aga-su.

That seemed impossible, however, unless we were extremely aggressive, and the risk accompanying that was too high. We were all exhausted, Rushia especially. The fatigue on her face was the most evident among our group.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 45	SUPPORT MAGIC: 8 → 9
SUMMONING MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 9 → 0

ARISU	
LEVEL: 36	SPEARMANSHIP: 9
HEALING MAGIC: 6	SKILL POINTS: 6

RUSHIA	
LEVEL: 35	FIRE MAGIC: 9
WATER MAGIC:	SKILL POINTS:



After defeating the second group of enemies, we received a message from Leen through her familiar: “Preparations for the final battle are complete, so I’m withdrawing the frontline troops. I’d like you all to retreat to a safe place as well.”

So, it’s time for the final battle preparations...

Our desperate efforts to eliminate the fast-moving monsters had all been to prevent any interference with the preparations that were now at hand. Leen had even mobilized non-combatants for the task, along with both the High School Division and the Cultural Arts Center’s students. If we were attacked during the setup, it would not only delay the process but also shake the morale of the workers.

It was a relief, then, that with the combined efforts of hundreds of people—both combatants and non-combatants—the preparations were completed in just an hour or so. It made me proud, as the plan had been formulated based on my proposal.

Back during the meeting with Leen, I’d said to everyone, “If the enemy’s main force consists of orcs, there’s one particularly effective countermeasure. So let’s take advantage of it and dig pits. Make pitfalls.”

Leen and Rushia had nodded in agreement after my passionate explanation, while Yuuki had commented, “Indeed, that was quite effective.” Keiko had agreed as well, but for some reason, Shiki had looked at me with skeptical eyes. At the time, I hadn’t been able to understand why.

Anyway, that was why we’d ended up digging wide pits along the enemy’s invasion route.

Given the lack of time to conceal the pits and the impracticality of using only shovels, we’d relied heavily on the Earth Magic users from the Cultural Arts Center and the High School Division, and we’d mobilized all the mages capable

of using earth spirits from the Light Tribe and the allied forces. The Light Tribe's strength-enhancing magicians also had played a crucial role.

"Shovels are truly wonderful tools," Leen remarked with a strange sense of admiration. "I have also heard that they can be used as weapons. A tool that can be used to both fight and build is my idea of a perfect design."

We all gave her skeptical looks—no one could understand where Leen was coming from with her sense of wonder.



The shovels, by the way, had been diligently collected by Shiki and Yuuki, who had managed to collect almost all of the available stock—there were nearly a hundred in total. It seemed that Shiki had fully anticipated our potential need to dig pits.

The depth of the pits ended up varying depending on the location, with the shallowest being about fifty centimeters deep and one meter long. Others were over two meters deep, but shorter in length.

As far as fighting the orcs was concerned, we'd learned from our skirmishes with them around the Cultural Arts Center on our second day in this world that they relied on numbers and launched simple attacks. If we could slow them down even slightly and create a bottleneck, their numerical advantage would become a hindrance, and could even end up constricting the movements of other monsters besides the orcs.

Ideally, we'd want to use area-of-effect magic on those bottlenecks to defeat the monsters as efficiently and quickly as possible. After all, the main enemy force was still waiting in the wings.

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Following Leen's instructions, we flew back to the World Tree. On the way, we overtook a group of five high school students. Through my Night Sight, which made everything appear as if it were dusk, they looked terribly pale. Two of the girls were covering their mouths with their hands, tears streaming down their faces.

Ah, Yuuki-senpai mentioned that they usually worked in teams of six, so that means...

"Someone from the High School Division died," I murmured.

Casualties were inevitable at this point. Still, I felt a sense of relief that the fallen student wasn't from the CAC group. Although, on second thought, there might have been casualties among the CAC that I wasn't aware of, and it was highly probable that there would be losses in the upcoming battles...

I need to mentally prepare for that possibility.

Chapter 176: Casualties of War

We continued to soar through the sky, heading for the point Leen had designated. For the time being, Mia had claimed Sha-lau's back as her own, and when she buried herself in his fluffy fur, she looked utterly content.

"It's pure bliss, like paradise," she murmured.

"If my back can comfort you that much, I'm glad," Sha-lau grumbled telepathically. "To think that my back means that much to her."

I decided to ignore his muttering, and we soon drew near the World Tree.

We landed in a plaza that had been set up as a rendezvous point. It was crowded with people—both the People of Light and ordinary humans, numbering in the hundreds, had gathered. Healers were scurrying about, tending to the wounded, and in the crowd, I saw members of both the High School Division and the Cultural Arts Center.

When we drew near Shiki, she greeted us with a simple "Welcome back. I'm glad you're unharmed." There was a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

I looked around. The mood among the high school students was somber; many of the girls were crying, and the boys looked exhausted.

"As far as we know, we lost two students," she informed me.

"What about on our side?" I asked.

"Fortunately, there were no casualties from the Cultural Arts Center," she replied. "But then again, we mainly used our top students, including those who followed Keiko-san."

That made sense. Even without us, the average level of the students of the Cultural Arts Center was higher than that of the High School Division. They had been fighting continuously since the morning of the second day, even while the High School Division was involved in internal disputes, and under Shiki's

guidance, they had systematically resisted the orcs, which had allowed them to steadily build up their strength through relentless hunting.

We already had more than twenty students above Level 10, and even excluding us, there were enough students above Level 15 to form a complete group. At the top of the list was, of course, Sakura Nagatsuki. After a full day of battle, she had reached an impressive Level 22, with a Spearmanship rank of 8 and an Agility rank of 1. With seven skill points left, just one more level-up would make her the only one besides us to max out a weapon skill. This would put her on par, if not above, the level of our seniors like Yuuki and Keiko.

Those two have diversified their skills though, and in actual combat, they use them in such a way that it feels like they're fighting on a completely different level, I mused. It's funny how, in a skill-based game, there are players who can just ignore the system and play at a cheat-like level. Normally, those two would be the protagonists, really.

As these thoughts crossed my mind, a commotion nearby caught my eye. A high school student was yelling at two petite girls.

Don't they belong to the middle school and the Cultural Arts Center?

"It's because your support was too slow! Aya's death is your fault!" the high school student shouted.

"B-But she said she didn't need my magic..." one of the girls stammered.

"Stop making lame excuses! You—!"

Before I could think, I found myself giving an order. "Sha-lau, protect the girls."

"Understood."

The male student raised his fist, but not a moment later his body was sent flying like a bowling ball. The massive Phantom Wolf King now stood where he'd been, shielding the girls by using his body as a barrier.

"What the—? There's a monster!" the boy shouted.

"My master does not tolerate unjust violence against young girls," Sha-lau explained. "I am merely following his orders."

Wait, wait, I thought, flustered. I didn't say anything so noble. Seeing that girl being bullied just reminded me of my past, and I reflexively gave the order.

Normally, I would have rushed over to help her myself. Leaving it to my familiar while I stood on the sidelines only highlighted my own weakness.

The high school students had descended into an uproar, and several rushed to the side of the boy Sha-lau had sent flying. Some even drew their swords and spears, ready for a confrontation.

The members of the Light Tribe, who were at a distance, looked over, trying to figure out what was happening. It seemed like an internal dispute was destined to unfold.

Ugh, I hate situations like this.

"I'm sorry, Kazu," Shiki said, rushing over to the scene. "We lent them these girls because the High School Division lacked rear guards."

The Phantom Wolf King, who had been silently holding back the male students, stepped aside to let Shiki through. Mia also approached the scene, following close behind.

Wait, what is she doing?

"Looks like they encountered a Hellhound," Mia began, ignoring Shiki's attempts at mediation. "Their clothes are burned. And as far as I know, that Aya girl rushed in without listening to her friend's advice."

Hey, Mia! Shiki was just trying to mediate! I thought, exasperated. *Anyway, why is she so invested? Is she classmates with that girl that's trembling behind her? She must be the one she was talking about.*

"What's wrong with you, dwarf?" the high school boy snapped. "Who do you think you are, butting in like that?"

"We had Hellhounds at our school, too," Mia said flatly. "Their fire breath is very dangerous—just two days ago, Tamaki almost died because of it. Why didn't the High School Division share this information with their people? Your leader must be seriously incompetent."

Well, that was clearly a swipe at Yuuki, I thought with a sigh.

Many people had seen Mia talking to Yuuki a short while earlier, but this boy didn't seem to be one of them. To him, Mia was just a bratty middle school student who was talking badly about his boss. Of course, for those of us who knew the dynamic between Mia and Yuuki, her words weren't a big deal. For this boy, however, they seemed to hit a nerve.

"No one badmouths Tagamiya-san!" the boy shouted, determined to defend Yuuki. "Plus, he did warn us about the Hellhounds!"

"Then what happened is Aya's fault, isn't it?" Mia countered.

The boy fell silent.

Mia turned to us with a smug expression on her face. She seemed to be silently saying: "I told you so."

Seriously though, she shouldn't provoke them anymore.

"What's with you anyway?" another boy from the High School Division suddenly snapped. "Who do you think you are, acting all high and mighty when you're just a middle schooler?!"

The girl, whose name was Saku, jumped at his words, but Shiki quickly hugged her and comforted her.

"It's okay," Shiki whispered. "Let Mia handle it."

Wait, what? Seriously? Is this really the time for such antics?

Shiki gave me a mischievous grin. Apparently, it was.

Mia glared at the new challenger, her gaze piercing. To some, it might have seemed like she was mocking him.

"You think you're better than me?" he growled.

The high school boy went to move forward, but Sha-lau stepped in, his imposing presence stopping the boy's advance.

"What's wrong with you?" the boy shouted angrily. "And you too, Kaya! Why are you acting like a big shot in the middle school division?"

A tall third-year senior glared at me. Had this been the old me, I would have been terrified—until yesterday, I'd still felt inferior to the high school students,

burdened by my insecurities and traumas. But now, for some reason, I didn't feel the same pressure.

Is it because they insulted my middle school friends? Is that really why I'm so irritated?

I met the senior's eyes, ready to shoot out a retort, but then...

"Stop insulting Kazu!" yelled Saku.

The petite girl had already slipped out of Shiki's embrace, and now she pushed past Mia, stepping forward to defend me.

"Kazu risked his life to save us!" Saku shouted, her voice filled with emotion. "In middle school, we had no teachers, no one to help us. Kazu was the only one that stepped up—he rallied everyone, and saved those who were still alive! He pulled us out of hell! In just one day, he reclaimed our main building, and the next day, he located and destroyed the source of the bees. He even made contact with the World Tree! Without Kazu, none of us would have survived yesterday!"

Hearing her passionate defense, a memory clicked in my head.

Ah, she was one of the girls we rescued from the girls' dormitory on the second day. So this reaction is all due to the efforts we made back then, risking our lives.

The senior boy's face turned red. He looked ready to lash out, but Sha-lau held him back. The other high school students around him seemed even more hostile—they must have been very frustrated.

Feeling that way's understandable, but taking it out on the middle school students is just unfair, I thought with a sigh.

"That's enough," Mia said, stepping in and calming Saku down.

"But Mia! I can't stand it when they look down on Kazu!"

"Kazu doesn't care," Mia whispered, glancing into the depths of the forest. "And anyway, as long as you're grateful to him, that's all that matters."

"We shouldn't be fighting among ourselves," a voice called out.

It was Yuuki's—he emerged from the trees with Keiko and Leen at his side.

“Thanks to my ninja technique, called the Distant Hearing Art, I think I have a good grasp of the situation,” Yuuki began. “Mia, I did my best too, you know.”

“Shut up, idiot big brother.”

“In my world, that's a compliment!” Yuuki replied playfully.

Keiko smiled and gave Yuuki a light slap on the head. “Enough with the antics,” she scolded.

Leen, standing a step behind them, looked on at their behavior with a cheerful smile.

The students of the High School Division looked on in amazement, their eyes darting between Yuuki and Mia. “Wait... Siblings?” one of them asked, pointing at Mia.

Mia nodded reluctantly, her expression a mixture of sleepiness and annoyance. “Unfortunately, yes. Can you imagine having such a weirdo for a brother?”

“Oh...” the previously aggressive boy mumbled, shrinking back in embarrassment. “Sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?” Yuuki asked, tilting his head in confusion.

I sighed. *Honestly, who knows?*

Chapter 177: World Tree Defense War - Part 1

“Hey, hey, what’s with the comedy act?” a voice asked suddenly, echoing out from the trees.

Wait, is it coming from above?

I looked up to see a girl in a high school tracksuit standing on a thick branch. The stripes on the tracksuit were green, indicating that she was a third-year student, and her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She also had a strong, assertive air about her, and was holding a bow that went along with the quiver of arrows attached to a belt around her waist.

It looks like she’s modified her tracksuit to accommodate that belt, I thought. Interesting.

We didn’t have any dedicated archers in the Cultural Arts Center, so it was a refreshing sight.

At the moment, the girl was staring at Yuuki.

Oh, I remember now, I realized. She was the one who scolded him earlier by pulling his ear.

“Hello, Akari-chan,” Keiko greeted the girl nonchalantly, waving her hand.

The girl, who was apparently named Akira, frowned at Keiko. “You seem awfully relaxed considering the upcoming battle.”

“If we’re tense all the time, we’ll just wear ourselves out,” Keiko replied.

Akira narrowed her eyes. “Keiko-san, you’re too relaxed. And Tagamiya-kun, it’s unbecoming to impose your carefree attitude on others.”

Akira gracefully jumped down from the branch and approached us, walking briskly over to Yuuki and giving him a light pat on the head. He seemed to enjoy it.

“In my line of work,” Yuuki began, “that’s a rewa—”

“If you say ‘reward,’ I’ll give you another smack,” Akira warned.

Yuuki immediately fell silent, and an uncomfortable atmosphere fell over the group.

What’s with this situation? I wondered, fidgeting a little.

Akira turned to us. “Sorry about our idiotic leader,” she began with a hint of annoyance. “I didn’t get a chance to introduce myself properly. I’m Akira Narimiya, the deputy leader of the High School Division.”

It was the first time I’d heard of her, but when I thought about it, I could see why Yuuki had chosen Akira. She had the ability to balance Yuuki’s often whimsical approach with her own kind of seriousness—a quality that seemed rare and valuable.

“We seem to have had a small disagreement,” she continued, “but can we put that aside for now? After speaking with the captain of the People of Light, we’ve decided that our group, the Otherworldly Visitors, along with the members of the Squadron from Aulnaav, will take care of the orcs that show up on the front lines. It’ll be the most intense battle zone, but the experience points will be worth it.” She looked back at the grumbling boys behind her. “If you don’t want to be looked down upon by the middle school section, then get a lot of experience points and level up. But don’t get reckless and die.”

“Hey! Are you mocking the dead?” one of them replied.

“I heard the report,” she shot back coldly. “Ayami died because she forgot about teamwork. She was foolish. Accept it. If you can’t, you may be next.”

Her words were sharp and direct. It was clear that her role in the group was to wield the metaphorical whip, as Yuuki and Keiko probably couldn’t have said it so bluntly.

I bet she and Shiki get along well, I mused.

Akira surveyed the senior members of the division. “Prepare yourselves. The enemy will be here soon. I’ll explain the formation now. Oh, and Shiki, use this memo as a reference.”

Shiki took the piece of the memo pad Akira had offered to her, read it quickly, and nodded. Then, using the information from the memo, she began to efficiently divide everyone into teams.

“Kazu, your group should stand by here for now,” Akira instructed.

“Are we the backup?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “I don’t want you to use up too much MP, and more importantly, I don’t want you to steal experience points from the others from monsters as measly as orcs. Just sit and rest.”

“That’s a bit harsh, but I see your point,” I agreed.

We all sighed and sat down. Now that I was finally at rest, a sudden wave of exhaustion washed over me.

“If you want to sleep, do it in the shade over there,” Akira suggested.

“Thanks. I might do just that.”

While everyone else bustled around, we leaned against a nearby tree and closed our eyes. Drowsiness quickly overcame me.

Even fifteen minutes of rest should be enough...

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I was jolted awake by a hand on my shoulder.

Looking up, I saw Akira, the deputy leader of the senior division, staring into my face. Arisu, Tamaki, Mia, and Rushia were crowded in behind her on both sides, all looking quite intrigued.

“Were you all watching me sleep?” I asked, slightly embarrassed.

“I told them to wake you up,” Akira said with a hint of annoyance, “but they seemed to enjoy the show.”

Ah, I can imagine the scene.

“I apologize for the inconvenience,” I said, standing up quickly and bowing.

Akira seems like the serious type, so it’d be best to act formal.

“You don’t have to act so uptight,” Akira said, shattering my expectations. “Right now, you’re the leader of the CAC group, and your team is the strongest, right?”

“Well, technically, yes...”

“Giants are invading from our right-hand side. The other parties can’t handle them, so we need you to intercept them.”

“Understood.”

I quickly gave instructions to Arisu and the others. They were already equipped with their backpacks, ready for action.

“I will accompany you,” Akira continued. “I can at least handle the small fry. Mind if I join your party?”

“N-No problem,” I stuttered. “I mean, sure.” I scratched the back of my head, feeling the need to clarify. “You’re okay with pain, right? If you’re with us and you get hit by an area-of-effect spell, it can be pretty rough.”

“You’re talking about Yukino, right? I apologize for the trouble she caused. I’ll be fine—my level is quite high.”

Akira clarified that she was at Level 18, with Archery at Rank 7 and Movement at Rank 3.

That’s an interesting build... I mused. Seems like she specialized herself in a way that made her useful for local battles in the school forest. She can probably jump from branch to branch in here and snipe enemies from above.

“If that’s the case, I’m counting on you,” I finally said. “It’s my first time working with an archer, so I hope you can teach me a few things.”

With Akira in our party, there were now six of us. We moved to the right flank of the battlefield and used the Fly spell to soar through the treetops.

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As we approached the front lines, the sounds of battle grew louder. Explosions could be heard in the distance—someone was probably using Fire

Magic to incinerate groups of orcs.

If it's only orcs, the others should be able to handle them without our help.

"It's around here," Akira said, pointing to an area.

We descended to the place she'd indicated. The soldiers of the Light Tribe who were waiting there were initially surprised and aimed their bows at us, but they quickly realized their mistake and lowered their weapons.

"My apologies. You are the Otherworldly Visitors, right?" one asked.

I nodded. "Yes. We'd like you all to retreat about a hundred steps from here, as the giants will attack this place soon."

Akira's efficient instructions had the ten or so members of the Light Tribe nodding in agreement and promptly turning on their heels to run. She really knew how to lead.

"All right, let's try to conserve our energy as much as possible during this fight."

"Understood. And Akira, don't push yourself too hard."

Akira nodded once and began to climb a nearby tree with ease. Within moments, she was perched on a thick branch about five meters up. One of Leen's hawk familiars, perched beside her.

"They're coming," the hawk warned. "Contact in thirty seconds."

Shortly after that, we began to hear the ground rumble and the earth beneath us began to shake. The vibration was probably due to the thumping of the giants' footsteps as they approached.

"The enemies are green-skinned giants armed with bows and axes. There are seven—no, eight of them. There's also a pale-skinned giant in the back wielding a staff."

"The green ones are probably Forest Titans," Akira mused. "The pale one... I suspect it's an Albino Titan, a mutated species. They're known to be wizards."

"Wizards are always a threat, Rushia chimed in. "Ideally, we'd like to take them out first. How strong are those Albinos?"

“The Albino Titan’s abilities are largely unknown due to limited reports. Forest Titans, on the other hand, are renowned archers who are known to use a unique form of magic called Bow Magic.”

Bow Magic? What on earth is that? I wondered. It doesn’t stem from the White Room and is centered around bows, not arrows or archery? How is that supposed to work? Also, giants that specialize in ranged combat sound like a far cry from the ones we faced in Hesh Resh Nash. They were all brawn and no brains. If we assume these guys are the same, we might be in for a rude awakening.

Soon, the giants emerged from the shadows of the trees. Keeping a distance of over a hundred meters from us, the green-skinned giants simultaneously notched and released their arrows. They all seemed to be aimed at Sha-lau, who was standing in a prominent position.

“Tempest!” Mia cried, conjuring a tornado right in front of the Phantom Wolf King.

All the arrows were sucked into the whirlwind, and they flew off course and scattered in different directions. Only a few managed to pierce the ground around Sha-lau.

This should make the enemy realize that arrows are useless against us. I wonder what they’ll try next...

Chapter 178: World Tree Defense War - Part 2

The Forest Titans were slightly smaller than the giants we had encountered before, and their skin seamlessly blended into the forest.

Perhaps their smaller stature led them to develop long-range attacks instead of relying on brute force, I mused.

Regardless, eight of them now stood with their bows at the ready, their bodies tucked behind the forest's massive trees.

Before the giants launched their second volley of arrows, their bows shimmered with a strange light. The glow from the bows concentrated into the arrows, which were then released all at once.

"That's Bow Magic," Rushia announced.

This not only confirmed the legitimacy of what I'd already been thinking, but also of the fears I'd been harboring.

This could be bad.

"Tempest!" Mia called out, using her tornado spell again.

This time, however, the giant's eight arrows pierced the tornado effortlessly and continued to soar along their original trajectory toward us. I had expected this, however.

"Ice Shield!" Rushia called.

Her spell activated right after Mia's, creating an icy barrier that protected us all, and the eight arrows embedded themselves in the ice shield. Then, after about five seconds, the wall of ice disappeared and the arrows clattered to the ground.

A collective sigh of relief rang out among us.

"A third volley is coming!" Akira warned from above.

The Forest Titans' arrows glowed again, this time pulsing at a slightly different rate.

Does that mean they're using another kind of magic? I wondered. *From the pattern, they could be homing arrows. What a pesky enemy.*

"We don't have to play their game," I decided. "Arisu, Tamaki, let's use our usual strategy. Mount Sha-lau."

"Roger that, Kazu!" Arisu replied.

"Got it, the usual it is!" Tamaki chimed in.

With Arisu and Tamaki on his back, Sha-lau took off. Due to his sheer speed, his form vanished within the space of a second, but its disappearance was followed by a pained yelp.

About fifty meters ahead of where he had vanished from sight, it appeared Sha-lau had been repelled by something. The massive wolf fell to the ground, and both Arisu and Tamaki were thrown off his back.

"Arisu! Tamaki!" I shouted.



What just happened? No, more importantly, this is bad. With Arisu and Tamaki down, they're sitting ducks!

Eight arrows were released at once. They shot forward, their trajectory reminiscent of a forkball in baseball, targeted at the fallen Arisu and Tamaki. It was clear the giants were using a targeting spell, just as I'd suspected. And at this speed, if the two girls didn't move several arrows would hit them directly.

Thankfully, that didn't happen. Sha-lau, who had regained his footing, shielded them and took all eight arrows into his body, his blue blood splattering across the ground.

"This is due to my own negligence," Sha-lau said.

I winced. "I'm sorry, Sha-lau."

Mia hummed softly to herself. "I'll get them back," she said. "Shape Lightning."

Mia's form vanished, leaving behind particles of light. In an instant, she reappeared next to Arisu and Tamaki, grabbing both of their hands.

"Dimensional Step."

The trio warped and returned right next to Rushia and me. Sha-lau was back as well, having used his lightning bolt magic to return to our side.

We all quickly took cover behind the trees, and Sha-lau collapsed. Arisu rushed to the Phantom Wolf King to heal his wounds. As she cast her healing spell, the embedded arrows were automatically ejected, and the wounds began to close quickly.

"What on earth happened?" I asked.

"I ran into an invisible barrier," Sha-lau explained. "It was probably some kind of magical interference."

"Was it the work of the Albino Titan, do you think? Or was it part of the Forest Titan's Bow Magic as well?"

While we didn't know what kind of magic the Albino Titan used, the Forest Titans were known for their Bow Magic. An invisible barrier didn't seem like it

would fit under the Bow Magic umbrella, though. Still, I had no proof, just a gut feeling.

“I tried shooting arrows from here as well, but they were deflected by the invisible barrier,” Akira said, her voice filtering down from up above.

I glanced up, seeing that she was still rapidly firing arrows from her quiver. She shot them at a rate of about one arrow per second, her rapid-fire archery rivaling even that of Legolas from *The Lord of the Rings*.

Could Rank 7 Archery really be that OP?

Nonetheless, all that skill meant nothing if her arrows didn’t hit their mark, and every single one of them was being deflected by the invisible barrier.

Realizing that her shots were useless, Akira quickly jumped to another branch and took cover from enemy arrows. Even so, moments later eight arrows curved around the tree where she hid in pursuit, aimed right at her.

“Akira-san, look out!” Tamaki yelled.

Taking heed of her warning, Akira quickly unleashed a volley of arrows. Their target? The massive arrows of the Forest Titans.

“Enough of this!” Akira snarled.

For each incoming arrow, she fired one of her own. Arrow met arrow in one head-on collision after another. Four times she repeated this in quick succession, and each successful hit sent the giants’ arrows tumbling to the forest floor, shattered.

The remaining four arrows continued to home in on Akira’s position, but she evaded them by jumping off the branch where she’d perched. She wasn’t safe yet, however—as the arrows passed where Akira had been, they made a sharp ninety-degree turn and dove straight for her.

Akira calmly drew and shot four arrows in mid-air, and each of them collided with one of the ones chasing her, resulting in mutual destruction. She then performed a half-twist and landed gracefully on the ground.

“That was close,” she said, breathing a sigh of relief.

“You’re telling me,” I said, unable to stop myself in my amazement. “What kind of acrobatics was that?”

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Now that we were all in a safe position, the question at hand was how we were going to break through the enemy’s formation. With the homing arrows of the Forest Titans and the invisible barrier in the middle, we’d be sitting ducks if we didn’t take some kind of action against them.

“Those monsters must drop their barrier in the moment they release their arrows,” Akira pointed out. “Maybe we can use that split second to charge in.”

Our best chance seemed to be breaking through head on. An alternative could be to overpower them using long-range attack, but this time, I decided I’d prefer a more elegant approach. I didn’t want to drain Rushia’s MP too much.

“Mia, can you use Invisibility and then Dimensional Step to get Arisu and Tamaki right into the middle of the enemy?”

“Of course,” she said with a nod. “Just to be safe, I’ll zigzag warp twice to avoid any attacks. Sound good?”

“That makes sense. There’s still a chance that the barrier could block even warp magic, though...”

It’s just a precaution, I thought. Honestly, I’d like to think that there’s no barrier that can block warp. I certainly hope that’s the case not just this time, but in the future. But wait... Maybe we shouldn’t be so cautious after all.

Now that I’d changed my mind, I quickly told Mia to hold on. “There’s a risk you might get hurt, but instead of zigzagging, can you warp directly into the enemy’s midst to confirm if the warp strategy works?”

“Hmm, all right,” Mia agreed. “But if my warp spell fails, make sure you have our backs.”

I nodded and cast a Deflection spell on Mia. Then, after she’d cast Greater Invisibility on herself, Arisu, and Tamaki, Mia took their hands and used

Dimensional Step. Even from my perspective, which had been enhanced by See Invisibility, the three of them vanished.

If the invisible barrier has the ability to even block warping, we should know sooner rather than later, I thought. We'll be able to hear their screams...

Thankfully, I didn't hear a peep from the girls. Instead, the sounds of battle filtered through the trees from about a hundred meters away, which was where the giants had been hiding.

Arisu and her team must have succeeded in their ambush of the Forest Giants, I thought. The rain of arrows has stopped.

"Well, it seems to have worked," I said out loud, my voice relieved.

"You certainly like to take wild risks," Akira remarked with a mixture of amazement and annoyance, "but your ability to execute them fearlessly is what makes you all so formidable."

It wasn't as if we *wanted* to get hurt. In fact, it was important that we didn't go too far and make any fatal mistakes during the upcoming battles.

"We've made many mistakes and nearly died several times," I admitted.

"But the fact that you've survived all those situations is quite impressive," the high school sub-leader said with a grin full of self-deprecation. "Everyone else, including me, lacks what you all have. A small setback is all it takes to deeply discourage them—just the death of three people can disrupt the coordination of the entire organization. And that's with Tagamiya-kun, who is an exceptionally skilled leader, and Keiko-san, who is overly reliable."

"Well, we're in a similar situation," I pointed out. "Fortunately, no one has died today."

Abruptly, I remembered Akane Shimoyamada, who had sacrificed herself as my shield on the second day. That bitter experience had undoubtedly strengthened my resolve. But the idea of someone dying just to gain experience...

"You should be a little less hard on yourself," Akira advised.

"I agree," Rushia added.

What kind of expression was on my face that both Akira and Rushia felt such a need to comfort me? I wondered.

I didn't get the chance to ask, as we were taken to the White Room shortly after.

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Tamaki and Mia were the ones who had leveled up. They had defeated six Forest Titans.

I wonder if those giants are about the same level as the ones we fought back in Hesh Resh Nash, I mused.

Mia seemed to be thinking along the same train of thought. She looked up from her calculations, which she'd been scribbling on the ground in marker, and commented, "The Forest Titans are probably Level 12."

"Hey, hey! Should you really be scribbling like that?"

Mia scoffed. "It'll disappear as soon as we leave this room, anyway."

"Well, that's true."

I left her to it and turned to Akira, then began discussing a few of the details of our future plan. She was eager to hear the information we had painstakingly gathered, so we willingly shared data about our enemies, information about the people of this world, and various other details.

In return, Akira told us about the current situation in the High School Division and the problems that had arisen that were beyond Yuuki's ability to fix. She mentioned that there were limits to what Yuuki could handle alone and apologized again for the earlier uproar.

"Many people are just drifting along without making any decisions," she continued. "Those people tend to blame others for the slightest inconvenience. You understand that, right?"

"I wish I didn't, but I do," I replied with a wry smile, thinking of the times I had been bullied by Shiba.

“By the way, Mia-chan...” Akira started.

“Hmm? What is it?” Mia replied, sensing danger and trying to back away.

Alas, she had no chance to escape—Akira’s agility was too high due to her Rank 3 Movement skill. She quickly closed the distance between her and Mia and grabbed the other girl by the shoulders.

“You’re such a meanie!” Mia whined.

Akira gave her a mischievous grin. “How about we discuss Tagamiya-kun’s weaknesses and how to manipulate him?”

Mia gave her a wary look. “This is the most dangerous situation I’ve ever been in,” she complained.

Without any further ado, Akira picked Mia up and took her to the next room, which was set to grassland mode. Mia looked back at us with a pitiful expression, and I waved a white handkerchief as a farewell gesture.

“Rushia, in our jargon we call this ‘watching the lamb be led to slaughter’.”

“Huh?”

“Kazu-san, stop making up stuff like Mia-chan,” Arisu snapped.

After that, about an hour passed as Akira and Mia spoke. During that time, the rest of us had summoned a feast’s worth of food and enjoyed ourselves.

When Mia finally returned, she looked unusually exhausted.

“Mia, do you want some cake?” I asked.

“Let’s get out of this room already,” she muttered.

TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 36	SWORDSMANSHIP: 9
STRENGTH: 6	SKILL POINTS: 6

Mia	
LEVEL: 36	EARTH MAGIC: 6
WIND MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 6

Chapter 179: World Tree Defense War - Part 3

After our strategy meeting, we returned to the original world. To wipe out the remaining enemies, we sent Sha-lau after Arisu and the others. Soon after, Akira leveled up.

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As soon as we entered the White Room, Mia immediately changed the adjacent room to a grassland setting and zoomed away.

“I’m outta here,” she declared.

“Don’t worry, I won’t bother you anymore, Mia-chan,” Akira called out, but to no avail. She watched Mia go with a wry smile.

The fact she made Mia so suspicious... Akira really is something else.

Once the two girls quieted down, we received a report from Arisu and the others. They told us they had just finished off the last of the giants—the Forest Titans had each dropped two blue gems, and the Albino Titan had dropped three. In total, we had gained loot that was worth one hundred and ninety gems from the battle.

Apparently, the Forest Titans were actually a bit smaller than typical giants, standing just under three meters tall, whereas the Albino Titan, the white-skinned variant, was significantly larger.

“We think the Albino used some kind of magic on us, but everyone seemed to resist it, so we’re not sure exactly what it was,” Arisu explained.

“I see,” I replied. “It could have been a mental attack, or maybe it couldn’t use the invisible shield effectively... In any case, I’m glad everyone is safe.”

If we face them again, it would be worthwhile to observe their tactics more closely, I mused. We didn’t really get a chance this time, since Tamaki dealt with

the threat so quickly.

Now that we’d exchanged all the information we’d gathered, we left the White Room once again.

AKIRA	
LEVEL: 18	ARCHERY: 7
MOVEMENT: 3	SKILL POINTS: 4

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Just as Arisu and the others returned after collecting all of the loot the giants had left behind, one of Leen’s hawk familiars informed us of the appearance of another group of giants. They were a little to the left of our current position, but even as we prepared to head in that direction, Leen urged us to wait.

“The giants aren’t the only portion of the enemy that is on the move,” she reported. “The rear of the enemy army is moving more quickly now. They’re advancing as they absorb the surrounding monsters.”

Wait, what?

“Sorry, I don’t follow,” I said. “Can you explain that again?”

“It seems that Aga-su is pushing through the forest, eliminating monsters with his strength while trying to reach the front lines. Numerous ogres and orcs are being swallowed by the expanding number of trees.”

I couldn’t help but blurt out, “What? The monsters are being swallowed by the forest?”

“I observed a scene where abnormally proliferating plants formed a mass and expanded,” Leen said, doing her best to clarify.

I feel like I know what Leen-san is trying to explain, but... I still just can’t envision it.

“So, Aga-su is like a high-level treant monster, right? And it controls the surrounding plants?”

“It seems so,” Leen confirmed, “but its exact characteristics are unknown. All we’ve observed so far is that it’s absorbing monsters like orcs, seemingly preying on them, and expanding.”

“I still don’t fully understand what that means, but I get that something dangerous is coming at the very least,” I muttered.

What should we do now? I wondered. *If things continue as they are, the orcs currently being held back by our allies at the center of the forest might be taken care of by the expanding plants. But a monstrous being made of trees, advancing while indiscriminately absorbing everything around it... Even if its true nature remains a mystery, it’s undoubtedly a significant threat. If we’re not careful, both the High School Division and the Cultural Arts Center group could face total annihilation.*

“Akira-san, please go to the center of the forest,” I said at last. “Take over the command from Yuuki-senpai, and if possible, signal a retreat. Then, if you could —”

“I understand. I’ll tell Tagamiya-kun and Keiko-san to come and support you all. Be careful out there.”

With a quick nod, Akira left the party. Within a few moments, she was jumping from branch to branch almost like a ninja, then disappearing into the depths of the forest.

I guess that’s what happens when you improve your agility, I mused. *But now’s not the time to be impressed.*

“If Aga-su is advancing and the enemy forces are in chaos, this is our chance,” I told the others. “We should take the lead and confront Aga-su.”

“That might be a bit reckless,” Rushia said, her deep red eyes fixed on mine.

“I know, but we don’t have enough information about Aga-su,” I pointed out. “We should scout and make sure we grasp the enemy’s capabilities before we have to fight against it. And we can’t risk it reaching the Cultural Arts Center group by any chance.”

The image of a young girl standing before me and then getting cut down flashed through my mind. If confronting Aga-su head on meant avoiding such a fate...

Rushia, who was standing right in front of me, slapped me lightly on the cheek. The stinging pain brought me back to reality, but I couldn't help but wonder what sort of face I'd been making to cause her to act that way.

"Kazu, you're being haunted by the memories of the deceased," Rushia said softly.

"Maybe..." I bit my lip. "No, you're right."

Rushia fixed me with an unusually intense look and put her hand on my shoulder. "If it's at your command, Kazu, we're ready to plunge into danger."

"I know," I said with a sigh. "Do I really look that bad right now?"

"You just look... worried," she said.

I chuckled, a hint of self-mockery in my voice, then took a deep breath and turned to Mia. "What's your take on this?"

"After scouting, Arisu should be the one to go," Mia replied without hesitation. "But honestly, we don't need to send everyone. Kazu, you typically use the tactic of having a familiar check out the power of an enemy. If we can do that and get information at the cost of a single Paladin or Greater Elemental, it'll be a small price to pay."

I nodded. She seemed to have planned her strategy meticulously.

I felt the urge to praise her by saying, "You really are the sister of a ninja," but refrained for fear that she might hit me if I did.

"You're exactly right," I said instead. "We should definitely use a familiar along with Remote Viewing for reconnaissance. That was spot-on, Mia."

"You should praise me more. I thrive on flattery."

Ignoring her, I turned to Rushia. "I apologize that you have to listen to such nonsense."

The elven princess just shook her head. “That just comes with the territory, since I haven’t shared many experiences with the others yet. But I’m curious—was saying something like that difficult for you, Kazu?”

I shrugged. “Well, I would’ve said it even if you weren’t here, Rushia.”

“But also, the last thing you said probably hurt her feelings, even after you praised her...”

I suppose it might have, I thought, but shrugged it off. Anyway, I’m really blessed to have such teammates.

With a clap of my hands, I said, “Now that we’ve come to a decision, there’s no time to dawdle. Let’s move forward. Leen, please lead us.”

“Understood. First, go forward two hundred steps. There’s a small group of giants on the way, but...”

“We’ll take care of them. Arisu, Tamaki, take the lead with Sha-lau.”

The two mounted Sha-lau and disappeared into the forest. Once they were gone, I summoned two Wind Elementals for protection, just to be on the safe side. It was probable that there were stray soldiers wandering around outside the main group, given the large size of the enemy force. It was best to be careful.

As expected, or perhaps unsurprisingly, we were ambushed by orcs who seemed to have strayed from the battlefield. They were only three common orcs though, and we quickly dispatched them.

Soon after, Arisu and the others returned, riding on Sha-lau’s back.

“We encountered four Forest Titans,” they announced. “We took them all down.”

“Good work,” I replied.

“The Forest Titans seemed a bit panicked,” Sha-lau commented.

“Do you think they were running from something behind them?”

“That’s most likely the case. In fact, it’s highly probable.”

It seems that Aga-su is wreaking havoc toward the rear of the monster army, I mused. Has it gone berserk?

Regardless, the situation was chaotic. I had no idea what was going on with Aga-su, and I couldn't tell if what was going on was an opportunity or a potential crisis.

"By the way, Kazu," Tamaki threw in, "just now we heard this strange sound coming from deep in the forest. It sounded like something was moving around and making a scraping noise. That's why we hurried back."

"A wriggling, scraping noise...?" I muttered.

Well, whatever it was, we'd find out soon enough.

"Let's head out and send a familiar in to investigate," I decided. "I'll use Remote Viewing, so Sha-lau, let me ride on your back."

"Use me as you see fit. It is my duty to ensure your safety."

I used Remote Viewing on one of the Greater Wind Elementals and then sent it forward, adjusting to my newly shared vision as I nestled into Sha-lau's fluffy fur. The surrounding forest scenery flashed by before my eyes, but due to Remote Viewing's inability to transmit sound, I was unable to hear the "wriggling, scraping noise" Tamaki had talked about. In spite of that, I instructed the elemental to wave its hand if it heard anything.

Oh, it's waving, I realized.

The elemental's gaze swayed from side to side, revealing that parts of the dense forest were writhing. Vines crawled around like tentacles, ensnaring fleeing orcs and engulfing their struggling forms in a dense swirl of vegetation.

So that's where the wriggling, scraping noise sound is coming from...

"Hey, Tamaki," I said. "Even after scouting, I'm pretty mystified about what's making that noise."

"I know, right?" she replied.

The elemental hesitated and began to back away slightly. It hovered above the ground, trying to distance itself from the spreading scratching sound.

Seriously, the whole area in front of us has been taken over by whatever is happening here, I thought, baffled. How are we going to deal with this?

It was then that I saw the Wind Elemental soaring into the sky. I assumed it was trying to get a view from above.

It reached the treetops, then looked down. The sight below was truly disturbing.

The entire forest seemed alive, writhing and pulsing. Trees swayed as if breathing, and branches twisted and turned. The writhing, scraping sound was everywhere. It was eerily mesmerizing.

And that was even commenting on the fact that the phenomenon was spreading like a contagious disease, and now filled the elemental's entire field of vision. It was as if Aga-su had taken physical form, in some sickening spectacle.

I may have underestimated what the Four Heavenly Kings were capable of, I mused.

We were no longer facing just an enemy. We were facing a natural disaster.

Chapter 180: The Raging Forest - Part 1

I watched in stunned silence through the Wind Elemental's vision as the trees writhed and undulated. My fists clenched involuntarily, and I bit my lip hard. It wasn't that I had underestimated Aga-su. But witnessing this spectacle made me realize how limited my imagination had been.

It was as if the entire forest had turned against us. This creature was on a different scale than any monster we'd faced before. It almost transcended the very definition of the word.

The trees were twisting and contorting to the point that they resembled green river water swirling around in a whirlpool. The sight was bizarre, eerie, and terrifying.

How can we fight such an opponent?

Countless branches stretched out toward the Wind Elemental in the sky.

It's dangerous! I thought. *Get away!*

Before I could even shout a warning, the elemental began to flee. That was, until a few seconds later, when it suddenly stopped.

The elemental looked behind itself, and I saw vines had wrapped around its legs. They must have grown incredibly fast.

Then, all of a sudden, the elemental was dragged down into the forest.

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The Wind Elemental was devoured by the raging forest in mere moments, its body pulled below the tree line and slammed to the ground. The impact caused its vision to bounce, which made me feel dizzy.

Whether it was fortunate or unfortunate, however, the Greater Wind Elemental was resilient. Despite being violently slammed into the ground and

dragged along by vine-like plants, it was still alive.

The elemental tried desperately to move its face from side to side in order to accomplish its mission, and thanks to its efforts, I was able to get a full view of the eerie, writhing forest.

To the left, about ten meters away, an orc was struggling against the foliage with its mouth wide open, a look of sheer desperation on its face. It stopped fighting, however, when the vines that had bound its limbs twisted and tore them off. Blue blood spurted out, and the orc seemed to pass out from the pain.

I couldn't hear a sound, but I was sure the monster was screaming. I watched in horror as its blue blood dripped onto the writhing trees, creating a speckled pattern.

All around, similar scenes were playing out. My only consolation was that I didn't see any humans or demi-humans.

The Wind Elemental was carried even deeper into the forest, even as it continued to struggle.

From what I could see, it was almost like the plants of the forest were feasting on living creatures. Could they have turned into carnivorous plant-type monsters, maybe? But the way the change was spreading... it felt more like a pathogen.

Honestly, this was the worst possible opponent to face near the World Tree. If this thing attached itself to the World Tree, it might even be able to control it too.

That was a scenario we had to prevent at all costs.

The vines wrapped around the elemental suddenly grew in number, their grip tightening. It could no longer even struggle. That was when, out of nowhere, the foliage cleared.

Tree branches stretched out, forming a dome-shaped canopy, and at the center of this natural dome stood a majestic tree. The king of the forest, if you will.

It wasn't particularly tall, standing maybe thirty feet in all, but it was just as wide. All of the tree's leaves were withered, a countless number of its thick roots wriggled on the ground like octopus tentacles, and about six or seven meters above the ground, numerous large red eyes were clustered around its trunk.

Yes, eyes. And they were *literally* countless, all of them staring at the Greater Wind Elemental at the same time.

A chill ran down my spine witnessing the scene.

Following my instincts, I tried to break the Remote Viewing connection, but my reaction was a split second too late. In that brief moment, the countless eyes of the massive treant glowed golden.

A tremendous shock hit me, as if countless needles were piercing my brain. I screamed in agony, writhing on Sha-lau's back. Someone rushed to my side, trying to hold and comfort me, but I flailed wildly, unable to stop my screams.

I couldn't take in my surroundings. I couldn't think of anyone else.

What is this? What did this creature do to me?

"Kazu-san, Kazu-san!" Arisu screamed.

"Hey!" Tamaki shouted right after. "What's wrong, Kazu-san?"

I could faintly hear their voices, but I couldn't answer. My mouth was only capable of screaming.

"Damn it!"

The cause of this mental assault was that I hadn't activated any protective measures while using Remote Viewing.

"Isolation."

Belatedly, I cast a protective spell, but my pain didn't stop right away. It seemed that the spell wouldn't heal the damage that had already been done. And to think I had had Clear Mind active during all this. *That creature... attacking me through Remote Viewing... What the hell is this monster?*

"Kazu-san, hang in there! Cure Mind."

Arisu cast a spell to soothe my mind. The torment that had been gnawing at my brain began to fade.

Finally able to catch my breath, I sat up and wiped the sweat from my brow. Everyone looked at me worriedly. I realized the connection to the Greater Wind Elemental I had sent out to scout had been severed. My familiar was dead.

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Reinforcements arrived from the CAC group and the High School Division.

First of all, the ninja duo—Yuuki and Keiko. They seemed ready to relieve Akari-san and take command of the field, acting as our front line for the final showdown.

Two other guys, both high school students who specialized in Fire Magic, had come along. Both of them averted their eyes when they saw me. Fire Magic was known to be effective against bees, so its popularity had skyrocketed in the past three days. I heard that both of them were at level 6. Well... at least they'd add to our numbers.

From the CAC Group, we had three in total. There was Sakura Nagatsuki, whose Spearmanship had recently reached Rank 9 at Level 24. She was joined by the Fire Magic Rank 8 duo of Yuriko Takahashi and Shione Mogami.

Shione Mogami was a lively second-year middle school student with rimless glasses. Her shoulder-length hair had a hint of brown, giving her a playful, "I'm trying something new" vibe. She was currently at Level 20, with Fire Magic at Rank 8 and Spearmanship at Rank 2.

Yuriko Takahashi, on the other hand, was a third-year middle school student who always wore a gentle smile. She was recognizable by her braided hair and... well, especially by her large breasts. She was so shy that she once admitted to being afraid of her own Fire Magic.

She also mentioned, "Shione always takes the lead and pulls me along." A busty older girl being led by her younger friend—there was something charming about that. She was at the same Level 20 as Shione, with Fire Magic at Rank 8 and Water Magic at Rank 1.

All of them had made it this far with Leen's guidance.

Including us, our final battle team numbered twelve. We'd probably split into two groups.

I took a moment to explain what had happened to the newcomers. While explaining, we quickly rearranged our groups and I cast my Support Magic on everyone. Especially in times like these, the Isolation spell became crucial.

Ideally, I would have wanted to use Rank 9 Support Magic Spell "Share Field," which allowed sharing information through a telepathic link. The more people were connected, the more effective it became, even over long distances. However, using Isolation would negate the spell's effects, since the former spell worked by cutting off the mind from external stimuli.

In deciding which was more important, resistance to mental attack was undoubtedly paramount. Our fight with Zorauses had made this abundantly clear. Even if a spell seemed incredibly powerful, it may lack practicality when it came to compatibility. It felt like a well-crafted game mechanic.

But this wasn't a game.

I wish they could tweak this aspect a bit, but they can't. We'll be completely dependent on that spell this afternoon.

After the briefing, we reorganized our parties. The first group consisted of me, Arisu, Tamaki, Mia, Rushia and Sakura.

The second group consisted of the ninja couple, the Fire Magic duo Shion and Yuriko, and the two boys from the senior division.

"In my humble opinion, facing the enemy head-on is the epitome of foolishness," Yuuki said, grinning cheekily from behind his mask. It was probably just for show, but the audacity suited him.

Mia, however, seemed a bit displeased.

"But we don't have any fancy tactics. Our goal is simple: concentrate our firepower in the right place at the right time. If that doesn't work, we'll retreat and use the People of Light as meat shields while we devise a backup plan."

It's ruthless, but logical. If we die, this world is pretty much finished.

On this battlefield, we have forces that are expendable and forces that aren't.

“As for our strategy... We'll fly up, target the Aga-su core identified by the elemental' scouting, and repeatedly cast fire-attribute attack magic until we run out of MP. That's it.”

It was a simple strategy, but it may as well have been the only option we had.

Chapter 181: The Raging Forest - Part 2

After a brief moment, the twelve of us, along with Sha-lau as our escort, soared above the canopy once again and looked down upon the writhing forest created by Aga-su. The remaining Wind Elemental had already been sent back, and from this vantage point, our enemies hadn't seemed to notice us yet.

"The command of this mission falls to Kazu," Keiko pronounced. "We'll leave the decisions and instructions to you."

"Eh? But wouldn't Yuuki-senpai be better suited for this?" I asked in reply.

Yuuki shook his head. "Keiko and I will fight on the front lines. Besides, it's better for a rearguard to also serve as a commander. Plus, I appreciate your crisis management skills, Kazu."

Is Yuuki-senpai intentionally saying this in front of the two from the High School Division for some reason? I wondered. He's probably trying to make sure that they follow my orders. I guess he can do what he wants, if he's trying to get them to be considerate of me.

"Our fights are always hanging by a thread, but I understand," I replied. "I accept the role. But if things seem dangerous on the front lines, make your own calls and instruct Arisu and the others."

"Of course." He nodded.

All right, let's put the plan into action.

"Rushia. Start with ten casts of Inferno. I hate to say it, but we can't hold back."

"Understood, Kazu."

Personally, I started by casting Power, a Rank 8 Support Magic spell, on Rushia. It was a short-lived spell that increased the power of offensive magic.

I hadn't used Power since leveling up to Rank 8, mainly because Rushia's Fire Magic was already overwhelmingly strong. But this time, we were facing an enemy that would be difficult to defeat even with Rushia's full power. I had no choice but to increase her maximum firepower.

Once I was done, I gave the signal to begin, and all of the Fire Magicians unleashed their spells simultaneously. The Rank 6 duo from the High School Division cast Fire Storm, while Shion and Yuriko unleashed a Rank 8 Incinerate. Rushia, meanwhile, cast a Rank 9 Inferno that consumed ten times the amount of MP it normally would. In the end, Rushia's fireball was more massive than all the others' combined.

Each caster aimed their spells at what appeared to be the center of the writhing trees. They hit the mark, and a massive explosion occurred.

A deafening roar ripped through the air, and in its wake, a shockwave rushed toward us, along with an incredible amount of dust that obscured our view.

The high school boys, who weren't used to flying, began to spin in circles midair uncontrollably. The ninja group—who were probably equally inexperienced—somehow managed to keep their balance.

Mia whispered, "Did we make it?"

I sent her a glare. *Hey, don't jinx it.*

Perhaps due to Mia's premature celebration—or admittedly, maybe not—we saw something stirring beyond the thick cloud of dust.

"Ah, here it comes," Keiko warned casually.

Almost the second she spoke, countless vine-like plants pierced through the smoke and stretched their tendrils toward us.

Just a short while earlier, my Greater Wind Elemental had been captured by these vines and dragged into the forest. They were dangerous, and we had to eliminate them all.

"All rear guards except Rushia, burn those vines! Arisu and the front guards —"

"We'll protect you!" Yuuki and his team cried out, stepping forward.

Keiko and Tamaki were leading the group brandishing their white swords. Shockwaves erupted from their blades as they advanced, severing the approaching vines one by one. Arisu followed along with them, using her magic spear to smash the vines that they couldn't fight off.

However, there was a limit to what they could do alone. The number of attacking vines had reached into the hundreds. And so, the four fire mages, excluding Rushia, began their bombardment.

"Fire Storm!"

"Incinerate!"

I'd already decided that if we couldn't cut the vines off completely, we should burn them. After all, the reality was that the attacks of everyone except Rushia were just a drop in the bucket against the huge forest.

I think it's the correct decision. I hope I'm right.

"Tempest!" Mia cried out, continuing to confuse the vines with her tornado spell.

The searing flames and violent winds prevented the countless vine-like plants from approaching us. But then, cutting through the sound of the howling storm, we heard a series of popping sounds, almost like someone was uncorking a bunch of soda bottles.

"Missiles incoming!"

Wait, missiles?!

The meaning of Keiko's warning became clear almost immediately. Breaking through the blazing inferno and spiraling whirlwind were teardrop-shaped acorns about the size of a human body. These acorns seemed to propel themselves forward by expelling a white powdery substance from their bottoms. Although they looked somewhat magical, they were unmistakably huge rockets, and there were three of them in total.

Three of the front guard stepped forward to tackle the missiles.

Is that Arisu, Keiko-san, and... Sakura? Wait, why is Sakura here?

I stared at Sakura in confusion, then noticed that the spear she wielded had a new handle that spiraled like a double helix, which was a design I had never seen before.

Before I could examine it closer, however, Arisu had already extended the handle of her own spear to pierce one of the acorn missiles. The impact set off an explosion, which sent another shockwave rushing toward us.

Sha-lau shielded Mia and me from the blast while the rest of our group struggled to keep their balance in the air.

Back at the front lines of the battle, Sakura had begun to chant some command words. The double-helix handle of her spear began to glow red until the red light converged at the tip of the spear and fired a beam that beautifully pierced another acorn, causing it to explode.

Keiko was standing in front of the last missile.

“Reflection!” she cried, and with impeccable timing, she deflected it right back from whence it had come.

Someone like me would have never been able to accomplish such a feat, of course. The acorn missiles were much too fast, to the point that probably only a Greater Ninja could anticipate when to strike.

The deflected missile crashed into the forest, causing another explosion. Trees were blown away, and a huge cloud of smoke rose.

If we took a direct hit from something like that, even we would have been in serious trouble.

In the meantime, while the front guard were buying us some time, Rushia had been dripping with sweat, waiting for her MP to refill. Now was the perfect time to strike once more, so I signaled the people in the line of fire to evacuate.

“Let’s go, Rushia. Power.”

“Inferno.”

The ultimate Fire Magic spell released for a second time, once again eating up ten times its normal MP. The massive fireball Rushia had unleashed slammed into the forest below, causing a massive explosion. It had landed near where

the acorn missile had struck, which resulted in the remaining writhing trees being blown away en masse, leaving deep gouges in the ground and scattered debris.

“I’ve leveled up,” Rushia informed us.

Did we actually manage to blow up a horde of monsters? I wondered. Or were those wriggling trees entirely separate from Aga-su?

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It turned out that Rushia wasn’t the only one who’d leveled—Arisu had too.

“It’s likely that those vine-like plants were plant monsters that were turned into Aga-su’s minions,” Rushia said, still panting heavily due to the heavy MP cost of using her most powerful magic twice. “They’re known as Rampage Thorns.”

Back when we’d had our strategy meeting with Leen, the name Rampage Thorns had popped into my mind. Now, I found myself wondering if each of the vines had been an individual monster. If so, we must have defeated a considerable number of them.

Isn’t it weird then that only two of us leveled up? I mused.

There were currently six of us in our group, including Sakura. Even taking that into account, the individual levels of the Rampage Thorns must be quite low.

“The vines were surprisingly strong, considering their supposedly low rank,” I muttered. “Even my Rank 8 Wind Elemental, enhanced with Mighty Arm, couldn’t tear them apart. From what I observed, they seemed to be the equivalent in strength to other monsters at Rank 4... but perhaps I was measuring by the combined strength of two or three of them.”

“That’s probably it,” Rushia agreed. “Remember, these vines were preying on monsters, and capturing a large number of monsters requires considerable strength.”

That’s true, I realized. Those vines weren’t just catching ordinary orcs, but giants as well. Could they have some sort of secret skill that strengthens them

somehow?

“What if they possess Support Magic similar to Kazu?” Mia asked. “Maybe they can bolster each other with it.”

Everyone turned their eyes to Mia. The girl looked back at us all blankly, her face as expressionless as usual.

“What do you mean exactly?” I asked.

“I’m just saying that maybe Aga-su has a skill like Plant Enhancement,” she explained. “If it has Rank 1 Plant Enhancement, then it could raise the rank of plant monsters by one.”

“That sounds incredibly dangerous,” Tamaki said with a groan.

Sakura frowned, but didn’t say a word.

“An ability like that sounds like cheating,” Arisu eventually remarked.

“You can say that all you want, but we’re currently under the protection of the World Tree, which enhances our abilities,” Mia pointed out. “It’s not unreasonable to think that the enemy might have something similar.”

Arisu wrinkled her nose. “Ugh, seriously?”

“Well, we should assume that whatever we can do, the enemy can do as well.”

Suddenly, I had a terrible thought. If Aga-su was a member of the Four Heavenly Kings with the ability to strengthen allies...

That means he’s the complete opposite of Azagralith, but just as troublesome to deal with, I thought, sighing.

A monster that could strengthen a variety of low-level enemies was beyond alarming. If it could, for example, raise any common orc to the level of the Elite Orc...

I shivered. *If Aga-su really has that ability, the effective range will definitely be a concern.*

At the moment, we didn’t know how far the Rampage Thorns could spread, and though it was unclear how the game identified a single entity, considering

the amount of experience points we had gotten from burning so many of them—about a thousand per person—it made one wonder...

“It seems like every Rampage Thorn is about Level 1, but it feels like their abilities have been greatly enhanced,” I muttered.

“Considering how few experience points we received, that seems likely.” Mia sighed deeply, a rare expression for her. “This hunting ground is not lucrative. This is a lousy game—I want to lodge a strong protest with the developers.”

“I understand the sentiment, but unfortunately, this game has been lousy from the start,” I pointed out.

Besides, it was a game that couldn’t be reset, and the stakes were our real lives. On top of that, the people of this world were currently engaged in an endgame scenario, and in the worst case, the entire continent could meet its end today. That level of difficulty was just crazy high.

“Well, there’s no point in complaining about the difficulty right now,” I finally said. “It’s highly likely that one of Aga-su’s abilities enhances the abilities of his minions, but at least we’ve already figured that out. Let’s consider that a victory.”

I looked at Sakura. Come to think of it, was this the first time I’d been in the White Room with her?

“What sort of spear is that you’re holding?”

“It’s a spoil of war,” she replied. “I heard that it belonged to an arachne who guarded the Underground Tree. Shiki suggested that I use it.”

Oh, an arachne... It must have been Legend class.

The extending spear that Arisu used was also from a Legend Arachne. I wondered if there was such a creature among the ones Rushia had killed.

“It seems convenient to have a spear that shoots beams,” I said thoughtfully.

Sakura shrugged. “It’s powerful, but it’s not economical, since it uses 30 MP per shot. Plus, you can’t use it consecutively.”

If it used that much MP, it wasn’t suitable for Arisu, who used Healing Magic. But for Sakura, who didn’t normally use MP and had no ranged weapons, it was

probably a convenient weapon.

“How powerful is it?”

“I’m not sure of its maximum power yet. I’d like to test it here if possible.”

I nodded. “In that case, we can turn the next room into a grassland and conduct an operational test. We’ll use the Paladin as the target.”

Sorry in advance, my friend...

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The beam from Sakura’s spear blew the Paladin away even from a distance of thirty meters. The familiar hadn’t been entirely destroyed—it was still able to stagger back to his feet—but there was a large hole in the metallic armor covering his body around his flank.

“Wait a minute— isn’t that a little too powerful?” I demanded.

“Well, the Paladin didn’t dodge,” Sakura pointed out. “In reality, it’s a challenge to land an accurate hit.”

After conducting several inhumane experiments with my familiars, we determined that the beam released by Sakura’s spear was classified as Wind Magic, not Fire Magic. Its power was almost equal to the Rank 9 Wind Magic spell, White Cannon.

That’s incredibly powerful.

Chapter 182: The Raging Forest - Part 3

With this level-up, Arisu's Healing Magic reached Rank 7. One of the notable spells available at her new rank was Revive, which allowed for the regeneration of the physical body. This meant that even if Mia's wrist were to be severed, there would no longer be a need to retrieve the severed part. By casting Revive on the wound, a new wrist would grow quickly.

"I'd like to try it later," Mia said, humming thoughtfully to herself. "I'm willing to offer my wrist for the experiment."

"You really want to chop off your wrist for that?" I asked.

"The pain is only temporary, and the experience seems fascinating..."

Everyone stared at Mia intently.

"You guys staring at me like that is starting to make me feel embarrassed," she muttered.

"Mia, you really are a curious soul," Sakura said in an annoyed tone.

"I really admire your mind," I told her.

At my words, the petite girl puffed out her flat chest. "You should praise me even more," she commanded.

Her commitment to being so strange and eccentric was truly awe-inspiring, but at the same time, it made me want to keep my distance.

Mia seemed to catch onto that, and she asked, "Why are you subtly trying to distance yourself from me, Kazu?"

I cleared my throat. "I wonder why?"

"That's mean," Mia whined, her face contorting into a pout.

I patted her head, trying to calm her back down. I could see Sakura watching our interaction with narrowed eyes.

“Sorry for being so lovey-dovey,” I apologized.

Sakura gently shook her head. “It’s comforting to see you both so relaxed in the midst of this situation. It shows that you have the ability to remain calm. I remember that those who were too nervous during the track meet ended up dropping out.”

“I guess that’s just how it goes,” I said. “Anyway, typically we are all pretty relaxed as long as Mia is around.”

“A mood setter is crucial,” Sakura admitted.

Mia looked up at me with a smug expression on her face, so I flicked her forehead lightly.

She winced, but her expression remained gleeful. “I’ll take this pain as just another expression of your love, Kazu.”

“I’m gonna ignore that. Rushia, how do you feel after using Magic Release twice?”

“I can still go on,” she replied.

She’d looked pale when we first entered the White Room, but she seemed to have recovered quite a bit while we were fooling around. Even though she hadn’t actually spoken, Rushia had participated in our joking as well, laughing at our silliness. It felt to me like her smiles had been more frequent and sincere lately.

“You seem more comfortable now,” I commented. “Maybe it’s because your level has risen significantly since the last time you unleashed your power.”

It was strange to think that when I said “last time” I just meant earlier this same day. Rushia had been Level 22 then, but now that she’d leveled up, she was Level 36. To make such progress in such a short time was nothing short of amazing, even considering the many battles we had been involved in.

To think, she was only Level 10 when we met her yesterday afternoon, I thought.

“In addition, the protection of the World Tree seems to be playing a significant role,” Rushia added.

“So, your fatigue is most likely due to your MP dropping drastically,” I realized.

“You know...” Mia tilted her head slightly. “It kind of seems like her resilience is increasing.”

Trust Mia’s gamer brain to figure that out, I thought with a soft laugh.

Analyzing all of these sorts of aspects thoroughly was important—if we misunderstood Rushia’s limits, using her magic trigger in the future could lead to disaster.

“Kazu, shall we conduct an experiment in this room?”

After thinking for a moment, I shook my head. “Let’s not. I recall from a previous Q&A session that overusing Magic Release can be life-threatening. We need to consider the worst-case scenarios.”

“Mm. I feel like I could use another shot,” Mia mused. “Also, I caught a glimpse of what looked like Aga-su through the dust. If we aim around that area, we should be able to clear our way.”

“Wait, Mia, you saw it? That’s amazing!” Tamaki exclaimed in awe.

To my surprise, Mia had proved to have quite good eyesight. Even though she said she was nearsighted without her glasses, she’d managed to see things from quite a distance.

“I just followed where my brother and Kei were looking,” she explained.

Oh, so she was piggybacking on their observations. Well, those two would be the first to notice such details.

“After Rushia launches another attack, our vanguard will rush in,” I said, leaving our current conversation behind to talk strategy. “The rear guard will support and follow, and Arisu and Tamaki will take the lead on Sha-lau as usual. Sakura... I know you want to dive right in, but I’ll need you to guard us.”

“No problem.”

“All right, inform the nearby second party of our plans.”

After the briefing and leveling up Arisu’s skills, we returned to the battlefield.

ARISU	
LEVEL: 37	SPEARMANSHIP: 9
HEALING MAGIC: 6 → 7	SKILL POINTS: 8 → 1

RUSHIA	
LEVEL: 36	FIRE MAGIC: 9
WATER MAGIC: 6	SKILL POINTS: 6

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Upon my return, I immediately reported to Yuuki, telling him of my plan.

“Understood,” he replied. “We were discussing doing the same thing on our side.”

Someone from their side must have leveled up as well if they had time to discuss strategy, I realized. Regardless, it’s good that we’re on the same page.

“Would you and Keiko like to keep Sha-lau?”

Yuuki nodded. “If possible, that would be better.”

“All right then.”

During our conversation, those who could cast Fire Magic continued to relentlessly bombard the enemy, making sure that they didn’t get a chance to retaliate. Rushia then initiated her third magic release, this time enhanced with the Power spell.

A massive explosion shook the ground, and a thick cloud of dust obscured our view.

That was our cue. The Phantom Wolf King, Sha-lau, rushed into the cloud of dust like a flash of lightning, carrying Arisu, Tamaki, Yuuki, and Keiko with it. At that same moment, we entered the White Room. This time, I was the one leveling up.

After a short discussion, we left the room.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 46	SUPPORT MAGIC: 9
SUMMONING MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 2

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“Start carpet bombing around us!” I ordered the Fire Magic users—excluding Rushia—as soon as we returned to the battlefield.

The combined group from the High School Division and the Cultural Arts Center, four people in total, obeyed my orders and launched area-of-effect attacks around the periphery of the devastation caused by Rushia’s strike. We couldn’t see through the thick dust, but the loud explosions were unmistakable.

All of a sudden, Rushia seemed to become off balance in the air.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Y-Yes,” she replied.

The protection of the World Tree should have given her a surplus of MP, but Rushia’s exhaustion was obvious—she was panting and sweating profusely. I supported her with one shoulder, and she leaned against me, her chest heaving.

“If you’re struggling, just tell me,” I chided her.

“Thank you, Kazu. But I can manage a little mo—”

“Ahem. *Ahem*. Mia, can you clear this dust with a tornado?”

Mia gave me a piercing look. “Are you sure? Those tentacle-like things could come back.”

“It will ease the burden on Arisu and the others,” I confirmed. “We’ll just act as bait.”

“Got it,” Mia replied, nodding. “Tempest.”

Mia aimed her tornado spell at the remaining dust, and the whirlwind stirred the air, clearing our vision. That’s when we saw it—a massive tree standing upright at the epicenter of the devastation. The colossal tree was unmistakably Aga-su.

Aga-su extended countless branches like tentacles as it fought Arisu and the others. The treant stood ten meters high and ten meters wide, and scattered around the trunk—especially around the seven meter mark—were countless eyes that kept a vigilant 360-degree watch.

Every now and then, some of those eyes would shine with a golden hue. Each time, they unleashed a different kind of attack—everything from lasers and ice bolts, to even jagged rocks that sprouted from the ground.

“Is it possible that each of those eyes can cast magic?” I wondered aloud.

“Multiple attacks from one boss—that’s just basic stuff to increase the difficulty of a game,” Mia quipped.

“Don’t make this sound like just another video game!” I snapped back.

The challenge we were to face didn’t end there. In coordination with Aga-su, the surrounding vines had begun attempting to impede the movements of Arisu and her party. Sha-lau dealt with this threat first and foremost, burning the free-growing vines with lightning and tearing them apart with sharp claws and fangs. But the vines were tenacious.

It quickly became apparent that covering all four members was too much for Sha-lau alone. But with the help of Yuuki, the front guard barely managed to hold on.

“Looks like they could use some reinforcements,” I suggested.

“You’re right; I’ll summon the Fire Elementals. Mia, can you transport them?”

“Roger that!” Mia replied. There was a strange note to her usual tone, though.

Regardless, it was obvious that the writhing vines had a weakness in Fire Magic. That meant that against our current enemies, Fire Elementals would be much more useful than Paladins.

I quickly summoned two Greater Fire Elementals and then applied the usual support spells to them. They appeared as muscular, sword-wielding figures, their bodies enveloped in flames.

Mia took the hands of both elementals and vanished after casting Dimensional Step. The next moment, she and the two Fire Elementals materialized near Sha-lau.

The Phantom Wolf King and Yuuki glanced in my direction. Even from this distance, where their facial expressions weren’t clearly visible, I could sense their gratitude.

Good, I made the right decision, I thought.

Mia returned shortly after she had left the two Fire Elementals on the battlefield and looked up at me. “They need more reinforcements.”

“Two aren’t enough?” I asked. “Okay, I got it.”

I summoned two more Greater Fire Elementals and quickly applied the usual assortment of buffs. Even with the MP boost from the World Tree, summoning more might be too much.

Just like earlier, Mia transported these two with her Dimensional Step, but at the same time, vines came down from above. There were fewer of them than before, however, as most of them were focused on attacking Arisu and the team.

Sakura and the fire mages intercepted the vines with ease, dispatching them handily. Then, just as Mia finished her second elemental transport and returned, we found ourselves in the White Room.

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This time, it was Sakura Nagatsuki who had leveled up. She'd now reached Level 25, which probably made her the one with the highest level in the CAC group.

"How are you doing, Arisu, Tamaki?" I asked. "How strong is Aga-su?"

"Ugh, there are hardly any openings!" Arisu grumbled.

"Yeah, and with all those eyes, it can see our every move," Tamaki agreed. "It's quite challenging."

The two frontliners looked tired. They weren't in the same desperate situation as they had been during the battle against Azagralith, however—with psychic attacks completely blocked, the enemy was unable to make a decisive move against them.

"We're at a stalemate, then."

"Yes. Keiko tried to slash its trunk a few times, but even her white sword was blocked."

My eyes narrowed. *Wait, did Arisu misspeak? Keiko has no sword skills. If experienced fighters like Arisu and Tamaki can't get close, how could she?*

"She dodged the branches like a willow in the wind and then struck," Arisu explained. "But since it had no effect, she retreated. Since then, the enemy seems to be more cautious."

"Remarkable... Oh, she must have been able to do that because of her agility."

As always, Keiko's abilities exist outside of the conventional skill system.

Chapter 183: The Raging Forest - Part 4

Our battle with Aga-su seemed to be at a stalemate. Considering that our previous strategy against Azagralith had been purely defensive, it was perhaps impressive that even with the protection of the World Tree, our twelve-member party had managed to reach a stalemate with Aga-su. But if we didn't win this battle, the World Tree would fall. And if the World Tree fell, the continent would follow. That would be the end for all of us.

If the battle continued in this equilibrium, the moment our MPs ran out, we would be overwhelmed by the tentacle-like plants of the rampant forest, the Rampage Thorns. We had to assume that a prolonged battle would favor them.

We're going to need to take risks to ensure victory, I thought, determination filling me.

"Tamaki," I began, "when Keiko's blade was repelled, was it because of a thick outer layer?"

"What do you mean?"

"Her weapon is the same as the one you have—the cursed blade once wielded by a General Ogre. Its power is known to all of us. Even Azagralith didn't dare to take a hit from that sword... Right?"

During our battle with Azagralith, we hadn't been able to inflict a single scratch on the monstrous creature. The demon general had either dodged, parried, or shielded himself from Tamaki's attacks. But that was because it had been afraid of being wounded by her blade.

Azagralith had targeted Tamaki with a surprise attack from the beginning—it had recognized her as the greatest threat. If her weapon hadn't been able to hurt Azagralith, it wouldn't have made such a decision.

At least, that was what I thought. I shared my theory with the group.

“So you’re saying that Aga-su’s body could be even tougher than Azagralith’s?” Arisu pondered, tilting her head slightly.

“To confirm that, we’d have to continue the fight and collect more data,” I pointed out.

“But we don’t have the luxury of time to indulge in such detailed observations right now,” Rushia replied.

Rushia and I exchanged glances, understanding that we were on the same page regarding the situation.

“Rushia, do you have any hypotheses about what happened to Keiko’s sword?”

“Azagralith’s mana shield was easy to spot because it glowed red. What if there was an invisible shield at play here?” Rushia postulated.

“Ah! That makes sense!” Tamaki exclaimed with a snap of her fingers. “Aga-su could have a barrier!”

That had been my first suspicion as well. And even though there was no concrete evidence and it felt risky to base our strategy on such an assumption, it was a possibility we couldn’t ignore.

“But when Aga-su uses magic, his eyes light up,” Arisu pointed out.

“The problem is,” I began, “with so many eyes flickering at different times, it’s difficult to tell which eye is casting which spell, especially from our aerial view.”

It would be easier to track the projectiles like ice bolts if we were on the ground, but predicting attacks that erupt from the earth, like the sudden spikes of rock, would probably be much more difficult.

“We have to consider whether the barrier covers Aga-su completely or whether it’s pinpointed to specific locations,” Rushia mused. “Our strategy will vary depending on that.”

“This is getting complicated,” Tamaki lamented.

“Since three of us have already leveled up, we can’t be sure if we’ll be able to access the White Room again. We should prepare strategies for different scenarios,” I suggested.

Ideally, it would be advantageous to have Keiko-san and Yuuki-senpai in the White Room at the same times as us—with our teams separated, it's hard to communicate in the middle of a battle.

Just as I was musing over how to make that happen, Mia said, “Why don’t we ask the owner of this room to implement something like the raid feature from MMOs?”

“It’s worth a shot,” I replied.

Following Mia’s suggestion, I entered the request into the PC. Surprisingly, there was a slight delay before we received an answer.

That would be difficult.

Staring at the message, we all exchanged worried glances. This was very different from the usual responses we received.

“Mia, when you requested the adjoining room, how did it respond?”

“It immediately said, ‘I will consider it’.”

Hmm, I thought. The responses seem strangely... human.

I found my interest piqued at the entity running the White Room, but at the moment, I had more pressing concerns. We needed to focus on the battle at hand.

There were three basic scenarios to consider:

1. Aga-su had no barrier.
2. Aga-su was using a pinpoint barrier.
3. Aga-su was using a full-surround barrier.

For the first option, we might need to target vital points such as the creature’s eyes or mouth, as other methods had so far seemed ineffective. For the second option, we could possibly break through the barrier with a simultaneous attack from all directions, like something out of a shonen manga. The third option would be the trickiest, but there might be a way around it...

“Oh! According to the Q&A, a full-surround barrier can be dispelled with an indiscriminate or target-specific Dispel,” declared Mia, who had been quickly querying the PC. “Let’s have a round of applause.”

Obediently, we all clapped.

“The only ones who can cast Dispel are Kazu and Arisu,” Sakura pointed out.

“To be more specific, I have the Dispel Magic spell at Rank 6 in my Support Magic, and there’s a Dispel at Rank 3 and a Greater Dispel at Rank 7 in Healing Magic,” I clarified.

Each spell had slightly different effects. The Rank 3 Dispel in Healing Magic required physical contact with the target and could only cancel one specific spell, whereas Greater Dispel could be cast from a distance, with the range increasing by five meters per rank. Support Magic Dispel spells were still more different; they could remove all spells affecting a target.

“So, Kazu, if Arisu uses Greater Dispel, will that solve our problem?” Tamaki asked.

“It’s not that simple,” I replied. “If you cast Greater Dispel without specifying which magic to dispel, the magic it targets is chosen randomly from all the spells that affect the target. In other words, if Aga-su has ten spells on him, the chance of luckily dispersing the full-surround barrier is only one in ten.”

“What if we cast Greater Dispel continuously?” someone asked.

“There’s a possibility that Aga-su will keep casting spells on himself to interfere. Honestly, if I were in his place, that’s exactly what I would do, and considering how many eyes he has and the fact that each eye can use magic, it’s even more likely.”

We couldn’t be sure if the enemy knew the mechanics of Greater Dispel, but from our previous battles, it was clear that our magic and the monsters’ magic were quite similar. For a high-level monster like Aga-su, it wouldn’t be surprising if he understood it.

Spamming the Greater Dispel seems like a bad gamble, I concluded.

“Of course, this strategy only works when the enemy has a wrap-around barrier,” I added. “For other patterns, we have other approaches.”

After that, we continued to discuss our possible plans in detail. Eventually, a seemingly foolproof strategy emerged.

Once we made sure there wasn’t anything we’d forgotten to strategize for in our plan, we increased Sakura’s Movement skill to Rank 2 and left the White Room.

It was worth noting that Sakura had held onto her skill points because she was unsure if she should continue to improve her Movement skill.

“After watching Keiko-san, I decided that I should continue ranking up Movement,” Sakura said, voicing her thoughts out loud.

I couldn’t help but think that using the Greater Ninja as a reference might not be the best idea.

SAKURA	
LEVEL: 25	SPEARMANSHIP: 9
MOVEMENT: 1 → 2	SKILL POINTS: 4 → 2

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After returning to our battlefield following our discussion, Mia used her Dimensional Step to disappear. Shortly after, she reappeared next to Yuuki and initiated a conversation.

The leader of the High School Division, the renowned ninja, desperately fended off Aga-su’s branches while talking to Mia. Their exchange was brief, lasting only a few seconds—the siblings always *had* had smooth communication.

Now briefed on the plan, Yuuki called out to Keiko, and they both started to attack. Arisu and Tamaki also began attacking the monster fiercely from the left and right.

Aga-su continued to fend off their simultaneous attacks with its numerous branches, despite the fact that it was being swarmed on all sides.

“Here I go!” called Keiko.

Using her impressive agility, she slipped between Aga-su’s writhing branches and delivered a powerful blow to its trunk. Almost simultaneously, Arisu extended the shaft of her spear and aimed a thrust at another spot close by.

Aga-su withstood both blows, and Arisu’s spear and Keiko’s sword were deflected. But that very moment...

“White Cannon!” Mia called out.

The white beam of light she released hit Aga-su directly, but bounced off its trunk. The blow triggered something, however, and the monster’s entire trunk shimmered silver.

“There it is!” Tamaki shouted.

Without a doubt, there’s a silver barrier surrounding the entire trunk, I thought.

The fleeting appearance of the barrier strengthened our resolve, and Mia and I exchanged glances before nodding at each other.

Frankly, this was the scenario we had feared the most. The risks were just too high, especially considering the danger it would pose to me. Arisu, Tamaki, Mia, Rushia, *and* Sakura had all vehemently opposed the strategy we’d come up with for this eventuality. In fact, everyone except me had been strongly against it.

Regardless, I had insisted on this plan. No one else had offered a better suggestion.

I was the only one who possessed a Dispel spell capable of removing all magic from an opponent, but getting close enough to Aga-su to use it would be a challenge. Even if Mia used her Dimensional Step to teleport me there, there would be a moment where we were vulnerable, leaving us exposed to a barrage

of magic and branches. If Mia or I were taken out in that brief slip of time, everything would have been for nothing.

And that was why...

“Shape Change,” I murmured, invoking one of the most powerful Rank 9 Support Magic spells.

My body, now enveloped in a golden glow, began to melt and transform.

Chapter 184: The Raging Forest - Part 5

I had just invoked the Rank 9 Support Magic spell, Shape Change, and now my entire body was enveloped in a dazzling golden glow. My skeletal structure transformed, fur sprouted all over my enlarging form, and the clothes I was wearing melted into my skin as my hands turned into forepaws and a tail grew out of my backside. I could also feel menacing fangs sprouting from my mouth. Had there been a mirror nearby, I would have seen that my form was now identical to that of the Phantom Wolf King, Sha-lau.

Shape Change allowed the caster to transform into a monster he or she knew well. And among the monsters I knew well, my familiars stood out, Sha-lau in particular. It was undoubtedly the most powerful.

Shape Change *did* have its limitations, however. While I gained a monster's species-specific abilities after using it, I could only use the unique powers that I possessed as the original caster. For example, while the real Sha-lau possessed numerous magical abilities, my transformed Sha-lau clone could only use the Support and Summoning Magic that I possessed.

Despite these limitations, my Sha-lau form was powerful. The constitution, power, and speed of this form were leagues above those of a mere human.

I cast Haste upon myself and leapt away from where I was standing with Rushia and the others. Surrounded by a red light, I propelled myself forward, my four paws pushing off the ground. I accelerated rapidly, zooming straight toward Aga-su.

The Heavenly King noticed my rapid descent from above and extended his tentacle-like branches in response. But before he could attack...

"Accel."

My thoughts sped up, and I narrowly avoided Aga-su's swinging branches. I used another branch on the ground to kick off, increasing my speed even more.

As I ran, the front guard continued to provide me cover. Arisu and Tamaki, as well as Yuuki and Keiko, attacked from all sides. The four Fire Elementals I'd summoned slashed through scorching Aga-su's branches even as the real Shalau swooped in and out like a bolt of lightning, pulling the enemy's focus away toward it.

Thanks to their efforts, the attacks on me were minimized. Soon, I was only twenty steps away from Aga-su. I shot forward in a perfect line, getting closer and closer, and then...

"Accel," I pronounced, accelerating my consciousness for the second time.

I sprinted through the gaps between the monster's branches, and just before the effect of Accel wore off, I reached Aga-su's trunk. Honestly, I practically slammed into it.

It was time. I extended my hand, or rather, my forepaw, and said, "Dispel."

My paw shone with a silvery light, and my spell dispersed all the magic that had been cast on Aga-su.

Good, the magic worked!

The whole tree shone brightly, and at the same time, an intense shock wave erupted in all directions. My Phantom Wolf King form was blasted away from Aga-su.

As I twirled in the air like a leaf, I deactivated Shape Change and returned to my human form. Thankfully, this threw off all the branches flying in my direction, and the wood whips whizzed right past my defenseless self.

I looked down at Arisu and the others, still spinning in the air like a top. They hadn't allowed themselves to miss their brief chance to attack when the monster's barrier had disappeared, and were now desperately trying to attack Aga-su. Among them, Keiko was the only one who managed to reach the colossal treant.

"Take this!" she cried, piercing one of Aga-su's eyes with her spear.

Almost simultaneously, Arisu thrust her spear into another eye a short distance away.

A deafening scream echoed through the air, and Aga-su began to flail wildly in its rage. I noted that even though there were still countless eyes remaining, the monster no longer retaliated with the same precision it had shown earlier. Still, its wild rage meant that even someone like Keiko couldn't approach it recklessly.

Still, there was another way. I looked up at the rear guard team.

"Concentrate your attacks on Aga-su!"

Before, Aga-su's barrier had rendered the rearguard team's magic ineffective, but this time was different. The massive tree—which was blindly flailing its branches—was showered with a rain of Fire Magic. Mia's beam of light was also absorbed by the trunk, causing a series of explosions.

Looking around, I noticed something strange. The vine-like plants that had been writhing so violently just moments ago had now stopped.

Had we disabled them by overpowering Aga-su? If so, this was our chance.

I landed on the ground and sent all four Fire Elementals back with Deportation. The MP I had was enough to summon a Rank 9 familiar three times, but instead I put it all into Familiar Awakening.

"Sha-lau!"

The Phantom Wolf King's body glowed dark red, and with a roar, he charged forward. A gust of wind swept through the area with the speed of lightning, and a thunderous sound echoed as the ground shook violently. Within seconds, Sha-lau collided with Aga-su; the air shook with electricity.

"Now I will show you my true power," Sha-lau said, speaking into my mind.

Looking on as the familiar attacked, I couldn't help but think his body had grown considerably. There was also a new, silvery aura surrounding the Phantom Wolf King that had purple lightning flashing around it.

Within moments, a massive explosion erupted with Sha-lau at its center. Aga-su's screams filled the air as dust clouds obscured my vision.

"What happened?" I asked once Sha-lau had emerged from the smoke and landed in front of me.

“The trunk... It’s broken.”

So, we defeated it? We defeated Aga-su?!

The ground shook, causing me to lose my balance for a moment. Through the dust, I could see Aga-su’s thick trunk, now split in two.

“But there’s one thing that worries m—”

Sha-lau stopped short, his ears twitching alertly.

Wait, is Aga-su still alive?

Abruptly, my vision shifted. I was in the White Room again.

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In the end, only Tamaki and Mia had leveled up due to the experience points we’d gained from defeating Aga-su. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief at the confirmation that the creature was dead.

“We actually managed to defeat one of the Four Heavenly Kings,” Arisu muttered with deep emotion.

“Yes, we did,” I replied. “It was close, but we managed to corner him and finish him off.”

We’d given it our all, the twelve of us—this victory had required us to use all of our trump cards. To tell the truth, I wasn’t sure if we’d be able to win again if we had to face Aga-su a second time. But for now, we had won.

“By the way, Sha-lau seemed to notice something...” I began.

“What do you mean?” Arisu asked.

“I was taken to this room before I could ask.”

We’ll have to be extra careful once we leave this room, I decided.

Before we departed the White Room, Tamaki decided to increase the rank of her Strength, while Mia decided to increase her Earth Magic to Rank 7.

LEVEL: 37	SWORDSMANSHIP: 9
STRENGTH: 6 → 7	SKILL POINTS: 8 → 1

MIA	
LEVEL: 37	EARTH MAGIC: 6 → 7
WIND MAGIC: 9	SKILL POINTS: 8 → 1

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As soon as we returned to our original location, Sha-lau issued us a warning: “Master, be careful. Something is still here.”

“What? Not Aga-su, you mean, but something else?”

“Indeed,” Sha-lau agreed. “It is most likely the true culprit behind weakening that treant and sending it into a frenzy.”

Wait, what? Weakening? Frenzy?

“Wait, Sha-lau, what do you mea—?”

“It’s coming,” Sha-Rau interjected sharply.

The next moment, a dark shadow the size of a horse burst out of the dust cloud hanging around where Aga-su had once been. Sha-lau, still enveloped in purple lightning, launched a thunderous attack on the mysterious creature, but the dark shadow effortlessly dodged and closed in.

Wait, it’s coming for me! I realized.

“I won’t let it hurt you, Kazu!” Keiko shouted, stepping between me and the shadow with her white blade raised.

Three sharp, blade-like extensions came out of the shadow. One pierced Keiko's chest, while the other two sliced off her arms. Her body fell, seeming to move in slow motion.



“Wh-What...?”

What just happened? What did that thing just do?

The dark figure landed in front of me and Sha-lau. I stared at it in shock.

The monster stood on four legs, and when it raised its head, the rest of its form was revealed to my eyes. It was a beast-type monster—a wolf-like creature, slightly smaller than Sha-lau, with jet black fur. Wings sprouted from its back, the tips of which resembled sharp blades and were now fully extended. And on its head, above its fierce red eyes, was a single retractable white horn in the center of its forehead, now glistening with Keiko’s blood.

Those blade-like wings... They’re what severed Keiko’s arms, I realized.

More than that, I had to wonder about this big wolf with sharp wings and a single horn. Such a creature wasn’t in any mythology or game I knew. Who was this creature that was staring at me?

The giant wolf looked at me and grinned wickedly. A shiver ran down my spine, and I couldn’t stop shaking.

“Do you understand the difference between our powers?” A mocking voice asked from inside my mind. “It would be wise for you to stop your attacks.”

Was that just telepathy? I wondered. Was that really the voice of that wolf-like monster in front of me?

Considering the enchantments I had on me, it wouldn’t be strange for me to hear a monster’s voice. I had heard monsters speak before, and Sha-lau was also a wolf-type monster that could communicate telepathically.

But this one... It felt fundamentally different from the other monsters that had attacked us so blindly and ferociously.

Could this thing be the monster that Sha-lau mentioned earlier? I wondered. The one that caused Aga-su to go berserk?

Above, Rushia cried out in warning, her voice sharp and desperate. “Why is another one of the Four Heavenly Kings here? That’s the Black-winged Mad Wolf, Algrafth!”

With this exclamation, we all understood who this creature before us was and the extent of the threat it posed.

Chapter 185: The Black-Winged Mad Wolf

The Black-winged Mad Wolf, Algrafth—it was a familiar name. I had heard it once from Leen, though I had no knowledge of the details of the monster’s appearance or abilities. I had assumed that it had died in the explosion caused by the wedge.

But here it is, alive. And at a place as far away as the World Tree, no less.

Moreover, if Sha-lau and this creature’s words were to be believed, the rampage of Aga-su, a fellow member of the Four Heavenly Kings, was this creature’s doing.

“What did you do to Aga-su?” I demanded, but all I got in response was what seemed like a smirk.

Was that... his answer?

“More importantly, aren’t you going to take care of her?” the monster asked with a chuckle. “That woman is going to die, you know.”

Startled, Arisu rushed over to Keiko, who was lying next to the black wolf, and began casting Healing Magic on her.

Arisu could easily reattach limbs. She might even be able to regenerate Keiko’s heart.

While Arisu performed her treatment, the wolf-like monster remained still, as if signaling that it had no intention of fighting. That didn’t make sense though, as it was the one that had attacked Keiko first.

Leen’s familiar, a hawk, sat on Rushia’s outstretched hand and pronounced, “If you really are Algrafth, why did you stab Aga-su in the back?”

The massive wolf lifted its head to look at the hawk. Its red eyes seemed to glow menacingly.

“I did not wish to lose the wedge, Guardian of the World Tree.”

“Weren’t you acting under the will of the Demon King as one of his subordinates?”

“To break that exclusive contract, I used a bit of cunning.”

I exchanged glances with Sha-lau, unable to help but wonder if one could really break such an exclusive contract. But Sha-lau just shook his head, signaling that he wasn’t sure.

The monster may not be lying. But did that mean there was a loophole in the exclusive contract that even Sha-lau didn’t know about?

The hawk was silent for a moment. During this pause, Mia descended to the ground. Fearlessly, she walked right up to Algrafth, looking up at the massive creature from a distance so close she could feel his breath.

“Hey, hey, Mia! That’s dangerous!”

Tamaki rushed forward in panic, but Mia motioned for her to stay back. After all, right at Algrafth’s feet were the fallen Keiko and Arisu, who was healing her.

“Yo. I’m Mia Tagamiya. Nice to meet you.”

“My name is Algrafth. What do you want?”

“If you decided to wipe us out, it wouldn’t matter if we were near or far. So why keep a distance?”

Algrafth chuckled.

Yuuki, who had originally seemed as if he wanted to intervene, scratched his cheek.

Ah, maybe he feels frustrated at being pushed aside, I mused. Like brother, like sister...

It was also true, perhaps, that Yuuki’s delayed response could have been due to the fact that Keiko had been attacked, so his judgment had been clouded.

“You’re a strange Outsider.”

“I get that a lot. But let’s be frank—can we work together?”

“I have no intention of doing such a thing. After all, you are all just sacrifices to me.”

Mia blinked, her blunt words met with the harsh reality of Algrafth's world. "But you aren't killing us now," she pointed out. "Instead, you're talking to us. That must mean we have some value to you. So what do you want us to do?"

"You are arrogant for an outsider. I find it distasteful."

Faced with the threatening visage of the snarling wolf, Mia remained undeterred, challenging him with her gaze. "If you could just bear with it and explain, it would save us both some effort."

Once again, Algrafth laughed heartily. "Guard the three wedges and retrieve the fourth if possible," he finally instructed.

"So you're saying you'd rather this continent not sink?" Mia deduced.

"Exactly. But you're being a bit impertinent," the monster remarked, his wings flapping.

Before anyone could react, Mia's legs had been severed at her knees. She collapsed to the ground in a tragic heap.

"Mia!" Yuuki screamed.

Mia rolled her eyes. "Brother, you're in the way. Be quiet. Lightning Arrow!"

As Yuuki rushed forward, the lightning arrows Mia had conjured hit the ground near him. He jumped back in shock. Mia, meanwhile, had managed to roll herself over, although she groaned in pain. She looked up at Algrafth defiantly.

"Do you still wish to bargain?" it asked.

"My legs are a small price to pay for information," Mia replied bravely.

"I must admit, I'm a little surprised. Are all Outsiders like you?"

"Well, we do have Healing Magic. Anyway, let's finish this quickly. What were you saying about the fourth wedge?"

"In consideration of your courage, I'll tell you. Search the Mountain of Outsiders for it."

A small smile crossed Mia's face. She let her whole body relax back into the ground and closed her eyes. Arisu yelled, "Mia-chan!" and ran to her side, then

turned her back to Algrafth to cast her healing spell.

The rest of us were stunned. We'd understood a lot from the words Algrafth had shared. My throat had gone dry.

"You mean the mountain near the school, yeah?" Yuuki managed to choke out.

"So the reason why Azagralith came to the mountain is... No, then the reason we came to this place in the first place—"

"It seems I've revealed too much," Algrafth interrupted. "We probably won't meet again."

The large, black-winged wolf seemed to blur for a moment, and its massive form disappeared. It must have run off somewhere, but I couldn't see a thing.

I took a deep breath and realized that I had unknowingly fallen to my knees. I was breathing hard, and my head felt heavy. I put my hand to my forehead and shook my head repeatedly.

"I don't even know what just happened..."

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Where Aga-su had been, a single flawless white gem had been left behind. Truly, it was worthy of one of the Four Heavenly Kings—when I asked Rushia, she said it was worth the equivalent of a thousand tokens. Even beyond that, a white mana stone was considered a thing of legend, something you'd only hear about in fairy tales. And now such a legendary stone was in my hand.

"We did it!" Tamaki suddenly exclaimed. "Mia and Keiko-san are both cured!"

I turned to see that both Keiko's arms and Mia's legs had been perfectly reattached. Perhaps because they had been treated immediately, there seemed to be no after-effects either.

"We came out victorious after all!" Yuuki cheered, laughing heartily. "Let's all rejoice!"

He was right. But still, I felt this strange, overwhelming sense of emptiness.

Our defense of the World Tree had been successful and all the monsters that had invaded the barrier had been destroyed. Humanity had defended the World Tree, retrieved the wedges from two locations, and annihilated the enemy forces that attacked two other wedges, explosions and all. The battle for the five wedges, though costly in sacrifice, had once again ended in a narrow victory for humanity. And yet we didn't even have the energy to celebrate.

Chapter 186: The End of the Fourth Day

Although we had defeated Aga-su, one of the Four Heavenly Kings, we now knew our victory had mainly been due to the weakening it had suffered due to the treachery of another Heavenly King, Algrafth. As for his motives, they remained unknown to us, but it seemed that he wanted to free himself from being a pawn of the Demon King and had rebelled against him.

The information Mia had extracted from Algrafth had been an important clue in figuring this out, as had the fact that the monster had decided not to kill us for now. Likely, he saw us as potential allies in his rebellion—he *had* ordered us to protect the fourth wedge to stop the Demon King from sinking all the continents, after all. It seemed Algrafth was determined not to let that happen.

The fourth wedge wasn't the one that was located in the Holy City of Akasha or the one that had been in the Spire of Haluran, which another of our squads had blown away earlier. In fact, it seemed that there was another wedge beyond those at the Underground Temple of Rown, the Storm Temple of Gal Yass, and the World Tree that we seemed to have been unaware of.

Algrafth had told us to look for it in the "Mountain of Outsiders," which was probably our school's mountain.

"Could it be that Azagralith's attack on our mountain, or even the earlier orc attack on the school, was just to get their hands on the wedge that was there?" I pondered.

"That could be the case," Yuuki said, crossing his arms thoughtfully. "However, we lack solid evidence to support our theories."

"Regardless, we'll discuss that later. For now, let's return to the others."

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Exhausted, we returned to our base and had a short meeting with Leen, Shiki, Yuuki, and Rushia to discuss our next steps.

The main topic of discussion was Algrafth's actions and words. Even though our interaction with him had been brief, the information he'd provided was shocking enough to leave us all in awe.

"We're going to put a gag order on the subject of Algrafth," Leen announced, and everyone nodded in agreement.

The information he'd given us was too risky to release to the greater public. There was even a danger that it would encourage the belief that we could coexist with monsters.

Those who had promoted peace, known as the Peace Advocates, had turned out to be doppelgangers. Their actions had held no promise; they had merely been acts of sabotage.

Algrafth, on the other hand, was on a completely different level. He was one of the Four Heavenly Kings, known for wreaking havoc as the enemy of mankind, but he was now rebelling against the Demon King. It would be absurd not to have some hope for peace, but that was probably a dangerous notion.

Those of us who had faced him directly understood this. Algrafth was not our ally, nor was he neutral. We were simply using each other because we could.

An enemy's enemy could sometimes be useful. I remembered the dilemma I'd faced on my second night in this world, and how I'd wondered whether to kill Shiba or use him as a barricade to reduce the number of monsters. In the end, I had decided to eliminate Shiba because his ideals would have been a threat to the Cultural Arts Center.

Parallels could definitely be drawn between that situation and the current one between the Demon King and Algrafth, and there was a high probability that history would repeat itself. In situations like these, the misunderstandings of the thoughtless could be harmful. If they belittled or underestimated an enemy like Algrafth, the consequences could be severe. As far as I was concerned, Leen's order to keep things under wraps had been completely justified.

“The sixth wedge—the one supposedly on our school’s mountain—is the most pressing issue at hand,” Yuuki remarked.

“But what does that information mean for us?” Shiki pondered. “Were we just summoned to this world by mistake? Was what the summoner really wanted the mountain, and we were just bugs that got dragged along?”

“Hold on, Shiki-san,” I interjected. “What about the abilities we were given, or the White Room that was prepared for us? None of it makes sense if that’s true.”

Rushia, who had been listening to our conversation, shook her head. “Maybe we should save this discussion for another day,” she suggested, her tone concerned. “Everyone is exhausted, and rest is crucial right now.”

She glanced at the wristwatch she’d pulled from her pocket. I could see from where I sat that the hands indicated that it was past ten.

I have to admit, I’m exhausted too, I thought.

“I wonder if Arisu and the others have already gone to bed.”

“I think so,” Rushia replied. “Regardless, I think I will leave the remaining tasks to my subordinates. As for the treatment of the injured soldiers... Shiki, Tagamiya-san, may I continue to borrow your subordinates?”

“Of course,” Shiki replied gracefully. “We would like to prove our worth as much as possible.”

“Please make sure they rest in shifts,” Yuuki added. “To aid in MP recovery, of course.”

Healers, with their ability to use Healing Magic, were in high demand. They weren’t just tending to our own; they were also treating the severely wounded from the allied forces. Given the uncertainty of the monster army’s next move, restoring our forces was a top priority.

“The monster army has lost over two-thirds of its expeditionary force,” Rushia informed us. “We believe there’s no immediate threat of them sending new forces to Gal Yass or Rown.”

Still, the monster army surrounding the World Tree had retained a significant portion of its main force, and everyone but us was practically powerless against the elite monsters, especially when it came to the divine class ones.

Considering our current situation, how long could we hold out? What was this so-called Demon King thinking when he mobilized the army? And what did Algrafth, who had defected from the Demon King, really want?

My head was throbbing. There were too many questions—too many things to think about.

“For now, everyone, please get some rest tonight... And Kazu, if you plan to add more dwellings in the future, please inform us in advance.”

This forcibly reminded me of when I had summoned a cottage with my magic earlier in the day.

Rushia chuckled slightly. She had become more expressive compared to when we first met, often showing a genuine smile. Seeing this, Leen seemed somewhat pleased.

“Kazu, please continue to take care of Rushia,” she urged.

“Uh, yes. I’ll take responsibility as a man, and um...”

“I would feel more reassured as Rushia’s friend if you could assert that with a little more confidence,” Leen remarked.

“Sorry for coming off insecure,” I mumbled.

Shiki giggled quietly. I couldn’t see Yuuki’s face behind the mask, but the way his shoulders shook indicated that he was probably holding back a laugh.

Ugh, I must look ridiculous...

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After the meeting, I went to the middle school base and enhanced the collected weapons, shirts, and gym shorts with Harden Weapon and Harden Armor spells. I continued this process until my MP was depleted.

Now that my Support Magic had reached Rank 9, I hoped my efforts would improve everyone's survivability a bit. Although there had been no casualties from the Middle School Division in today's battle, it had only been due to luck. The High School Division, meanwhile, had reported a second casualty in the final battle.

"So the High School Division has lost a total of four people?"

"They originally had more members than us, and even though most of them participated in the battle..." I sighed. "I'm worried about their morale."

"I wonder..." Shiki pondered. "Until the second day, they had to witness the deaths of multiple acquaintances, didn't they?"

After some thought, Mia nodded her head in agreement. "True." Then her eyes shifted to me.

"What?" I asked a bit defensively.

She smiled, "You've gotten stronger, Kazu."

"What are you insinuating?" I retorted.

Shiki just grinned. "It's always best to make the leader of the bridal procession feel good."

"You're being too blunt!" I yelled, cringing.

Rushia chuckled softly.

Seriously, am I just the clown here?

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Rushia and I made our way back through the dark forest to the cottage I had summoned earlier in the day. On the way, we indulged in a little romance. Making sure no one was around, we intertwined our fingers and occasionally stopped to share kisses as we walked slowly to our destination.

"I never thought I'd be truly fulfilled as a woman like this," Rushia murmured.

"Did you think you'd just fight until you died?"

“Yes. And I never thought I’d be able to help my sisters.” Rushia stopped and looked deep into my eyes. Under the dim light of the twin moons, she smiled softly. “It’s all thanks to you, Kazu.”

“I was desperate,” I admitted. “I was just doing my duty—I wanted to survive the day and see the sunrise tomorrow, and I wanted to protect the people I cared about.”

“Nevertheless, please allow me to express my gratitude. On behalf of the people of my country... No, personally.”

Rushia then uttered something that sounded like an incantation.

“What was that?”

“It’s a name I once discarded. It used to be mine.”

Whatever the name had been, the fact that she’d said it seemed to signify her determination to be with me no matter where our journey took us. Moved by her trust, all I could say was: “I understand.”

Our lips met again.

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Arisu, Tamaki, and Mia were all fast asleep on the living room couch. It looked like they had intended to wait for us, but exhaustion had taken over.

I felt bad about making them wait, and worried that they might catch a cold, I fetched a white blanket and placed it gently over their shoulders. I wanted to take a bath as well, but I was too tired, so I quickly went upstairs instead.

Rushia, on the other hand, seemed eager to take a bath. “Bathing is such a wonderful thing,” she remarked.

Apparently, there wasn’t a culture of bathing in Rushia’s homeland. Given the arid environment there, that made sense.

I lay down in bed, and as soon as I closed my eyes, my drowsiness began to take over. There were countless things on my mind, but sleep seemed to come faster.

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And so, the prophesied day of the Apocalypse, the fourth day, came to an end. We had defied the prophecy. The world would continue until tomorrow.

An unknown fifth day awaited us.

A world where everything we knew would be turned upside down was about to begin.

To be continued in Another World Survival: Min-Maxing My Support and Summoning Magic, Volume 8.

Side Story: Shiki Yukariko Doesn't Need a Balance - Part 4

I, Shiki Yukariko, have my likes and dislikes. For example, I can't stand pickled plums. In fact, just the thought of a pickled-plum rice ball makes me shudder.

One time, one of my juniors made one for me, trying to be kind. It was the afternoon of the second day in the other world, and I remember forcing myself to eat just a single one, even as tears filled my eyes. I told her, "Give the rest to Kazu," and she happily took the pickled plum rice balls to him. He was busy working at the time, but he still took them. The sight made me feel mildly relieved.

Not long after, that junior died in a battle. It wasn't her fault—in fact, her sacrifice might have been the only reason Kazu survived. She fulfilled her role, but still, it's hard for me not to think about the what ifs. If I had talked to her more, would it have changed anything?

Every time I sleep, I'm haunted by nightmares. As a result, I haven't slept in days. Is the fact that I haven't yet collapsed due to the level-ups we've experienced in this world? Regardless, I'll have to live with countless regrets from now on. Letting my junior die, abandoning many others in order to save my comrades, and just today, during my fourth day in this world, using the high school group as a shield while I positioned the CAC group in a safer place.

As a result of my actions, the high school group suffered several casualties, one of them an acquaintance of mine. He was my senior and a class representative, and he always interfered in everyone's affairs. Since I was the vice president, our paths often crossed at committee meetings. That was the extent of our relationship, though.

I guess no one is to blame in the end, but I am one of the people who gives orders. I proposed a strategy that would put a significant burden on the high school side and made them accept it. From that moment on, I was probably

guilty. However, I cannot apologize to the grieving members of the high school group, for tomorrow, the next day, and all the days to come, it's my duty to protect everyone in the CAC group. But I suppose that sort of behavior is expected of someone as devious as me. Even as I made the decision, I was prepared to earn their resentment.

On the night of the fourth day, as I walked alone through the deserted treetop city, I found myself surrounded by men in a plaza built beside a giant tree. The bridge, which would have allowed me to escape, was far away.

I examined the six strong men facing me. Judging by their normal ears, they weren't elves, catfolk, or dogfolk. They were probably humans, just like us. Could they be doppelgangers? Or perhaps members of the so-called Peace Advocates I'd heard about? If so, it would mean that spies had infiltrated deep into the World Tree.

"You are the leader of the Otherworldly Visitors," one man declared, drawing his sword.

"Come with us," another commanded.

"Where to?" I asked. "And who are you?"

"We are fighting a true holy war, and we must take command back from the filthy beasts that currently wield it," he replied. "To do this, Visitors like you must stop following these beasts."

Ah, I think I get it. They probably want to take control of the human coalition army. My interest in this argument immediately faded. What a waste of time.

"Just get it over with," I said, turning toward the darkness.

The men looked confused, then moments later, they fell one by one. Once they were all incapacitated, Yuuki and Keiko emerged from the shadows.

"How did you see through our invisibility technique?" Yuuki asked.

"Well, my Reconnaissance skill is quite high," I replied.

Even before the confrontation, I had already noticed the men surrounding me, as well as those watching us from the shadows. I'd just wanted to try and

understand who the strange men were, but in the end, I'd realized that they were completely insignificant.

These guys are just unconscious, aren't they? I realized. What should we do with them now?

"Why don't we just leave these men to others," Yuuki suggested.

He gave a flick of his fingers, and more men dressed in black emerged from the darkness. With their cat and dog ears, they were probably underlings of Leen, but...

"Why are they dressed like ninjas?"

"I recommended it," Yuuki replied proudly. "They were quite pleased with the clothes' excellent functionality. True experts know quality."

Wait, ninja clothes are functional? Seriously? Hmm... But it seems like they really are all dressed in ninja outfits... Ah, my head is starting to hurt.

Afterword

Greetings! I am Tsukasa Yokotsuka, and I am pleased to present the seventh volume of *Another World Survival: Min-Maxing my Support and Summoning Magic*.

With the completion of this volume, we have now gone through the events of the fourth day. Remarkably, it's taken seven books to cover such a short time!

Looking back at my original plot outline, it's clear that the narrative of the third and fourth days expanded considerably. This was largely due to the introduction of new characters and further exploration of the world. Writing a story can be a meandering journey.

That said, prepare yourself for what's next: a thrilling roller coaster of events! The fifth day will bring both groundbreaking and tumultuous developments in the plot.

I sincerely hope you'll join me at the end of this story. Thank you very much.

Back Matter

Author: Tsukasa Yokotsuka While also serving as a fleet admiral in a certain ship-girl training browser game, I began writing when I decided to post stories on the “Shousetsuka ni Narou” self-publishing website, and here I am now! My admiral duties are currently on hold. (As of November 2015.)

Illustrator: Manyako (MANYAKO)

From Saga Prefecture, currently living in Tokyo. A freelance illustrator who primarily draws illustrations for books and games. (As of November 2015.)



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