

Another World Survival

Min-maxing
my Support and
Summoning
Magic

2

✿ Author: Yokotsuka Tsukasa ✿

✿ Illustrator: Manyako ✿


Hanashi
MEDIA

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*"I-I'm going to
comfort you now."*

THIRD YEAR MIDDLE SCHOOLER
TAMAKI RYŪKI

THIRD YEAR MIDDLE SCHOOLER
ARISU SHIMOZONO

*"You comforted me when I was
feeling down, so now it's
our turn to make you feel better."*

FIRST YEAR MIDDLE SCHOOLER
MIA TAGAMIYA

*"T-That was a kiss to make a
certain man down in the
dumps feel better."*



FIRST YEAR HIGH SCHOOLER
YUKARIKO SHIKI

*"I'll be able to bear it.
Compared to being violated by the orcs,
sacrificing the lives of my friends
isn't anything major."*

FIRST YEAR HIGH SCHOOLER
KAZUHISA KAYA





*"I will be your villain.
All of your sins, all of everyone's sins...
I'll bear the weight of them all."*

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A grayscale illustration of a young woman with long, wavy hair, wearing a white short-sleeved shirt and a dark bikini bottom. She is standing in a classroom, with her hands on her hips. In the background, there are rows of wooden desks and chairs. The entire image is faded to serve as a background for the text.

ANOTHER WORLD SURVIVAL

MIN-MAXING MY SUPPORT AND
SUMMONING MAGIC

STORY BY YOKOTSUKA TSUKASA

ART BY MANYAKO



Chapter 26: Search Through the Girls' Dormitory

Arisu began using Healing Magic on the surviving girls, starting with Heal and finishing with Cure Mind. She moved from person to person and, once soothed by her magic, the hopelessness cast over their expressions faded. Light began to shine in their eyes once more.

Naturally, applying so many recovery spells at once was burning through her MP. Nevertheless, we couldn't leave them injured and broken; these measures were necessary.

“Tamaki, Mia!” Turning around, I called out to the stunned pair. They were standing motionless behind me, staring at their horrific surroundings in shock. “While Arisu takes care of things here, we're going to look around. Follow me.”

They needed some sort of task to perform right now—anything was fine. So long as there was something they could do to take their minds off this mess.

Leaving Arisu to take care of things here, we moved away from the dining hall. Tamaki and Mia walked with me, and my familiar wolf trotted behind us. I imagined we wouldn't be coming across any orcs during our search, much less an elite. Every last one of them had more likely than not met their doom when they rushed out of the building. That being said, we couldn't get negligent just because we believed the building to be clear.

And so we began our search of the building. First on the list: the first floor.

Not a single sound other than our footsteps rang out as we made our way down the corridor. We stopped at each room and searched high and low before moving on to the next. Some of the doors were locked, but Tamaki broke down the door using her axe so we could also explore those rooms. Considering all the noise we'd made outside, there was no point in holding back now.

“Oh, that reminds me. Where are you guys' rooms?” I asked out of the blue.

“Arisu's and mine are right over there,” Tamaki replied, pointing nearby. “We were neighbors.”

“Mine's on the third floor,” Mia answered.

I momentarily lapsed into thought before instructing Tamaki to go to her room and change into a new set of clothes. “And while you're at it, grab a pair for Arisu as well. Once you're done with that, find the girls' rooms in the dining hall and grab a set of clothes,” I added.

“Roger! We can't leave Arisu alone down there forever, can we?” She waved and turned around. “I'll leave the searching to you guys.”

“Mia, you're staying with me. We're heading up to the third floor.”

I imagined we could manage without her with the wolf acting as our escort. Even if there was a surviving orc lying in wait somewhere, it was sure to sniff it out with its superior sense of smell. Moreover, the corridor was narrow; I doubted more than one orc could approach at a time. If I needed to buy a couple of seconds, I could also conjure another wolf to stall for time. Mia could provide cover fire with magic.

While we were on the topic, I had healed the injuries of my familiar by using Cure Familiar, a Rank 3 Support Magic spell. Summoning Rank 3 familiars reduced my current and maximum MP by 9, so compared to calling a whole new wolf, healing the current one's injuries was more efficient.

Separating from Tamaki, Mia and I ascended the staircase. Fortunately, my fears were not realized; earlier every enemy seemed to have rushed out all at once. I didn't spot so much as a single orc as we made our way upstairs.

The second and third floors were dominated by the constant buzzing sound of flies. My ears felt ringing as we passed the second-floor hallway and continued up the stairs. *They had probably spotted the corpses and gathered on them.* Finally, we reached the hallway for the third floor. We skipped past the other rooms and made a beeline for Mia's room so she could change into fresh clothes.

“You're not gonna peek at me as I'm changing, are you?” Mia asked at the doorway.

“I'm not gonna peep at you.”

I waited outside the room with the wolf for her to finish her business. I lowered myself to the floor and sat down, my knees nearly touching my chest. My ashen-colored familiar sat down next to me, assuming the same pose as Hachikō, the dog renowned for its immense loyalty. *Awe, aren't you a smart boy?* I brushed the wolf's gray fur, and a comfortable expression came over its face as the wolf half-closed its eyes in bliss. *Dang, this guy's actually pretty cute.*

“What about the stained pair of underwear?” I heard her voice coming from within the room.

“Don’t bother taking them. Just throw them away,” I said dismissively. “Besides, there should be plenty of alternatives for you to take, shouldn’t there?”

A slight pause followed before I heard her reply. “Oh. Right. I suppose I’ll just take some from my roommate.”

Crap. I groaned as I realized the mistake in my phrasing. I had just told Mia straight to her face that all her friends were dead. Moving my hand, I covered my mouth in an attempt to conceal the groan.

“Don’t worry about it.” Mia opened the door, poking her head out. I wondered if my inner turmoil had been discovered through the shift in my tone or perhaps some sixth sense of hers. “I’m well aware of the current situation. My friends, classmates, teachers, and everyone else is most likely dead. I was the only one lucky enough to have survived.”

“... You don’t know that for sure yet.”

“It’s best to be prepared for the worst. Don’t worry, I already cried about it last night.” Mia patted my shoulder as I remained seated against the wall, seemingly trying to comfort me. “All of us cried last night in the girls’ room. Shiki-san suggested we do it.”

I looked up at her, surprised. “Shiki-san did...?”

“Mm. ‘If you’re going to cry, then you better do it now,’ Shiki-san told us. So, if you haven’t had your chance to cry yet, I’ll let you borrow my chest to cry into.” She spoke in a proud tone, emphasizing her non-existent chest. “I may not have any boobs to nuzzle into, but it’s yours if you need it.”

I smiled wryly. “You’d make a killing with that self-deprecating routine of yours, you know?”

“Zip it,” Mia snapped back. “Unless you want me to stuff my freshly-stained panties into your mouth.”

Perhaps her offer may have been enticing to a select group of individuals, but it didn’t please me in the slightest. *Besides... I don’t have anyone to cry for who is close like a friend.* I was *hoping* everyone I knew had kicked the bucket altogether. But I couldn’t shoot down her genuine offer with something so morbid. I had to respond appropriately... and I knew just the response. *Yeah, this should work.*

“If I need to cry, I’ll do so in the comfort of Arisu’s chest.”

“So having boobs is better, really...” She looked down dejectedly.

It’s not about the boobs, Mia. It’s about the person behind the boobs. Moreover, couldn’t you have phrased it better? Like, “I knew you’d choose your lover instead,” or something?

I excused myself for a moment to take a look at the rooftop before she finished changing her clothes and packing her stuff. *She’s better off not seeing what’s up here,* I thought to myself as I opened the door to the rooftop. The six corpses I had seen earlier were still there, covered in a mass of flies and birds. I made sure no orcs were hiding up there before heading downstairs and shutting the door behind me. When I returned to the corridor, I happened to catch Mia walking out of her room. There was a travel bag hanging from her hands.

“All ready to go, Kazucchi.” Her expression seemed refreshed. The areas around her eyes looked a little swollen, but due to how dim the corridor was, I couldn’t tell if it was my imagination or not. *Maybe she cried a little while I was away... though perhaps that’s for the best.* She said that getting the tears out while you had the chance could be a good thing. Even more so right now, with everything having gone to hell.

“Sure. So, totally random question, but... any reason you specifically chose to wear briefs?” I asked, eyeing her questionable choice of clothing. Mia had

appeared from the room dressed in the same fashion as when we had been digging, the holes—that is, in a gym shirt and briefs.

“I brought them from the Cultivation Center. There are enough pairs for everyone.”

“I see.” I brought my hand to my head and sighed. “I don’t even know where to start commenting on that, so I’m just going to choose to ignore it.”

We began opening the doors to the rooms on the third floor, scouring each room one by one. We happened across two corpses inside one of them. Mia stared at them in silence for a moment before murmuring, “I’m sorry. I’ll be back for you soon, okay?”

“Did you know them?”

“Mm. We’re... *were* classmates.” Mia’s expression didn’t change, but she couldn’t completely mask her feelings. Her hands trembled as they held onto the handle of the bag. I didn’t bother to ask her if she had been close to them. I could guess the answer.

We searched every room on the third floor as though compelled by some force. According to Mia, those who had lived on the third floor were all first-year students at the Middle School. She also mentioned that she never interacted much with the other students save her classmates. *Maybe it would’ve been better if I had looked around by myself.* I considered but quickly discarded the thought. *Well, there are things that only she would know because she lived here.*

“Next, the second floor. Let’s go,” Mia said in a blank voice. “The second years’ live on that floor. I don’t know anyone there.”

I nodded in agreement, and the two of us moved downstairs.

Much like the third floor, the exploration of the second floor ended without us being attacked by any orcs. Once we finished, we returned to the dining hall. Tamaki was already there when we got back, having changed her clothes and returning before us. Her top half sported a white gym T-shirt, and her bottoms were—you guessed it—briefs.



“Her too? How’d she get those...?” I muttered to Mia beside me.

“I gave them to her a bit ago.” She whispered back. *Oh, so it's your fault?*

Tamaki appeared to have found several friends’ faces buried in the mountain of cadavers. She was sitting off to the side, bawling. Meanwhile, Arisu was sitting by herself next to the survivors, continuing to treat them in complete silence.

“I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Arisu,” Tamaki wept. “Please, just... just give me a minute.” She had changed clothes in the first place to get out of her old and stained ones, yet here she was, using the sleeves to wipe away the tears and mucus from her eyes and nose.

Arisu didn't reply to her pained cries. Her face was devoid of emotion, like a noh mask, and she continued using Heal and Cure Mind on the surviving girls. I'd nabbed some sheets from the rooms on our way back to the dining hall and used them to cover the bodies of the drained, but otherwise healed, girls. I regretted not having done so earlier.

When all was said and done, only ten people survived after receiving treatment from Arisu. Their injuries had been patched up thanks to Heal, and the shock inflicted upon their minds had been mitigated to some extent by Cure Mind. Despite their treatment, not one of them would be getting to their feet soon. Their physical and mental wounds may have been healed, but magic wasn't so all-doing as to restore their spent stamina. *Not that I expected them to be faring any better, of course.*

Sometime during the past few minutes, Tamaki finally recovered and reached her feet. I motioned to her and then to Mia, who was standing as motionless as a statue beside the dining hall entrance. Her hands were still clutching the grip of the travel bag.

“Both of you, head back to the Cultivation Center and bring back five to six people.”

“All right,” Tamaki replied. “But I'll go by myself. Mia can stay here. I'll be back shortly.”

Before I could explain that going alone was dangerous, Tamaki had dashed out of the building, not even stopping to take the gigantic axe—her only weapon—with her. *What are you thinking, you idiot!* I cursed her in my mind. Left with no other choice, I ordered the wolf to follow her. *Make sure to stick close to her and intercept if you come across any orcs*—I instructed my familiar, sending my orders to it through the path. My ever clever and cute pet barked once before running out of the dining hall after Tamaki.

“We’ll have to bury the corpses another day. Assuming the same is happening everywhere, there might be survivors in the other buildings. I’d like to devote as much time as we can to rescuing them.” I said as I walked over towards Arisu.

“All right. That’s probably... for the best,” Arisu replied and tried to stand up. She barely finished getting to her feet before stumbling and I quickly moved to support her. She mumbled out an apology, “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. You saved ten lives today. Feel proud of yourself,” I consoled Arisu.

“But many of my friends were...”

I nodded. I figured that might be the case. Statistically, it was far more likely that most of Arisu’s friends had not been among the ones she had saved.

I wanted to tell her that it was okay for her to grieve more and that she didn’t need to hide her emotions. But it wasn’t like she was unaware of this. She understood that the dead would not come back even if she wept here. Rather than weep for the dead, it was far more effective to devote herself to saving as many survivors as possible. I’m sure she believed so.

On that note, it wasn’t like I was convinced that gathering as many people as possible was the best course of action. I agreed that it would be difficult for us to grow in the future unless we increased the number of people protecting the Cultivation Center. But I also held the opinion that growing *too much* wasn’t ideal either. We risked factions forming within our ranks or some other malarkey that would cause us to collapse.

In that same vein, however, I thought we should squash the orc bases one by one and reduce our enemies’ numbers as soon as possible. There was no way we would be able to protect ourselves if the surviving orcs were to gather up

and swarm the Cultivation Center all at once. We needed to take action before we ended up on the other side of the sword. Though that could wait for another day. My MP was practically empty, and I wasn't the only one suffering from a lack of MP. Arisu, too, had nearly spent all of her MP healing the survivors. Hers might not have had any direct effect on her combat strength, but mine was quite literally the essence of mine. For now, I just wanted to get everyone back to the Cultivation Center and then get some rest.

Mia returned around this time, several paper bags in hand. Since Tamaki had left her behind, I'd tasked her with collecting clothing sets for the survivors. She had gone around the first floor neatly and efficiently fulfilling her task, stuffing them into the bags.

"Thanks. Sorry for running you ragged."

"Mm. It's fine. Working's helping put my mind at ease," she assured me as she handed Arisu a bundle of clothes. As for what type of clothing, I'm sure you could guess. I didn't even bother making a snarky comment about it; it was more effort than it was worth.

"Sorry, Mia, I know you just got back, but can you gather up all the carving knives and other utensils from the kitchen?"

"Aye, aye, sir!" She gave a firm salute before racing out of the dining hall. Seeing her speed, I couldn't help but wonder if she was trying to escape from the horrible spectacle here.

Arisu also chose to leave the room, half-stumbling to her own room. Before returning to the dining hall, she changed into the gym shirt and briefs Mia had given her.

Around twenty minutes passed before Tamaki returned, leading a group of five girls from the Cultivation Center. One of them was Shiki-san. Save her, all of them gasped once they looked at the horrific sight inside the dining hall, bursting into tears one after the other. Shiki-san slapped their cheeks, scolding them, "I know it's painful, but right now the most important thing is protecting the survivors. The Cultivation Center could be attacked at any moment. We can't linger for long."

I walked over to them and went around the group of girls, casting Mighty Arm on each one. They bent over and picked up the languid survivors, lifting them onto their shoulders, though they seemed to be struggling under their weight.

Fortunately for them, four survivors insisted that they could walk on their own, and they slowly got to their feet. The four of them linked up with each other, putting their arms around their neighbors' shoulders, and began to walk forward.

"I don't really understand what's going on." One of the girls called out to me. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail, and her gaze remained fixed on me as she ran a cloth through her soaked hair, grimacing at the gross, sticky feeling. "But it doesn't look like there's any time to spare for an explanation. We'll try not to drag the rest of you down."

"Just try not to push yourselves," I said before turning away, leaving them to their own devices. I had wanted to at least have them wash with some water, but the plumbing system inside the girls' dormitory was—to no one's surprise—not in working order. I imagined it had broken when the earthquake struck.

"That's everyone. Shall we head back, Kaya-kun?" Shiki-san called out to me. She was carrying a girl under each of her arms, evidently struggling from their collective weight. I offered to help carry one of the girls, but she quickly shot me down.

"Not a chance. Your role is to protect us on our way back in case we run into any orcs. Don't you think that'd be for the best?"

"Y-Yeah, good point."

From seemingly out of nowhere, she'd stolen the role of leader from me. That said, her orders were efficient and logical, so I had no qualms with following them for the moment.

We quickly withdrew from the girls' dormitory and headed back towards the Cultivation Center.

When we entered the Cultivation Center's general vicinity, my familiar's gray wolf ears perked up. Simultaneously, Shiki-san paused in her tracks at the front of the group before turning her head over her shoulder to look back at me. If I

remember correctly, she'd picked up the Scouting skill when she first leveled up. *Meaning...*

“Kaya-Kun,” she called out to me. Her voice carried a tension as she continued, “I can hear the sounds of combat ahead of us. The Cultivation Center is under attack.”

Chapter 27: Defensive Battle at The Cultivation Center

Nine of the eleven people taking refuge inside the Cultivation Center were out on a rescue mission, meaning only two of them were defending the base at the moment. How long would the two of them be able to hold out with their limited strength?

Before my party had departed from the Cultivation Center, I'd instructed them to dig a hole around the entrance. This trench-shaped pit was now serving as a moat, limiting the paths the orcs could use to approach. Nevertheless, I should've realized that a half-baked measure such as that would only buy a couple of seconds at most.

"Arisu, Tamaki, Mia, you're with me. Everyone else, I'm leaving you under Shiki-san's command!" *Even if I've gotta give up part of the leadership to her, I don't care right now.* My internal strife over whether to let Shiki-san take charge was thrown to the side in an instant. Stressing over the petty details could wait until *after* the battle had been won.

I cast Physical Up on each of my party members before breaking out into a sprint towards the Cultivation Center. Behind me, I could hear a shout of protest coming from Shiki-san, but I chose to ignore her and keep running. Even the tiniest of microseconds could make all the difference right now.

Leading the charge forward was my wolf familiar as well as myself. From the several pairs of footsteps behind me, I could sense Arisu, and they were hot on my heels.

I decided to let the wolf go on ahead of us and conveyed an order to my familiar: *Save the girls defending the base if it looks like things are getting rough.* The gray wolf accelerated in a heartbeat and shot forward, its figure soon vanishing among the trees. Meanwhile, I continued to run towards the building. Before long, the sounds of metal colliding with metal entered my earshot.

Although I wasn't positive, I was pretty sure the skillsets of the two stay-behinds were Spearmanship 1 & Support Magic 1 and Spearmanship 1 & Fire Magic 1. If you're wondering why everyone was geared towards Spearmanship, it was because I'd recommended weapons with longer reach. Sometime in the past, I'd watched a news report on TV about a champion-level match between a woman armed with a naginata and a man wielding a sword. Despite the huge difference in power between men and women in martial arts, the woman had proved herself capable of holding her own against the swordsman. *At least, I think that's how the report went?*

In any case, the point is: weapon reach was simply *that* important when it came to combat. Yesterday, Arisu had taken the initiative and made use of her spear's reach. At the same time, she fought the orcs, therefore ensuring she held the upper hand in the fight from beginning to end. *So, even if they are Level 1, the two of them should be able to handle two to three orcs as long as they worked together...*

I wanted to believe as much, anyway.

I reached the forest's edge and burst through it, my field of vision expanding to match.

More than twenty orcs were gathered around the entrance of the Cultivation Center. The wide trench in front of the entrance had forced the orcs to split into two groups, both approaching from either side. The two girls stood back-to-back between the trench and entranceway, desperately fighting to stave off the orcs' advance. Fortunately, the orcs didn't appear to have any spears on their side. The difference in weapon reach was proving effective; the girls were barely able to fend them off.

However, not even that advantage would allow them to hold up a defense forever. One of the girls stopped her strike midway and lost her balance in the process; she was going to fall. Seeing this moment of weakness, an orc armed with a sword quickly closed the gap.

But the orc's sword never reached its mark. My familiar burst onto the scene then, crossing over the wide trench in a single leap and latching onto the orc before it could slash the girl. The two of them tumbled down into the pit.

Hell yeah! That's what I'm talking about! I cheered in my head, stopping in my tracks.

"Kazu-san!" A shout came from behind me—Arisu. As she flew past me, I quickly reached out and touched her shoulder chanting, "Haste."

Her entire body was wrapped up in a golden light, and she began accelerating. She charged into the leftward orcs' ranks, weapon aimed and ready. One of the orcs was speared from behind straight through the heart, and one last moan of anguish escaped its lips as it collapsed to the ground. A huge wave of panic spread over the mass of orcs as they realized one of their allies had been viciously murdered by a savage from behind.

"Hey, Kazu-san, hey!" Tamaki prodded from my side. "Give me Haste, too!"

"No, you're staying here with us."

"Eeeehh?! Why!"

"Your job is protecting Mia and me," I said before turning to Mia. "Do it, Mia!"

"Mm." Mia nodded. "Sleeping Song."

Sleeping Song—a Rank 1 Wind Magic spell which induced a singular target into a light doze. The provided explanation had mentioned that, if used improperly, the target would reawaken from the impact with the ground... and Mia had rapid-fired this spell into the group of orcs to the right.

Thud, thud. One by one, the orcs at the back of the crowd fell over and hit the ground. Although a few of them slammed into the ground headfirst, the orcs remained fast asleep under their magically-induced drowsiness. Rhythmic yet peaceful breaths came from them. Meanwhile, the orcs at the front were too absorbed with trying to get rid of the girls, desperately staving off their advance with grim expressions, to notice the abnormality consuming their rearguard.

"Isn't this spell... a bit too overpowered?" I found myself muttering.

Mia shrugged her shoulders. "Hm. I got more than I expected to..."

"They're all brawn and no brains, huh?"

Honestly, are we even going to need a guard at this point? I looked towards Tamaki. "Hey," I called out. "Go make some sashimi out of the sleeping ones."

“You got it! Just leave it to me!” She cheered as she ran towards the right side group. Once she was in range, Tamaki began bringing her giant axe down upon them. No matter if the blade touched the head or torso, it cleaved through each orc she slashed like a knife through warm butter. They were sent to the next realm one after another, a small groan being the last thing heard from them before they were converted into gems.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the battlefield, Arisu had found herself in a bit of a struggle. A group of six or seven orcs had encircled her, and she seemed to be having a hard enough time fending them off. Being surrounded on all sides was dangerous, even for Arisu, and I considered summoning another wolf to go to her aid. However, we had been going through one battle after another in a short time. My MP wasn't exactly fully stocked at the moment.

“How's your MP looking, Mia?”

“I still have some left,” she replied before adding, “I'll help Arisu-senpai,” and casting Heat Metal in her direction. The orc Arisu was in the middle of engaging, suddenly found itself unable to hold onto its weapon and dropped it, letting it fall to the ground below. That second of vulnerability was all it took for Arisu to send out two sharp thrusts in its direction, piercing through its heart and throat, respectively. The orc died almost immediately, having lost two vital orcs at once.

On the Cultivation Center side of things, the two girls defending at the entranceway suddenly burst to life with renewed energy upon our arrival on the scene. The pyromancer of the two shot a fired bullet (a Rank 1 spell) at the orc directly in front of her the moment the opportunity presented itself. The fiery bullet scored a direct hit on the orc's face and lit it ablaze, causing the orc to scream in agony as it tumbled down into the trench. Spurred on by the apparent effectiveness, she sent out a few more in rapid succession and managed to bring down two more, marking up her kill tally to three. The orcs behind their late brethren recoiled in fear, retreating a step. This did not go unnoticed by the girl, and she began to conjure up even more fire bullets.

Unbeknownst to her, however, one orc had deliberately fallen into the pit. It scaled the side of the wall facing the Cultivation Center, using one of its hands

to hold onto the wall and the other to hold onto its weapon. And it attempted to swipe at the girl's legs with its sword.

Not good! I sent out the raven I had on hand without delay. Just before the orc reached her, the raven jabbed its beak into the creature's eye. It screamed out in pain before falling back down to the bottom of the hole.

"Hey! Watch your legs!"

"O-okay! Thank you for saving me, Kazu-senpai!"

Oh. Arizu called me Kazu-senpai... I mean, if that's what she wants to call me, I don't have any problem with it. After all, Mia's calling me Kazucchi, so go for it.

One of the remaining orcs met a bloody end through a thrust from the other girl, and the others were not far behind it. One by one, the number of enemies steadily decreased thanks to Arisu's thrusts, Tamaki's slashes, or my wolf familiar tearing into them.

Finally, the orcs' morale reached the breaking point. The five or six survivors turned tail and fled into the woods.

"After them!" I shouted towards Arisu and Tamaki. "But don't go too far away!"

The defensive battle had changed into one of pursuit. However, the enemies split off in different directions as they ran away. I rushed over to the trench and checked the bottom to find my familiar struggling to climb out of it, courtesy of its quadrupedal build. *Guess you're not going anywhere, huh? Oh well.*

One of the orcs had barely gotten a few steps into the forest before Arisu caught up to it, spearing it from behind. A final scream of pain reverberated through the forest before it died.

As it began to vanish, Tamaki and Mia leveled up.

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We held a discussion in the white room. The end result was that Tamaki would raise the rank of her Swordsmanship skill to 3, and Mia would do the same for her Earth Magic.

Moving on, it was time for the meat of our discussion: what were we going to do about the three, possibly four, orcs that had escaped? *Should we go after them?* I glanced at Arisu and Tamaki’s expressions. They both appeared to be showing signs of fatigue, though I was sure they wouldn’t hesitate to chase the orcs to the ends of the earth so long as I gave them the order. *The problem is, what’s going to happen if I do order them to?* They might chase the orcs too far. They might be spotted by another squad of orcs. They might get surrounded and not be able to escape. *And, in the million-to-one chance that one of those happens to have an elite orc in the mix...*

Before long, I arrived at my decision. I raised my head to look at them.

"Both of you are strictly forbidden from chasing them too far. Once you get far enough away from the Cultivation Center, give up the chase and come back."

“Are you sure?” Arisu asked worriedly.

“Your safety is more important than theirs,” I said, as I rubbed my hands on both of their heads, ruffling their hair. “I trust you guys. Seriously, don’t stray too far. There’s no point in going overboard.”

“G-got it.” Tamaki gazed up at me with upturned eyes and nodded, her cheeks dyed bright red. *Yup that should do it. Now there’s no way they’re gonna get distracted and keep chasing against their orders.*

TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 4	SWORDSMANSHIP: 2→3
STRENGTH: 1	SKILL POINTS: 4→1

MIA	
LEVEL: 4	EARTH MAGIC: 2→3

WIND MAGIC:	SKILL POINTS:
1	4→1

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We returned from the white room.

Although I wouldn't hear about this until later, Arisu and Tamaki chased down and ended the lives of two more orcs. Per my orders, the pair stopped pursuing the final one and returned to the Cultivation Center. *The lone survivor's sure to have told its brethren about us.* I somehow managed to mask my panic behind a straight face as the pair filled me in on the results of their pursuit.

Not too long afterwards, Shiki-san and the other girls accompanying her approached us gingerly.

"Is... it over?" She asked hesitantly.

"Yeah, we managed," I replied. "Things could've gone better, but everyone tried their hardest. With that said..."

I gave her a general overview of the situation. Once I finished, Shiki-san nodded with a stiff expression. "I didn't think we'd be able to keep this place a secret forever. We have to strengthen our defenses."

The orcs had learned that a group of survivors had gathered in this building. They would come back, and as a large force, too, I'd wager.

The next battle we would participate in was going to be crucial.

Chapter 28: Confronting Yukariko Shiki

The girls, now inside the Cultivation Center's lobby, all wore panicked expressions. They'd all grown extremely distressed upon being informed that the orcs had learned of our little group holing up inside the Cultivation Center.

Similarly, the inside of my head had also devolved into a panic. *What should I say to them to calm their nerves? And how should we respond, knowing that the orcs are aware of our location? Was staying here even the best option anymore? I wondered if we should escape from the Cultivation Center while we could.*

Okay, calm down. Let's go over our options here.

Option A: We flee and take everyone with us. This wasn't a bad plan per se. Still, more than half of the girls we'd rescued from the girls' dormitory could not walk anywhere. Even the few that *could* weren't going to make it very far. Furthermore, considering their exhaustion, I doubted their speed would be up to par. Rejected.

Option B: Abandon the girls we rescued and escape with the others. *Setting aside the obvious question of whether they'd agree to this, how will we survive after abandoning base? Would we look around for a place to conquer the orcs and reestablish ourselves there? Perhaps we could survive on the move, sneaking around unbeknownst to the orcs. But even if we survive today, would we be able to do the same for the next? And the one after that?*

Option C: We go a step further and abandon *everyone*. The four of us—Arisu, Tamaki, Mia, and myself—would escape by ourselves, leaving everyone else to their fates. Although a practical solution, convincing them to see reason in abandoning the others was... not going to happen.

Come on, there's gotta be something we can do. Think, Kaya, think! I motionlessly observed the outside area near the trench from the entranceway, a pensive look on my face as I frantically worked the gears in my head. A fierce

battle had occurred here only a few moments ago and now another was on the horizon. Arisu and the other members of my party anxiously looked at me.

Suddenly, Shiki-san clapped her hands, and everyone's eyes focused on her. "For the time being, let's do what we can."

Following her words, the girls sprang into action. They began moving the rescued survivors who were still too weakened to move upstairs to the third floor, laying them down onto beds. The remaining few walking here alone were quickly guided to the bathing area.

I watched Shiki-san intently from the side as she handed down orders to the others and I lapsed into thought. *Compared to a nobody like me, she's much more capable of taking charge like this.* Her capabilities of acting as a commander on the battlefield were yet to be determined. But in every other aspect, she was a competent, capable leader... and that was why I was so wary of her. There was some bad history between she and I. Though no one at present was aware of it other than Arisu, who I had confided in, nothing stayed buried forever. Sooner or later, someone would notice she and I were not on friendly terms, and we would be forced to decide on a leader. *And between me, someone with narrow-minded ideals, and Shiki-san, a brilliant and talented person... the choice is obvious, isn't it?*

I shook my head. *No, you're forgetting something, me. You have something that she doesn't: manpower.* Arisu and Tamaki wouldn't turn their backs on me. And considering I held all the power here, the others surely wouldn't think to do so either. I hoped not, anyway.

But even if I remain in power through force, what good does that do us? Could we really defeat the orcs if things ended up like that?

I bit down hard enough on my bottom lip to draw blood. I had grown sick of it all. I was disgusted with every part of myself with my weak heart, narrow-mindedness, and cowardice. *What should I do... why can't I figure something out?!*

I hardened my resolve... and picked Option D. Lifting my head, I turned to look at my party members and spoke. "I am temporarily disbanding our party."

The girls stared at me in bewilderment, and I flashed a small grin to reassure them before stepping outside for a second to send a raven to scout the forest. Once finished, I stepped back inside, marched over to Shiki-san, still giving instructions to the other girls, and grabbed her arm.

“Eep! Wh-what is it?” She stammered, turning to face me. Her expression was full of fear, and her complexion had paled. *Crap, I forgot! She's scared of being touched by men.* I hastily offered an apology before cutting to the point.

“Form a party with me.”

“Huh? What purpose would that serve?”

“I would like to speak with you in the white room.”

“Just the two of us?” She shot me a probing gaze and hesitated for a moment. Perhaps something in my expression had given her the feeling that this was a matter of grave importance because she eventually nodded in agreement. “... Okay. Lead the way.”

The raven flew in through the open door, having arrived with spectacular timing. I listened to its report before repeating it to Shiki-san.

“I’m a single orc’s worth of experience away from leveling up, and there just so happens to be an orc roaming the forest on its own southeast of here. That’s our target.”

“All right. We can’t afford to be gone for very long, so let’s get going.”

Wasting not a second more, the two of us sprinted off into the forest.

About five minutes later, we came across the wandering orc. A spear was gripped loosely in one of its hands. I ordered the gray wolf to attack, and my familiar leapt at the orc from the bushes. The orc intercepted its foe with its spear before going on the counterattack.

"I'll end this in an instant," came Shiki-san from behind me. Turning around, I noticed her figure had disappeared from sight entirely. By using her Reconnaissance skill, she had begun a literal stealth operation.

Her sudden disappearance sent a shiver down my spine. *Surely she's not intent on aiming for me instead, right...?* I discarded the thought with a shake of

my head. *Come on, Kaya. Get a grip on yourself.* She wasn't going to kill me out here. There were no benefits to be gained by my death for her in our current situation.

As if to prove my statement, a knife whizzed out of the shade of a tree, shooting towards the orc from a blind spot. The orc was busy engaging with the wolf and failed to notice the incoming attack. It was screaming with pain as the knife buried itself up to the hilt in its back. Furious, the orc turned around to find the source of the unexpected attack against its former foe, paying no mind to the fact that it had just left itself defenseless.

The wolf did not let this chance go to waste and pounced on the orc, knocking it to the ground. Not a second later, its teeth were burying themselves into the orc's windpipe.

I leveled up.

Shiki-san and I found ourselves standing inside the white room. We turned to face each other.

"So," I began. "Let's have a chat, shall we?"

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Inside the white room, Shiki-san and I stared each other down, separated by a distance of about five feet.

"There are two points I'd like to discuss. The first is our plans regarding the future..." I paused for a moment, looking straight into Shiki-san's eyes before continuing. "And the second is my relationship with you."

"Very well." She nodded and donned a serious expression, arms folded under her chest. I imagined she had already surmised my reasons for bringing her here. *Who knows, maybe she's even picked up on my cowardice and weakness.*

"So then, I don't suppose you brought me here to thoroughly tease me as you do with Arisu-chan, did you?"

"Ha-ha. Having fun teasing me over there?"

“Naturally.” The corners of her lips rose to form a cynical smile. “Sorry, Kaya-Kun. I’m the type of person that can’t help but feel helpless unless I’m putting on a tough front. You may feel free to smack me if my attitude’s causing you any problems.”

“Are you secretly a masochist or something?”

Shiki-san simply shrugged her shoulders in response and smiled coyly. “Who knows? But if there’s one thing I *do* know, you’re not going to do anything that will cause Arisu-chan to hate you. Right?”

“You’re a real pain to deal with, you know that?!” I growled. She had had her fill-in teasing me, and I’d fallen right into her trap.

"All right, enough’s enough. Let’s get back to business." Her expression switched to serious mode, evidently having had her fill of teasing me. She continued, “You seem hesitant to go first, so I suppose I’ll take the initiative. You saved my life and rescued me from a cycle of perpetual hell.

“At the time, I wanted nothing more than to be killed. Now, however, it is the complete opposite. I swear I will survive-no matter what I’ve got to do. Your power is indispensable for attaining my goal. To further this, I have manipulated the other girls to view you almost worshipfully.”

I listened to her in stunned silence. *Um, what? Manipulation? Worship? She’s saying some scary things with a straight face; I’m creeped out.*

“Are you surprised?” Shiki-san giggled before continuing, “It’s not like doing so was all that difficult, you know? Those girls need a heroic figure to act as a crutch for their emotional support. Arisu-chan was prattling on and on about your accomplishments with sparkles in her eyes, so I merely traveled the path she paved for me. If you’d like, I’ll continue to sing praises about you in front of everyone in the future as well.”

“Please try to keep it in moderation.” I must’ve looked like I was biting down on a bitter bug. Shiki-san covered her mouth with her hand and snickered.

“Are you making fun of me?” I frowned.

“Not at all. Rather, I’m making fun of *myself* for having looked down on you all this time.”

“You really viewed me in such a poor light?”

“Hmm, how should I put it...?” Shiki-san placed her index finger on her chin, gazing upwards at the ceiling as she tried to find the right words. “Seeing that you’re so capable as a leader is... well, surprising, to say the least.”

I’m not fit to be a leader.”

“Oh really? Yesterday, only two hours after you two had met, you had Arisu practically worshipping you. And today was no different either. Tamaki-chan and Mia-chan went from complete strangers to trusting you from the bottom of their hearts in a few hours.”

“Me finding Arisu was simply a case of luck, or a ‘fortuitous meeting,’ whatever you want to call it. And Tamaki and Mia only ended up that way because Arisu was there to help bridge the gap between us.” I replied, waving off the idea. “Besides, the girls only needed an older male figure to look up to. Anyone else could have filled the role sufficiently.”

“Is that so?” Shiki-san mused before shrugging her shoulders. “In any case, seeing as you’ve won every single battle you’ve found yourself in so far, I was starting to think you were a big deal.”

“That, too, can only be regarded as a matter of luck.”

Truth be told, several of our victories had been no more than the result of a successful coin toss, so to speak. Take our battle at the girls’ dormitory, for instance. Had that level-up not come when it did, we would have struggled to regain our footing. There’s no telling what might have happened had we not gotten that chance. We could’ve all been wiped out by the elite orc, or maybe a smokescreen from Mia’s Wind Magic would have masked our group and allowed us to scramble away into the forest.

“Forget the means; the end result is what really matters,” Shiki-san insisted. “You brought us to victory again and again, and there’s not a single person who doesn’t recognize that fact.”

“Then why speak of me so highly to them?” I asked.

“It’s a necessary action to ensure everyone unites. Now then, don’t go whining too much in front of them, okay? You’re only allowed to do that kind of

stuff in front of Arisu-chan and myself. Oh, and just so you know, I've already spoken to her about this."

"You did...?"

"Yes. Her cooperation was absolutely required to get everyone to look up to you in respect. I apologize for using your lover like that."

Well, aren't you ever the opportunist? I jabbed her in my mind. *Then again, disagreements aside, does this mean my fears surrounding her exposing my pitiful high school self were... groundless?*

"What did Arisu say when you told her this?"

"She told me she's fine putting up with it, even if you ogle the other girls a little bit. Good for you, huh?" Shiki-san said in a teasing tone. "You've been given permission to flirt around-."

I was astonished. *If Tamaki is okay with it, I want you to sleep with her.* My thoughts flashed back to something Arisu had said to me before. *Did this nugget of wisdom come from Shiki-san as well?* I decided to ask her to determine the truth, but Shiki-san turned out to be just as surprised as I had been.

"I never intended for her to take things *that* far."

"Where in the world did she get that idea from then?" I said to no one in particular.

"Perhaps middle school girls have some kind of stipulation that demands they share their boyfriends or something...?" Shiki-san frowned, tilting her head in confusion as she struggled to come up with a reasonable-sounding answer.

I gave her a long, hard look. "Not once have I ever heard mention of something as ridiculous as that."

"Oh, is that so? I wasn't aware you had any friends to gossip with about those sorts of things."

K.O.! Brutality! I swore I could hear the faint sound of an announcer from the critical blow she'd just landed on me. I soundlessly turned my gaze elsewhere and then trudged over to the laptop corresponding to me. Upon reaching my

destination, I threw my body down into the chair, heaving a deep sigh. Shiki-san chased after me in a panic, bowing her head quickly in apology over and over.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. Sometimes I accidentally let slip unnecessary comments on the spur of the moment. It’s a bad habit of mine.”

“You went way too far there!” I spun around and shot back, sending a glare in her direction. I could feel something distorting the corners of my vision. *Anger, surely, and definitely not tears.*

“Yes, you’re completely right. I’ll apologize for as long as it takes. There’s nothing I won’t do, so please, let’s forget about it!” Shiki-san pitched her entire upper body forward, placing her hands together in a pose, not unlike a devout follower begging forgiveness from a higher power.

Watching Shiki-san’s over-the-top apology, I sighed inwardly. She appeared to have not meant it after all... but it didn’t change the fact that she had a nasty tongue on her.

“I wasn’t expecting that. You’re much more of an ill-mannered person than I took you for,” I remarked.

“You’re absolutely correct. I’m an evil-minded, twisted woman. A worthless sow that makes even maggots look better by comparison.”

“I never once said anything so cruel to you?!”

Dammit, she got me again! I watched as she closed one of her eyes and stuck out her tongue in a playful manner. *J-Just one punch, one punch wouldn’t be so bad...*

Unlike before, this feeling of wanting to give her a good punch was not borne out of bitterness or deep-seated hatred. What I felt now was akin to the buds of friendship between her and me. A warm and pleasant feeling that made me feel like I could play the straight man every once in a while. *How long has it been since I’ve felt like this, I wonder?*

I felt myself break into a wry smile. I couldn’t figure out the reason why, but I found myself enjoying our little conversation.

Now that I think about it, Arisu, Tamaki, and Mia are all from middle school, aren't they? To them, I was an older man, an upperclassman. I wondered how much time had passed since I had talked at length with another person of equal standing like Shiki-san. *It's been a while, that's for certain.*

“Whatever. It doesn’t bother me anymore.” I shrugged my shoulders, standing up from the desk. “Back to the main topic. Hear me now, Shiki-san. I’m going to be working you to the bone.”

“No problems here. Exploit me as you see fit until I am nothing more than a ragged husk. Both my mind and body are yours to use... though don't misunderstand and assume this extends to pervy stuff. You got that?”

“Loud and clear.”

“Although, if you do come after me like that, I won't say a word to anyone. I feel too indebted to you to reject your advances. I'll voice my dissatisfaction the entire time, but I won't stop you.”

“You do realize I won't do that to you, right?”

“I know.” Shiki-san smiled and then abruptly changed the subject. “Arisu-chan sure is cute, isn't she?”

“You bet. She's hard-working, honest, and doesn't go around putting weird ideas into people's heads.”

“Y-you got me there...” This time, Shiki-san found herself on the other end of the shoe. *Yeah! Got her back from earlier!* I mentally pumped my fist into the air.

“All right. As fun as it’s been, I think now is a good time to move on from the ‘gotcha!’s and dive into more serious matters, wouldn’t you agree?” I suggested. “We’ll be here all day otherwise.”

“Couldn’t agree more... Well then, so long as you’re okay with me doing so, I’ll do all the menial things in addition to the role of uniting everyone. I apologize if it seemed as if I was testing you before.”

“No need. You were waiting for me to sort out my feelings on the matter, right?”

Though Shiki-san did not offer a response, she smiled bitterly at my question. *So that really was why she acted the way she did, huh?* I was beginning to understand her.

Entrusting full control over the group to me had not been done out of thoughtfulness or because she held any expectations of me. To put it simply, she took a gamble. She chose to wait for me to realize my own limits and come to rely on her on my own terms. Personally, I couldn't see her method as anything but underhanded, but that didn't change the fact that it had produced results.

Despite being on the verge of total emotional collapse yesterday, she was now looking towards tomorrow, struggling through her challenges. The path before her may have been full of thorns, but she pushed through regardless. She believed that using people was the most optimal play, and now she was attempting to use me in the same way. I was the type of person to unconsciously run away from their problems, yet here in front of me lay someone strong enough to face all of hers head-on. An unyielding spirit that never quit no matter how many times she was knocked down.

Perhaps even those small, insignificant exchanges from earlier were similarly done out of consideration in an attempt to develop a relationship with me. One where we could banter with each other; one where we could play the straight man with one another; and one where we could hold day-to-day conversations about unimportant things—a friendship. If that's the case, then I've been dancing atop the palm of her hand this entire time, haven't I?

But I didn't mind. She spoke to me without reservations. *Or, at the very least, she's opened up my heart enough that I believe she has.*

"Let's do our best," I said and offered my hand again.

"Yes, let's," replied Shiki-san as she mirrored my action.

I gripped my hand on hers, and the two of us exchanged a handshake.

Chapter 29: Two Pillars of Command

“I’ll choose to believe in you. Our team needs a person with capable leadership like you,” I spoke matter-of-factly. “I’d like you to be proactive and move to bring everyone together.”

“Understood. Until this body of mine lays broken and worn, I shall move for your sake,” Shiki-san replied affirmatively. “Let’s create an organization—one that can always offer support to match your needs. One that is capable of swiftly and appropriately dealing with any and all difficulties you may bring onto us... and one that will allow every single one of us to unite and survive.”

She paused for a moment before continuing, “No matter what challenges we may face in the future, let’s acquire the power to overcome them all.”

Both of us were aware of the circumstances that had befallen us and were operating under a single basic premise regarding our situation. That is, no one would extend a helping hand to us from now on.

Had the middle school teachers been alive and sound, they would have attempted to make some sort of contact with us by now. The high school side of things was in the same boat. If fate did not smile upon them, they might have been wiped out entirely. Alternatively, perhaps a few people *had* survived but were unsuccessful in uniting as a group. Now they faced conflict from friend and foe alike.

Our group had Shiki-san, a talented woman who had conceded to me and made me the de-facto leader of the group, on *top* of making an effort to bring everyone together. Even if similar-minded students and teachers were at the high school, their survival wasn’t guaranteed by any means. Only those to have reached Level 1 were capable of surviving in this harsh environment. And only a select few among them would be able to form a group capable of strengthening others, thereby increasing their strength at a steady pace.

In the worst-case scenario, the only group with the potential to help other people reach Level 1 was those in the Cultivation Center.

The point is that unless we succeeded in uniting everyone Level 1 or above and creating an organization that could move and act under one mind, our group would collapse sooner or later, and all of us would perish. Well, maybe not *all* of us—Arisu and I might be able to survive by running away when the opportunity presented itself. I imagined I could probably wage a flawless victory on the orcs once my level was somewhere in the 50s range. *Even then, though, that's not enough to guarantee survival.*

Perhaps this was the tinfoil hat in me talking... but I was positive that the orcs were no more than the vanguard on a never-ending list of enemies.

Why did the white room exist? And why had the entire mountain been transported to another world? These brainless musclehead pigmen had appeared at our school out of nowhere—the very notion itself seemed strange. There was something—or *someone* lurking in the background—yet undiscovered with direct involvement in our situation.

I was certain of it—the orcs were nothing more than the frontward scouts. Even their attacks, gruesome though they were, were naught more than preparation for the true calamity to come. Shiki-san's grandiose speech about an organization from earlier was clearly based on this premise.

An organization formed for *the future*, the composition of which was a small number of elites, myself included, and a large number of people providing support for them. Shiki-san had declared she would lead this supporting group, play the villain role, and take care of all the troublesome matters.

But that begged the question of why? Why had she not come to me about this yesterday or during the morning?

The answer was simple: because I had not trusted her then.

Shiki-san was a clever girl—smart to the point that I was jealous of her. She had envisioned an organization such as this from the very beginning and formulated a number of strategies and schemes to achieve this goal, putting her brilliant mind to use to predict not only the present but also the future.

Frankly, I held a strong distaste towards this super-intelligence of hers. I could feel the jealousy welling up inside me. Regardless of my personal feelings,

however, I recognized her intellect was a much-needed figure in our group. This was something beyond my capabilities.

The generous quality of accepting another—that was what she was requesting of me.

Fine, then. I'll be the person you're looking for. I had someone that I wanted to protect: Arisu. No matter how much I had to change, I was ready and willing so long as it meant fulfilling this goal. I'd join forces with anyone—even the Devil itself. *And compared to the Devil, meeting Shiki-san's expectations is a far more promising endeavor.*

“Now then,” Shiki-san began. “I believe it’s time for another strategy meeting.”

“Yeah, let’s get to it. First, we should theorize about how many enemies are coming...”

“We should overestimate their forces. Moreover, as for the placement of ours...” Shiki-san pulled out a permanent black marker from who-knows-where and began drawing a map of the vicinity around the Cultivation Center.

“You know, I’ve always wanted to try this. Doodling on the floor, I mean.” She spoke in an almost merry tone, her lips curled into a mischievous grin. “Here, I don’t have to worry about leaving any marks. Everything will be reset the next time we come back here.”

“That's not... inaccurate, I suppose...”

On the contrary, no matter how many plans we drew up, not one of them would ever leave this room. Nothing tangible or otherwise could be taken from this room's confines other than memories. But that made this space such a great place to rack our brains. The frozen passage of time provided us with unlimited time to perfect a strategy... and we were going to perfect one. We planned and argued. Time seemed to fly by as we endlessly discussed and reevaluated our strategy, but we paid no mind to the passing hours. Time was infinite, after all.

Before long, I'd come to realize something. Ironically enough, she and I had very good chemistry with each other. She would offer a suggestion, which I took

and then refined into a concrete strategy. When I repeated the details back to her, she would quickly spot any holes and patch them. The more we discussed and fine-tuned our plans, the more in sync we became. Nearing the end, we had gotten to the point where simple gestures and one-worded sentences like “There” or “This” were enough to convey entire messages.

“I never imagined we’d get to be so close.” Shiki-san exchanged a glance with me, smiling wryly. I guess even she was surprised by our progress.

There's something that's been bugging me, though. This girl... she's 100% a gamer. She seemed to be trying to keep it under wraps, but she would often let something unexpected slip from her. And this did not go unnoticed.

“You sure know a lot about video games, huh?”

“I haven't the faintest idea what you’re talking about.” Shiki-san dismissed me, feigning ignorance.

“Oh, really? Then why did you refer to Support Magic’s enhancements as ‘buffs’ a while ago?”

“Yo-you must have misheard.” She turned away from me, her cheeks dyed a vermillion hue. *Don't you think it's a bit late to be doing that? I mean, come on, who are you trying to fool here?*

“C’mon, out with it,” I badgered her. “Let’s bring that embarrassing past of yours out into the open, eh?”

“There's no such thing. I just happened to get a *little* bit addicted to MMOs and spent around six months cooped up in the house, consequently incurring my parents’ wrath. As a result, they shipped me off to a boarding school with no commodities such as internet...”

Shiki-san’s past came as such a shock to me that I found myself rendered speechless. *Did everyone in the class know that their class vice-president had lost themselves in games in the past?* I wondered to myself.

“Ever since I came to this school, I had a change of heart and began to study in earnest,” Shiki-san explained. “Even joining the Tea Ceremony Club was all part of an effort to communicate to my parents that I had corrected myself.”

“I’ve gotta admit, you’ve done an excellent job at covering up.”

Presuming she had taken an external exam, her test scores had to have been fairly high to get into this school. *She did rather well for someone who had spent the better part of a year stuck under a roof playing online games*, I remarked inwardly. *Maybe her marks had always been high? That would explain why her parents were so anxious about their daughter’s addiction. Seeing how things turned out, though, perhaps leaving her to her shut-in fate was for the best...*



“Maybe. But now we’re in another world... Online games aren’t even part of the equation anymore.”

“Yeah... that’s true,” I nodded.

“I don’t even know if I will be alive two hours from now, much less survive the day.” Shiki-san sighed, lamenting our misfortune. “Oh, but don’t get me wrong; the only time you’ll ever hear me complaining like this is inside this room. Outside, I’ll feign being a confident, anxiety-free leader.”

Therefore, you need to do the same—such was the implicit message hidden within her words.

“Although looking at it from another angle, I suppose the only reason I’m alive now is *that* I joined the Tea Ceremony Club to maintain my facade of a well-mannered woman. Maybe it was for the best after all...”

For the best, huh? She had quite the backbone, having gone through a harrowing experience at the hands of the orcs but still being able to view it in a positive light. *Not that I’m ever going to express as much outright to her though.*

Despite myself, my atmosphere seemed to have given away my inner thoughts. She shrugged her shoulders slightly with her arms still folded.

“I don’t have even an iota of hope that there are any survivors in the high school section.”

“Not even a little?” I asked.

“Even if there are a few survivors, the remainder is most likely less than a tenth of the original number. Moreover, there’s no telling how many of those are currently being held captive by the orcs.”

Considering the hurdle required to reach Level 1, her assessments were probably not too far from the truth. I could feel my spirits dampening as a feeling of gloom settled in. I needed to send out a raven to the high school sections to scout the area sooner rather than later. So far, an opportunity had yet to present itself where I could afford to devote so much time and energy to do so. *Although, even if an opportunity does present itself, I’d much rather have the raven explore all of the buildings in the middle school section.*

“Oh, right. I nearly forgot.” Shiki-san abruptly spoke up. “Would it be all right if I called you Kazu-kun?”

Most likely, she wanted us to seem on amicable terms. She and I were both in charge of the other girls for the present moment. What better way to instill a sense of security than to have the two effective leaders of the group addressing one another on a close-name basis?

“Yeah, I don't mind. I think I will stick to calling you ‘Shiki-san,’ though, as that’s how I’ve been addressing you so far. Sound good?”

“Sure. The girls in our class would also address me that way. ‘Yukariko’ doesn’t really roll off the tongue well, does it?”

Now that she mentions it... I do recall everyone in our class calling her ‘Shiki-san.’

“Not that I hate my own name, of course,” she quickly added. “I do think it's a bit tacky and old-fashioned, but I don't hate it.”

Isn't that the same as hating it, then? I remarked inwardly. Names were a delicate matter, however, so I chose to keep the comment to myself.

“If you'd like to, you can also use Yukariko, Yukari, or Yukarin. Whichever you prefer is fine by me,” Shiki-san offered.

“Thanks, but I'll pass. ‘Shiki-san’ works best.”

“Doesn’t it?” Shiki-san laughed. “Now that that’s out of the way, let’s get along, Kazu-kun.”

She presented her hand once more, and I grabbed hold of it.

“Oh, and you don’t have to force yourself to act friendly here,” she tacked on. “You can call me a sad sack of used orc goods if that’s what you’d prefer.”

“Knock it off already,” I sighed. “I’ve heard enough of your self-deprecating jokes.”

“Teehee?” She stuck out her tongue playfully. Admittedly, I found it impressive that her heart had the strength to act with so much courage. That said, I wished she'd quit it with the depressing jokes.

Before leaving the white room, Shiki-san told me one more thing.

“Leave the command of everyone else to me during this battle. You only need to worry about your party, okay?”

I gave her a confused look as if asking, “Why?”

“Meaning, you only need to think about the lives of Arisu-chan, Tamaki-chan, and Mia-chan,” she clarified.

“Okay? I’m not against it... but why bring this up?”

Shiki-san did not respond to my question, choosing to brush her hair with her hand instead. Once I saw the sorrowful gaze coming from her eyes, everything clicked into place.

“... Because our companions might die? And you don’t want me to bear that burden?”

“It's only a possibility,” she quickly added. “However, in the million-to-one chance that something does happen... it'd be a problem if you were to be crushed by guilt.”

“So, you want to be the one to carry the burden in my stead, you mean?”

“I'll be able to bear it. Compared to being violated by the orcs, sacrificing the lives of my friends isn't anything major.”

Like hell, it isn't. You're lying. I gave Shiki-san a long stare. *I can see the look in your eyes, I can see the face you're making... so why are you trying to deceive me?*

Shiki-san responded by pointing a warm smile at me. “Remember, it's only a possibility. I'm just thinking of the worst possible scenario. Besides, if one of us had to break... we'd be better off if that person was me.”

There was nothing I had to offer her in response. Objectively speaking, not a single thing she said had been anything but the matter-of-fact truth.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 7	SUPPORT MAGIC: 3

SUMMONING MAGIC: 3	SKILL POINTS: 2
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Chapter 30: Second Defensive Battle at the Cultivation Center – 1

We returned to the middle of the forest. Without a moment's delay, I conjured up three more ravens and sent the four of them out to do some recon. Then, the two of us began making our way back to the Cultivation Center.

Upon returning, Shiki-san and I were greeted by several anxious faces, among which was Arisu. We waved back at them, mustering as bright expressions as we could.

“Sorry for the delay, everyone,” Shiki-san apologized. “Kazu-kun and I have finished our discussion. I will begin explaining our plan of operations now, so come over here.”

From what I could tell, not a single one of them failed to notice that Shiki-san had changed how she referred to me. Arisu shot me a questioning look, and I patted her on the shoulder reassuringly before whispering into her ear. “We made up.”

“‘Made up,’ huh...?” Her eyes narrowed. “And what exactly do you mean by that?”

I found myself at the end of her death glare for reasons unknown to me. *Huh? What did I do?* Question marks formed over my head as I looked back at her blankly, head tilted sideways.

Shiki-san watched our exchange from the side, arms folded in front of her chest and a bemused expression on her face. “Well, look at you, Kazu-kun. Aren’t you Mr. Popular over there?”

“Ha-ha, very funny. If you’re trying to call me stupid, you might as well straight out say it.”

“You said it, not me,” she giggled. “Don’t worry, Arisu-chan. We just got rid of the underlying issues between leaders.”

Arisu blinked her eyes in surprise before finally seeming to agree and giving an assenting nod. *That reminds me, I thought, no one else knew about Shiki-san's and my past other than her, huh?*

Arisu smiled at me. "You did a great job, Kazu-san."

"Only thanks to you and everyone else. Besides, Shiki-san's the one who did the bigger share of the work."

"Maybe so... but still, I'm glad."

Seeing the pure smile beaming at me, I couldn't help but reach out to stroke Arisu's head. Her eyes squinted in bliss as my hand caressed her hair. *Ahh, she's a true angel.*

"Okay, okay, let's keep the flirting to a minimum," Shiki-san said, interrupting our moment. One clap of her hands and everyone's eyes focused on her. "We're beginning the meeting."

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There were currently a total of eleven students residing in the Cultivation Center who had reached Level 1 or greater, myself included. The guidelines established by the System specified that one party could have at most six people.

Following a lengthy discussion, Shiki-san and I chose to split the members like so: one party of four, one party of six, and lastly, one party of one. The four-man party was going to be our main force and consisted of myself, Arisu, Tamaki, and Mia. The six-man party was going to be a sub-force, and the one-man party—Shiki-san—was going to act alone.

Shiki-san had proposed the idea to me inside the white room. "Just in case there's an emergency. It will buy me some time to strategize," she had insisted. By acting independently, she could choose when to level up.

Wringing the white room dry of every last drop of usefulness... Should I consider her way of thinking reliable or terrifying? I pondered. Her ideas were usually pretty reliable, so it would most likely be fine.

The strategy itself was simple.

“The Cultivation Center is not suited for defending from the inside. If the orcs resort to busting down one of the side walls and penetrating our defenses from there, there won’t be much we can do to stop them once they’re inside. The ones from a little while ago didn’t try that, but who’s to say if an elite orc might show up?” Shiki-san had pointed out.

This was the greatest point of contention throughout our discussion. The sheer destruction an elite orc could unleash upon its immediate surroundings was something I had witnessed firsthand. A single swing from its axe had been enough to obliterate one of the lobby’s sets of staircases. Would the wooden walls of the Cultivation Center be able to withstand a similar heavy blow? Not even the slightest chance, if you asked me.

“The Cultivation Center’s structure isn’t so shoddy that it’d break in one blow,” Shiki-san had argued.

But I’d adamantly objected, “There’s not a single building out there made to withstand the blows of an elite orc and simultaneously remain structurally sound.”

When all was said and done, my viewpoint reigned supreme. Shiki-san factored it in when drawing up our strategy and then proposed, “How about we go on the offensive? Fortunately, only one path leads to the Cultivation Center through the forest, and it’s only about five meters wide. The immediate vicinity is covered completely by dense woodland, meaning combat in large numbers would be difficult. No matter how many orcs show up, their numbers are meaningless if only three of them at most can come at once. Therefore, the most optimal terrain for defending would be outside.”

Next, defenders. The main defenders would be composed of the girls who'd chosen spears as their primary weapon. Excluding Arisu, three such users fit into this category. Two of these three were the pair that had stayed behind and defended the Cultivation Center from the earlier attack. They reached Level 2 and ranked their Spearmanship skill to Rank 2.

Our main force would be composed of the girls who’d chosen to use spears as their primary weapon. Excluding Arisu, three other people fit into that category,

two of whom being the pair that had stayed behind and defended the Cultivation Center earlier. They had reached Level 2 and ranked up their Spearmanship to Rank 2.

We were going to have them line up side-by-side on the path, forming a makeshift wall.

“There is going to be a small indent dug out in front of this spear wall,” Shiki-san explained to the girls before looking in my direction. “Between 20 to 30 centimeters should be deep enough. Please finish it quickly, Kazu-kun. I’m counting on you.”

“On it.” Nodding, I grabbed a shovel and headed outside from the Cultivation Center’s lobby without waiting for her to finish the rest of her explanation.

“And as for the orcs coming from the left and right sides of the forest, we’ll...” I could hear her continuing to explain the strategy to everyone else as I walked out of earshot. I wasn't worried about missing the rest of it.

I was the co-author, after all.

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I walked around the Cultivation Center clearing, slowly making my way over to the path.

The path was barely wide enough for a single truck to travel. I walked down it for about twenty feet or so before coming to a stop. Brandishing my shovel, I began to dig the hole.

Okay, maybe “hole” is overstating it a bit; if anything, I’m digging a dip into the path.

In any case, the digging proceeded smoothly. An impressive feat, considering how packed the dirt was due to the frequent path usage. A feat only possible thanks to our much-loved Physical Up.

Several times during my excavation my ravens returned to me, bringing intel about the orcs. According to their reports, the orcs were gathering en masse in

front of the middle school's main building. They had also spotted bronze-colored figures among the mass... and several of them at that.

Multiple elite orcs, huh? This was going to be a tough battle, that much I knew.

That being said, an enemy force of this magnitude was within Shiki-san's expectations. She was spot on with her predictions—*too* spot on, if you asked me. Initially, I believed she was going overboard in her estimations... but surprisingly, she had been right on the money. *And good thing, too. If we'd gone along with my more optimistic prediction I would've been running around like a chicken without a head right about now.*

When I wasn't digging, I spent my time gathering information. The ravens returned to me one after another to give their reports. Once they were finished, I sent them right back out to gather more information on the enemy's whereabouts. This cycle continued several times over the course of my digging. Before I knew it, a dip long enough to stretch across the entire path had been excavated.

“Good work.”

A voice came from somewhere behind me. Turning around, I was greeted by one of the middle school girls standing not too far away. She was one of the two girls who had stayed behind to watch over the Cultivation Center.

In her hands was a white plate on top of which were four balls of rice wrapped up in seaweed—*onigiri*.

“Unfortunately, the only meat we could find to put inside was canned salmon. Sorry,” The girl apologized, glancing up at me bashfully. “Ah! Your hands are all dirty. Here, use this handkerchief to-”

“Nah, don’t worry about it,” I interrupted her as I grabbed a rice ball with my dirt-caked hands and lifted it up to my mouth, munching down. With all the stuff I'd been through the past couple of days, a little dirt didn't bother me anymore. Besides, time was too valuable to be wasted on handwashing. According to the reports from my ravens, the orcs were going to be on the move soon. For all I knew, they may have begun to march at this very moment.

A salty taste permeated my mouth as I stuffed down the rice balls. The intensive labor must've spurred my hunger into high gear, as even the simple-made *onigiri* tasted extremely delicious. All four of them disappeared into my stomach in the blink of an eye, and I found myself licking my lips in satisfaction. *Thinking back on it, I guess the last time I had something to eat was just before sunrise, huh? So many things were going on this morning that I forgot I was hungry.*

"Thanks for the grub. It was delicious."

"I know it wasn't the most grandiose meal but thank you for eating them. I made them myself," she said apologetically. A soft, childlike smile was visible on her face as she continued, "Thank you for saving us earlier. I didn't think we were going to make it."

The fact that we'd made it back in time to save them was simply a matter of luck. Moreover, helping your fellow survivors when they were in a pinch was only natural... especially if they had ended up in that situation because I had borrowed the other five defenders, leaving the two of them to fend off any foes by themselves. *She doesn't need to know that though, so I think I'll just keep quiet and accept her gratitude.*

"Next time, I'll be the one to protect *you*, Kazu-senpai!" She beamed.

"Uh, sure... instead of 'Kazu-senpai', could you call me 'Kazu-san' instead, maybe?"

"Okay, Kazu-san! We'll ensure you stay safe and sound, so just sit back and watch!"

"Uh huh..." My gaze fell on the girl's hands. Her skin was peeling from the digging she'd done in the morning. Upon realizing that she had gone to the effort of making me rice balls with her peeled hands, I found myself feeling a little apologetic.

Well, while she was off in the Cultivation Center making the rice balls, I was out here working on digging a huge dip in the forest. That kinda evens it out, doesn't it?

Somehow or other, I felt like digging had become a matter of course to me. Like digging through the ground came as naturally as breathing in the oxygen around me, a natural bodily function.

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Around five minutes later.

Three girls armed with spears stood on the side of the ditch facing the Cultivation Center, waiting for the incoming enemies. The ditch was very shallow, about eleven feet by twenty feet, with a depth of just below one foot. Mia and I were not too far behind them and standing guard beside me was a lone gray wolf—my familiar. As for everyone else, they had been divided between the forested areas to our left and right.

The ground began to tremble. From the direction of the main middle school building, a cloud of dust could be seen rising into the air. The orcs' large force had begun to march towards us. But we were ready for them.

The sheer noise of their footsteps seemed to shake the ground beneath our feet. *Wh-whoa?! That's a lot of power.*

A bend in the path was just shy of two hundred feet ahead of us. Right then, the orcs leading the charge rounded the bend. The sight of them coming into view sent chills down my spine.

Upon spotting us, the orcs roared out in vengeance. They stampeded down the path, visibly enraged and vicious-looking. The overwhelming wave of violence drew nearer and nearer.

I spotted fearful expressions on the girls' faces as they approached. But they managed to keep themselves together and stand their ground. Having reflected on my mistake at the girls' dormitory, I had gone around and cast Clear Mind on everyone beforehand. Thanks to their magically-enhanced willpower, they didn't show even a hint of wanting to turn tail and run as the army of orcs bore down on us. *On the other hand, casting all of those left my MP around 30 or so... I hope it'll be enough.*

Everything else was dependent on them keeping calm and acting according to the strategy.

That being said, I can't believe they actually gathered up one hundred orcs. I wondered if we would be okay as I maintained a calm facade on the outside, masking the terror I felt deep down. Was dividing up commands really the right option? Am I going to be able to protect Arisu?

I clenched my fists. *Of course I am.* It wasn't about whether I could or couldn't protect Arisu. I was *going* to protect her.

The foremost orc made contact with the ditch I'd dug and stepped onto it, a second not far behind. They all raised their weapons at once, preparing to strike the girls standing before them.

"Now, Mia!" I shouted.

"Mm. Earth Pit."

With a lethargic voice, Mia invoked her magic. Earth Pit—belonging to Rank 3 Earth Magic, the spell dug a hole in the ground. The spell's effective range was limited to around five feet from the center, and the maximum depth was nearly seventeen feet. The spell did not create a deep hole in one instant but gradually sank into the ground until the pit was complete. *But that's on the base-level ground. What would happen if one were to use the spell on an already low stretch of the ground like, say, a pre-dug area?*

Below the feet of three orcs on the left side of the orcs' vanguard, the ground swayed violently. They were caught off-guard, having just planted their feet on the ground as they prepared to strike, and lost their balance. The moment they fell forward, the three girls thrust their spears towards a different orc.

The orcs following behind attempted to stop themselves from moving forward to avoid the same fate as the first three. But the ones further behind them continued pushing forward. They were knocked from behind and pitched forward, falling onto the receding ground in a heap. The hole continued to deepen, taking with it a pile of pigmen.

The orcs to the right were evidently shaken by the fact that their left-hand brethren were disappearing before their eyes and halted dead in their tracks.

“Earth Pit.”

Another hole mercilessly opened up beneath the rightward orcs' feet. They, too, suffered from the same phenomenon and were pushed forward by their allies following behind, falling into the pit starting from the leading orcs.

Screams, followed by grunts of being crushed, rose into the air. Their cries of death resounded through the forest.

Chapter 31: Second Defensive Battle at the Cultivation Center – 2

The once peaceful and serene atmosphere in the forest was disturbed as the pained shouts and cries of orcs filled the air. I watched the orcs seemingly vanish one after another into the pit, forced forward by their brethren from behind, before exchanging a glance with Mia.

“So, the orcs should still be giving out experience points even though we're not the direct cause of death, right? Where do you think it's all going?” I asked curiously before a haunting realization hit me. “... I *really* hope it's not going to the orcs instead. That would seriously suck.”

“No kidding.” Mia agreed from beside me. “We'd be in trouble then.”

I pictured the scene inside my mind: one of the orcs among the horde suddenly undergoing an evolution due to an influx of experience points, and from *our* trap, no less. *Yeah, screw that. We'd be dead meat if that happened.* Overactive imagination aside, we had yet to uncover any information on how elite orcs came to be in the world. So there was no telling whether or not my suppositions would become a reality. *Guess we'll have to wait and see. Either way, we've got a fight to finish.*

The orcs' march forward had more or less been brought to a standstill thanks to the pitfall spanning the width of the path. While a majority of them were standing on the other side, staring at us from across the pit, a few had seemingly given up on marching. They had begun pushing through the forest to the sides to reach us. For a moment, I began devising a means to deal with these rogue orcs, but my concerns proved unnecessary.

Screams rang out through the forest around us—Arisu and Tamaki's doing. Before the battle began, I had stationed both of them inside the forest to our sides and tasked them with dealing with any and all unwanted guests pushing their way through the tall brush.

The pained cries of their allies ringing out from within the forest, as well as having no clear way around the trap, sent the horde of orcs into a frenzy. Once again, they began to push forward down the path.

“Missile Party, fire!”

I handed down the order, and not a second later, several attacks launched down at the orcs from nearby trees, hidden upon the branches of which were all of our ranged attackers. Plastic bags filled with kerosene were thrown by girls with the Throwing skill, which splattered on impact and doused a few of the orcs from the head-down. Fireballs hurled by the Fire Magic users scored direct hits on those orcs and ignited them, wreathing their entire bodies in fire. They writhed in pain as the flames charred their flesh, resulting in their allies growing even more panicked around them. And kerosene wasn't the only thing the girls were tasked with throwing. Any throwable weapons we'd plundered from the orcs, like javelins and hatchets, also soared through the air towards them, multiplying the chaos spreading through their ranks.

Honestly, I would've preferred to have had one or two bow users in the mix. Unfortunately, we hadn't come across a single one of the most essential parts of that puzzle—the bows themselves. Consequently, no one amongst our group had picked up the Marksmanship skill, although perhaps that may have been a blessing in disguise. Had we come across one in our spoils, that would mean there were orcs out there capable of *using* ranged weaponry, and any such foes would've rendered our strategy null the moment the battle began. In that regard, I could only pray that we would never come across any.

The core part emphasized in my and Shiki-san's strategy had been to constantly keep the battle limited to close quarters. While there were several weapons the orcs had used against us, most could be divided into three main categories: spears, axes, and swords. If you wanted to delve into technicalities, there were a few more subdivisions among even those.

Take spears, for example; some of the ones we'd come across so far were small enough to be considered a short spear while others were insanely long by comparison. One was nearly *eighteen* feet in length. The axes and spears had come in all sorts of shapes and sizes too, and we'd also discovered a few unique ones among them.

And you might be thinking, "Well, at least they don't throw them, right?" Wrong. Dead wrong. Heck, yesterday while Arisu and I were in the middle of clearing out the Cultivation Center, my life had nearly come to an abrupt end thanks to a flying hatchet.

Ranged attacks weren't uncommon amongst the orcs. But their basic methods of attack leaned mostly towards close quarters, so as long as they continued to fight up close, our strategy was bound for success... in theory. Even now, a small number of orcs were throwing the spears and axes they were holding at the girls up in the trees. However, their attacks were proving rather fruitless, as each of the trees the girls were stationed on had thick trunks. Whenever one flew in their direction, the girls would hide themselves using the thick trunk, resulting in most projectiles flying right past them and missing entirely.

These girls were never intended to be a major part of our fighting force; I was simply hoping for causing some mayhem among the orcs' ranks once they'd come to a stop. As such, I'd make sure to warn them over and over not to overdo it. Our sure bet at victory was resting in their hands.

"Mia, go ahead and fall back while they're distracted. Take a break," I suggested. She gave a small nod and retreated back to the clearing around the Cultivation Center.

All right, so we've unnerved their leading force. This is where things might get spotty...

As Mia walked back towards the clearing, Shiki-san rushed up to me to take her place.

"Hey," she called out. "How about you summon another wolf? I'd like to send more defenders to the sides."

So she wants to send reinforcements to help Arisu and Tamaki, huh? I had one wolf waiting in the immediate area on standby, but it looked like that wouldn't be enough.

While we had been holding back the orcs' main force, Shiki-san had been sneaking through the forest, scanning the area for signs of the orcs as she moved around unnoticed, thanks to her Scouting skill. Considering how she was

insisting on sending reinforcements to the sides, she must've noticed that the orcs were going to make a huge push through the forest.

Going through so many battles in such a short timeframe had left me quite low on MP—only 30 or so was left over. *I've really been scraping the bottom of the MP barrel for a while now, haven't I? And summoning another wolf will take nearly a third from that, too. That said, I can't exactly just haphazardly dismiss her request, either. This concerns Arisu and Tamaki's safety.*

"All right," I nodded. "We're cutting it close in terms of MP, but one more should be manageable."

"Thanks. Don't bother putting all of the buffs on it; just Mighty Arm is fine."

Following her instructions, I buffed the newly-summoned wolf with Mighty Arm before sending both of them to the forest's sides. *Make sure you protect Arisu and Tamaki, you hear?*

The orcs in the front continued to fall into the pit, thanks to the ones in the back forcing them forward. And any orcs attempting to push through the forest were intercepted and dealt with by Arisu and Tamaki. This cycle repeated for a while. As I watched what seemed like the umpteenth orc fall into the pit before being crushed by another shortly afterward, my vision was suddenly engulfed by pure white.

Arisu had leveled up.

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"How many did you guys kill?"

Upon arriving in the white room, I immediately went over to press Arisu and Tamaki. The two then filled me in on their individual kill count.

Hmm... assuming their reports are both accurate, it's still not enough XP for a level-up. I can't imagine the wolves killed enough to make up the difference, so that can only mean...

"Seems the system is working in our favor. The orcs being crushed beneath the others inside Mia's Earth Pit are being treated as her kills."

“Mm. How kind of it.” Mia flashed a thumbs-up.

We speedily went over the plan once more and then returned to the real world.

ARISU	
LEVEL: 7	SPEARMANSHIP: 3
HEALING MAGIC: 3	SKILL POINTS: 2

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Finding myself back in the forest, I quickly took in my surroundings. Before me, the fierce battle raged on. The three spear users were stabbing the orcs at the bottom of the pit. Every time one of them got within reach, the girls went for the kill—much like a professional fisherman, everything they cast netted an immediate bite.

So they’re part of the six-person party, huh? That means their next level-up will need twelve orcs between all of them and then another eighteen to get to level 3. As the thought crossed my mind, the girls’ movements stalled for a single beat. Oh, and there it is. A level up.

“I leveled up Spearmanship,” reported one of the girls without even so much as glancing back at me. I mentally fist-pumped. *All right, now we’re talking. They will be able to perform even more skillfully against the orcs now.*

So, the two that were already level 2 before this battle began just need six more orcs now, I think. Well, no need to rush things; we’ll take it nice and slow... hmm, that reminds me.

I turned to my side. “Hey, Shiki-san, did you see any elite orcs while you were out there?”

“Yes, way in the back. There’s three of them,” she replied.

I grimaced. *No one here's capable of stopping an elite orc other than Arisu and Tamaki, and they're both out in the forest. The girls here, brave as they may be, won't be able to do much more than buy a few seconds of time. Now, if we had someone with a Rank 4 weapon skill, then our chances would be much higher. Currently, though, we'll still need backup support with Mia's magic. I could also use a well-timed Reflection...*

That being said, Reflection was a high-risk, high-reward spell, thanks to its very short window of opportunity. I had my doubts about forcing them into a melee to use it.

I suppose we're just going to have to rely on Mia. She'd only be able to deal with one at a time, too. If two of them came at once, we'd really be pushing our luck to try and do both.

To think that there were *three* of those monstrosities out there and they'd brought along an entire army with them to boot.

"Wait here for a moment," Shiki-san said before vanishing from sight. She must've activated her Reconnaissance skill.

A short spear suddenly shot through the air from the shade of the trees, piercing the thick gut of an orc attempting to push its way through the brush. The orc turned translucent and faded into nothing, and a few seconds later, Shiki-san returned.

"Just one away from a level up now," she remarked.

Due to the halved experience she received when the two of us had gone out hunting an orc earlier and the entire orc's worth she'd just acquired, she was currently sitting at 90 XP. Only 30 away from a level-up.

"Gonna keep a white room use on standby?" I asked.

"No, probably not. There's not much left to think about, don't you agree?"

True that. The orcs were still stuck in flux due to the mass confusion they'd entered. I wanted to shave off their numbers as much as we could while they remained disordered.

My hope was that Arisu and Tamaki could reach Rank 4 in their weapon skills before the elite orcs reached us. Fortunately, there were plenty of experience points (read: orcs) out there ripe for harvesting.

Switching back to the front lines, the orcs and the three spear users were having a standoff. They each glared at the other from their respective sides. Meanwhile, any orcs that tried to flank around the sides were either dealt with by Arisu and Tamaki or slain by my familiar wolves. Their screams of agony echoed around the battlefield.

The orcs may be idiots, but even they won't keep doing the same thing over and over again ad infinitum. Eventually, they're going to...

My train of thought ended abruptly as the scenery warped around me. Before I knew it, I was back in the white room.

"Mia and I have leveled up!" Tamaki celebrated.

Ah, so that's why. So they've reached level 5, huh?

Though the achievement was grand, the pair only had 3 skill points each at the moment. Unless they leveled up one more time, they wouldn't be able to raise their main skill to Rank 4.

I ran through some calculations in my head. *Looks like they're gonna get that level up right around the time that Arisu gets hers. Then we'll have two Rank 4 weapon skills to go around.*

"We've gotta kill 24 more orcs," I said.

"All right! Then Arisu and I are gonna run up to them and *swish, shing* slaughter them all! C'mon, Arisu, let's get 'em!" Tamaki cried out energetically. Her blonde pigtails bounced back and forth like springs as she mimicked swinging down an axe with her arms, complete with sound effects and all.

"Erm... Kazu-san, a little help here...?" Arisu asked, flashing a troubled expression. *Yeah, you're right. She's gone off the rails. All that adrenaline must've gone to her head. I better keep a close eye on her. She's the type to take a risky gamble and get herself killed in the process.*

"Denied," I shut her down. "You're not running out anywhere."

“Ehhh? But why!” Tamaki pouted.

“I just received a report from Shiki-san. There are three elite orcs out there.”

Tamaki’s pouting expression vanished immediately, but still, she insisted. “B-but with so many of them, then all the more reason to level up quickly!”

“Even if you succeed in pushing way further than you have to and kill some of the orcs, you’re gonna be exhausted by the time you accomplish your goal. *Further-more!* What happens if you have to fight against an elite orc when you’re surrounded on all sides by the small-fry ones?”

“You think you can go against one of them while simultaneously keeping a watchful eye on your surroundings to make sure none of the other ones attack you during your fight? You wouldn’t last a minute.”

Reckless suggestions could only be met with a hard shutdown. I could not afford to let her misunderstand my reasoning and attempt it anyway. Even if her weapon skill was Rank 4, she would be superior to the elite orc in terms of ability; in fact, she’d only be *matching* it. I wanted Arisu and Tamaki to battle them under the most optimal conditions. *And if she's going to bring my efforts to waste, then I guess I've gotta force her to realize the issue.*

“You listening, Tamaki? Next time you wet yourself, I’m making you fight in a diaper.”

“W-wait a moment. That’s too cruel!” She protested.

My gaze flicked to Arisu. “You too. Say something to her.”

“Hweh? G-got it! Umm, Tamaki, you need to make sure to use the toilet properly, okay?”

That’s... not what I was going for, but good attempt, Arisu. Now then, how am I gonna convince Tamaki that she shouldn’t run around recklessly? I was glad she was so willing to partake in battles... though perhaps therein lay the problem. Having made a mistake once before, she'd probably fallen into the mindset of “I need to achieve something fast to regain Kazu-san’s approval!”

Back at the girls’ dormitory, Tamaki hadn’t performed very well, even being reduced to a weeping heap for a while. Following those events, I imagined she

was berating herself for causing us a grievance. There was definitely some form of deep-seated fear lurking somewhere in her mind—maybe even on a subconscious level, feeding her doubts such as, *I've got to do something good here, I have to! Or else... Kazu and Arisu are going to abandon me.*

If that were the case, we would never be able to get through to Tamaki, no matter how many times we drilled it into her head. What she needed most at this moment was self-confidence.

In that case, let's switch up our way of thinking here for a minute.

"Mia, how much MP do you think you have left?" I asked.

"Around 20, maybe?" She replied, unsure.

About the same as me, huh? We'll need to leave her with enough MP to cast Heat Metal three times as a countermeasure against the elite orcs... Okay, we have enough. Let's do things this way.

"Go ahead and cast Earth Pit two more times, as well as Plant Rampage twice."

"You sure? That's our trump card."

"If we kill fourteen more orcs, then I'm gonna level up," I said before switching my gaze to our pair of defenders. "Arisu, Tamaki, listen up. I want you guys to get out of the forest. Take the wolves and head back over to us."

My wolves had also been instructed to follow Arisu and Tamaki's orders. To what extent would they, I wasn't sure, but they had listened to them without issue so far. I imagined this one would be no different.

"And as for after you guys get back..." I rapidly began to hand out instructions. Just like Shiki-san had told me earlier, I spoke with as much confidence as I could muster, as if everything was unfolding exactly as planned.

"Arisu, Tamaki. Once I've leveled up, I'm gonna spend basically all of my MP on buffing you two. The rest is in your hands."

"Right!"

"You can count on us, Kazu-san!"

The two of them nodded strongly.

Then after I spoke briefly with Mia and worked out a few things, we left the white room.

TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 5	SWORDSMANSHIP: 3
STRENGTH: 1	SKILL POINTS: 3

MIA	
LEVEL: 5	EARTH MAGIC: 3
WIND MAGIC: 1	SKILL POINTS: 3

Chapter 32: Second Defensive Battle at the Cultivation Center – 3

Finding myself back in the forest, I flicked my gaze back towards the clearing where Mia had retreated earlier. I quickly spotted her small figure only a couple of meters away. I broke out into a sprint towards her and, a few seconds later, I was right beside her.

“All right, get on,” I prompted as I crouched down next to Mia, hands positioned at my sides to hold her feet. She climbed on top of me, throwing her legs over my shoulders. I gave her a second to secure herself before standing up. Then I stepped towards a nearby tree, maneuvering myself until I was next to the trunk.

Mia grabbed onto the trunk and began slowly ascending the tree, pushing off of my hands—followed shortly afterward by my shoulders—with her feet to boost herself up. While her original physical abilities may have been poor, Mia moved from branch to branch almost effortlessly as she scaled the tree. Physical Up was really pulling its weight here.

Mia steadily made her way up the tree, and after grabbing onto a branch that was thick enough to support her weight, she paused for a moment and glanced down at me.

“Would you be enjoying the view more if I was wearing a skirt instead?” she asked, emphasizing her briefs.

“Just get to the top already.” I sighed. *Not even a little nervous, is she?* I pondered as I watched her return to climbing. *Not outwardly, anyway. Guess I can chalk that up to my “Mr. Popular” status. She probably doesn't want to show her emotions in front of me.*

Despite her indifferent expression, I was sure Mia was feigning at least a partial mask of calmness. Back at the girls' dormitory, the elite orc's roar had

caused her legs to give out from fear so I couldn't imagine she wasn't feeling scared.

Yet here she was, cracking jokes seemingly without a care in the world. I couldn't help but admire her courage.

“Sorry for the hold-up, Kazu-san. I’m here now,” said a voice from the left.

“Tamaki has arriiived!” another announced energetically from the right.

The two voices jogged me from my thoughts, and I switched my gaze from above to the sides of the forest. There, I spotted two figures emerging from opposing sides of the sea of trees—Arisu and Tamaki. They ran over to me, each with a wolf following closely behind.

Good, they've returned. Now everything was in place for the next phase of the plan.

“Hmm... Hey, Kazucchi, where should I cast my magic?” Mia’s voice rang out from above. She was standing on top of a pretty strong-looking branch, looking down on the horde of orcs from her heightened position.

“The center of them is probably the best spot,” I replied.

“Mm. Earth Pit.” She nodded before casting Earth Pit near the center of the army of orcs. The moment she was finished with her first spell, Mia quickly added a second. “Enjoy your two-for-one special. Earth Pit.”

A chunk of the earth began to recede into the ground in the middle of the orcs’ ranks, followed quickly by a second one. The orcs panicked, seeing the ground below them slowly shrinking into the ground, and they quickly pushed into the forest on their sides to avoid falling inside the widening pit.

“Plant Rampage.”

Only to find that the entire forest had become their enemy.

The orcs who pushed into the area of the forest to the left were blindsided as the forest suddenly burst to life. Tree branches, bushes, grass—all manner of flora in a wide area around the orcs, began to thrash around. The ends of branches warped and formed into sharp, knife-like points, gouging into the

faces of nearby unsuspecting orcs, and the falling autumn leaves danced through the air as they sliced and diced through their flesh.

“Encore! Plant Rampage.”

The rightward side of the forest found themselves suffering from a similar dilemma. Agonized screams echoed through the woods as the trees bent and thrashed, snapping at the orcs like carnivorous plants.

The cause of the forest’s indiscriminate slaughter of the invading creatures was, of course, none other than Mia’s magic. Plant Rampage, a spell belonging to Rank 3 Earth Magic, turned the peaceful and docile plant life in the nearby area into indiscriminate killing machines out for blood. The spell was tied to strict requirements, needing an area dense with vegetation to exhibit any noteworthy effect. Here in the forest, however, the spell’s power was practically unmatched.

Although the wide scope encompassed by Plant Rampage was one of its strong points, it wasn't without its problems either. The indiscriminate nature of the spell meant that not only would enemies be targeted but also allies. Unlike in games, there was no option to cancel friendly fire. Such a huge range consequently meant a high risk of accidentally dragging an ally into the mix. This was why I had ordered Arisu and Tamaki to withdraw from the forest.

Another problem with this spell was the fact that it wasn’t infallible.

Three orcs rushed out from the forest a little way in front of us, covered in blood but otherwise very much alive and seething with bloodlust. The moment they spotted the face of the person handing down the orders to the rest of our group—mine, that is—the three orcs charged towards us.

“Arisu, Tamaki!”

Heeding my cry, my two guards sprang into action. The *swish* of a spear and *fwoom* of a gigantic axe cutting through the air reached my ears. The lives of two of the three approaching orcs were reaped in an instant. The remaining one, unperturbed by the nigh-instant death of its companions, ignored the ones responsible and lunged for me.

Shink.

But the orc never reached its quarry. It collapsed to the ground in a heap, deader than dead. There was a spear jutting out of the orc's chest, having scored a clean blow through its heart.

"Level up for me," came the sound of Shiki-san's voice from somewhere within the shade of a nearby tree. *Oh, so that's who threw that?* I quickly pieced together the identity of my savior as she stepped out into the open, continuing, "It seemed pretty intent on getting you, so I stepped in. Just in case, you know?"

"Yeah, thanks," I nodded. "Things have been progressing pretty well so far, so I guess there's not much need to save an emergency use of the white room, huh?"

"True. I didn't think I would be out here raising my level. Honestly, I didn't plan on even interfering a little while ago..." She knew full well that one of my wolves would've jumped before me as a shield to block the blow had she not decided to step in at the last moment.

And yet, even knowing I would be completely fine, she still chose to go through with it anyway on the off chance something happened. She may be a bit of a worrywart, but she really does care for others, doesn't she?

"What? Something you wanna say?" Shiki-san huffed while sending an annoyed gaze in my direction. She appeared to have guessed something because of my expression around the comments I was making about her inside my head.

"Well-" I opened my mouth to object only to find myself interrupted almost immediately. The words ***You have leveled up!*** reverberated through my mind, followed by the blurring of my vision.

"Not that I mind, in any case. That *is* the kind of relationship we have, after all," she added before everything was completely engulfed in white.

It was a twisted but symbiotic relationship where we could disparage the other yet also split the burden between ourselves, one that would continue to last so long as she didn't break. Truly a daring strategy, but one I was willing to bet on.

Everyone stared at me with confused gazes inside the white room, and I simply shrugged my shoulders in response.

“So, Arisu, Tamaki,” I began, shifting to the main topic. “From here onward, you guys will be doing almost everything.”

“You can count on me, Kazu-san. I won’t let you down.”

“I-I’ll do my best.”

Arisu gave a firm nod, but Tamaki’s response was a little stiff. I gazed at her incredulously.

“You’re getting cold feet *now*? Don’t you think it’s a bit late for that? Nothing came out, right?”

“No, nothing did! And stop bringing that up! Have some delicacy, would you?!” Tamaki protested, lips curled into a pout. Her face was a deep crimson.

Seeing her angrily huffing at me caused me to break into a grin, prompting even more pouting from her.

“In case it’s not clear, Tamaki, I’m saying that I believe in you.”

“O-Oh, um, th-thanks! I’m not gonna let you down this time!”

Although initially surprised by my statement, she quickly recovered and clenched her fists, hyping herself up. Then she paused for a moment and eyed me with an imploring gaze.

“What?”

“U-Um, could you... y’know...”

“You know...?”

“P-pat my head...” Her normal, cheerful attitude was nowhere to be seen, and in its place was a withdrawn, almost scared voice.

I nodded at her request and placed my hand atop her head, ruffling her hair. Once I finished, she looked up at me, displaying an embarrassed yet blissful smile on her face.

“All ready to go now?” I asked.

“Mhm,” she nodded. “Watch me, Kazu-san. I’m going to win for sure!”

Smiling, I nodded back at her before returning to the main topic. We went over the strategy again, ensuring everyone was on the same page. Once we were ready to go, I walked over to my laptop and moused through my status, stopping on the button to rank up my Support Magic. One confirmation later, and my newly-improved skill was ready to go.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 8	SUPPORT MAGIC: 3→4
SUMMONING MAGIC: 3	SKILL POINTS: 4→0

With my Support Magic now at Rank 4, one of my long-awaited goals had been achieved. *Trial and tribulation, plus a little patience, means even faraway-looking goals can be achieved eventually.*

Following the earthquake, we had come into possession of special powers known as “Skills.” Orcs had been enemies to fear yesterday, and now we had grown powerful enough to match and even surpass them. Much like in RPGs, we grew stronger with every battle we overcame. *Unlike* in the games, however, our avatars were sorely lacking in a certain aspect: weapons and armor befitting our levels.

Fortunately for us, this missing piece could be covered by using a certain pair of spells, both of which belonged to Rank 4 Support Magic: Harden Weapon and Harden Armor. These two spells were said to strengthen the effects of both weapons and protective gear to a higher level corresponding with the rank of the caster.

For example, let’s suppose we wanted to enhance the iron spear that Arisu was currently using. Using Harden Weapon on the spear, the spell would strengthen the weapon into something like Iron Spear (+1).

On the other hand, the strengthening effect left me feeling... unmoved. Her spear had been improved, sure, but I didn't have a clue as to how far the

improvements had gone. I attempted to receive an answer through the computer but was met with vague responses at best such as, “the weapon’s sharpness has increased.”

The armor side of things didn't fare much better either. The clothes currently being worn by my party (except me, of course) were white gym T-shirts and briefs. Going by the defense rating system used in games, the defensive abilities of their clothing would be at most, a 1, if not an outright 0. *I've heard of paper-thin defense, but fabric-thin defense? Come on!*

Left with no other options and a bunch of questions, I navigated back to the search field and began to type.

How much defensive ability does a gym shirt provide if upgraded by Harden Armor?

Question not specific enough.

Hrm... okay, let's try phrasing it a bit better. How about this?

Arisu is wearing a gym shirt strengthened by Harden Armor and receives an attack to the chest from an orc with a rusty spear. How severe are her injuries?

The spear will be unable to pierce the gym clothing. Furthermore, the impact of the attack will be reduced by a portion. Depending on the circumstances, the force of the blow may be transmitted to the body entirely.

Won't that just cause bone fractures?! I screamed inside my head as my eyes read the computer's response.

After going through a couple more very specific questions, I came to the conclusion that the damage of attacks would apparently be absorbed through some sort of magical effect. “*What an incredibly game-like defensive feat,*” I remarked.

Despite my initial wish to prioritize attaining Rank 4 Summoning Magic over Rank 4 Support Magic owing to the unexpected follies of my teammates during the battle at the girls' dormitory, I was actually glad that I had ended up going for the latter. By casting Harden Armor onto my clothes, I could secure a safety net for myself, something I had been wanting for quite some time. And the icing

on the cake: the effects of the spell would never expire. A single cast was all that was needed to permanently wrap myself in armor.

We warped back to the forest from the white room, and as soon as I felt my feet back on the forest ground, I called Arisu and Tamaki over to me. Once they were close enough, I quickly began buffing their gear. Before long, the two of them were sporting improved weapons and “armor” (read: gym shirts). I would’ve also done the same to their briefs but casting the same spell multiple times over had consumed 16 MP, leaving me nearly completely drained of MP. While I could’ve cast Harden Armor on at least one of their briefs, I chose to forgo that to keep enough MP handy for a single use of Reflection, our final trump card.

“You’re going to have to make do without Haste this time. For now, focus on taking out as many of the small-fry orcs as you can,” I ordered.

The two of them were ten orcs away from reaching their next level up. Once they hit that mark, they both could rank their weapon skills to Rank 4.

With their upgraded skills combined with the offensive and defensive boost provided by their upgraded weapons and clothes, not even an elite orc will be able to match up... I hope. I shook my head to dispel the anxiety gripping me. *No, get a grip on yourself, Kaya. This is no time to be getting cold feet. You’ve shown them courage, even if some of it was faked, every step of the way, and you’ve also nagged them a thousand times over to not push themselves too hard no matter what. There’s no way they can fail.*

Arisu and Tamaki nodded in response, both wearing enthusiastic expressions.

“Go out there and win!”

I nudged the two on, one of my hands stroking Tamaki’s head and the other rubbing Arisu’s butt. She looked back up at me with an embarrassed look, and I grinned back down at her in response.

“Y-you better be ready for a lecture later!” Arisu stammered, a mix between embarrassed and angry.

“I knew it! You really are a pervert, aren’t you, Kazu-san?” Tamaki smirked.

Having said their fill, When they finished talking, the pair turned around and headed back towards their sections of the forest.

“Pervert,” came Mia’s scathing voice from beside me. Apparently, she’d climbed down the tree and returned to my side sometime during the conversation.

And with that, my role here is finished. All I can do is let fate decide the rest and leave everything else in their hands.

“Hey, Mia, the Plant Rampage’s effects are...?”

“Finished already,” she stated matter-of-factly. “Do you want me to support the two of them from behind?”

“No, don’t bother. Save enough MP for three uses of Heat Metal.”

“Mm.” She nodded before suddenly extending her hand towards me.

“What’s that for?” I asked, eyebrows raised.

“No good view of the battle from here. Help me get up.” She pointed back at the tree from which she’d just gotten down.

“Then why bother coming down in the first place?”

Gripping, I crouched again to help her back up into the tree. She stepped towards me and climbed onto my back, placing her buttocks onto my hands so I could push her up onto the trunk.

“Hey, while you’re at it, feel free to take this opportunity to give mine a feel too,” Mia said as she reached for the trunk.

“Ha-ha,” I laughed dryly in response. “Get on the tree, would you?”

“She may have me beat everywhere else, but I have just as much as she does down there.”

“Flab doesn’t count!”

Seriously, does she even remotely understand why I like Arisu’s butt? For one, although she’s filled out rather nicely down there, it doesn’t feel flabby in the slightest and is soft to the touch. And the voice she makes when I rub it... Just perfect... Huh?

My thoughts were brought to an unceremonious close as I felt Mia's body go rigid in my hands. I looked up to see her frozen, staring off in the direction of the horde of orcs. *Great, what now?* I thought as I looked over to where she was gazing.

Over there, the orcs were panicking a lot more than the rest. I could hear their pained cries all the way from here.

"Arisu and Tamaki... are in the middle of the horde," Mia managed to squeak out.

"Seriously? Dammit, those idiots... I told them not to go overboard," I cursed. I felt my face twist into a grimace as I momentarily fell into thought, still supporting Mia by the rear. "... Damn. Well, no time to waste. Get to climbing."

"They're really tearing into them. Whoa, Tamaki-senpai just did a super-cool spin with her axe. So cool," Mia narrated as she watched from above.

Quit it with the sports commentary and get up there already!

I quickly pushed Mia into the tree before moving to a nearby one and climbing up myself and looking back towards the horde once I was high enough.

Pandemonium. That was the only word that came to mind as I observed everything from my bird's eye view of the tree. The mass confusion gnawing at the orcs from before paled compared to what was happening now. Orcs were running around left and right like a bunch of chickens without their heads, more a disordered mob than organized army. Arisu and Tamaki were down in the middle of them, having snuck into the crowd from the sides, tearing apart any orcs that happened to get in their way.

The situation at the front lines was still the same as before. The orcs leading the charge were falling straight into the hole after being pushed by their allies from behind. The three spear-wielding girls were taking any chance to deal killing blows to the ones inside the pit. Meanwhile, at the very back of the force, any panicking orcs attempting to flee from the massacre were being sent flying by the several bronze-colored orcs at the back.

Realizing any attempts at escape were futile, the orcs once more began to push towards Arisu and Tamaki.

“Oh, I see. So that’s why they haven’t retreated despite the extensive damage they’ve received,” I mumbled as I watched from my branch. “The elite orcs are acting as barrier troops in order to prevent any deserters.”

“Barrier troops? What are those?” asked a girl in a neighboring tree, apparently having heard my monologue.

“So, you see, barrier troops are...”

I briefly recited the dark and depressing examples that I’d read in a book a long time ago about the Chinese Military and the Red Army. Essentially, the commanding officers in the back would point their rifles at their fellow soldiers and threaten them, forcing any would-be deserters to charge forward.

“Oh wow... I can’t help but feel a little bad for them,” she said, sending a pitying gaze in the orcs’ direction.

“Don’t be. Show them any signs of mercy, and we’ll be the ones going through the slaughterhouse,” I responded curtly. *Not that I don’t understand where you’re coming from, though,* I added inside my mind.

“Well... I suppose so.”

The girl nodded reluctantly, smiling wryly. Though she may have offered words of pity for the orcs only a few moments ago, she had been shooting fireball after fireball into the middle of their group without a single shred of guilt, burning several of them to a crisp in the process. On top of that, her actions also indirectly resulted in several more deaths by sparking chaos amongst the orcs, causing them to run into the forest only to be one-sidedly slaughtered by Arisu.

“Ah.”

A mumble from Mia reached my ears. *Already 10 down, I see.* The thought barely even finished crossing my mind before I felt myself being warped.

Chapter 33: Second Defensive Battle at the Cultivation Center – 4

The trigger for us being transferred to the white room wasn’t just because Tamaki and Mia, Arisu also leveled up. Not only had they all leveled up simultaneously, but all three of them were each going to be getting their hands on a Rank 4 skill: Spearmanship for Arisu, Swordsmanship for Tamaki and, lastly, Earth Magic for Mia.

Listed below is everyone’s current status.

ARISU	
LEVEL: 8	SPEARMANSHIP: 3→4
HEALING MAGIC: 3	SKILL POINTS: 4→0

TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 6	SWORDSMANSHIP: 3→4
STRENGTH: 1	SKILL POINTS: 5→1

MIA	
LEVEL: 6	EARTH MAGIC: 3→4
WIND MAGIC: 1	SKILL POINTS: 5→1

There also had been the option of raising Mia's Wind Magic instead of her Earth Magic. But we decided that the better of the two options would be to focus on the latter. Much like me, her MP reserves were nearly tapped out. Rather than upgrade something she couldn't use at the moment, the most optimal play would be to increase her proficiency in Earth Magic, thereby increasing the effectiveness of her Heat Metal spell. *We're going all or nothing!*

Had the circumstances been different, Wind Magic would've been a tempting pick considering the road ahead of us. There were quite a number of spells in its repertoire that would be very useful to have. Be that as it may, right now, we needed to focus everything we had on surviving the next few minutes, so it would have to wait for another time.

"You may have Rank 4 skills now, but don't let it go to your head. If things go south, you'll not have Haste to fall back on."

Before we finished our discussion, I made sure to drive home this point to Arisu and Tamaki.

"This may be an even tougher fight than before. Are either of you injured?"

"No, nothing worth mentioning." Arisu shook her head.

"All good over here, too!" Tamaki grinned. "Everything's A-Ok, thanks to your Harden Armor spell!"

I pressed for details, and Tamaki went on to explain that any attacks they'd taken practically bounced right off their clothes. Before, they would've gotten at least a scrape or bruise, but now they were apparently taking no damage at all. They both also sang praises about their weapons, even going so far as to say that the ease with which they pierced or cleaved through the orcs felt like they were using new weapons entirely. I could sense hints of excitement in their voices as they went on and on.

"New weapons, huh? I wonder if that might just be the case," I muttered to no one in particular.

My mind flashed back to the systems seen in games. Though I'd provisionally named their upgraded gear in a fashion like 'Iron Spear +1,' perhaps the change was more on a fundamental level, such as a club transforming into an iron

sword. *Alternatively, there may be a class system for items, like changing from Pelt Armor into Holy Armor.*

Well, I guess there's only one way to find out. To the surprise of no one, I turned to the computer for answers.

One quick Q&A session later, this is what I discovered.

The enhancement effect provided by the spell, regardless of the version, would increase with every rank up of my Support Magic. Weapons and armor already buffed by the spell, like Arisu and Tamaki's, would not increase automatically, it seemed. And the spell would have to be reapplied each time for the updated effect.

In any case, experimenting any further will have to wait for later. Right now, we've got bigger fish to fry.

Denoting our next plan of attack was of the utmost importance right now.

"Listen up. We're not going against just one elite orc now, but *three*. Don't even think for a second about taking on more than one of them at a time. Stick with the plan and split them up," I addressed them in a serious tone.

"Don't be such a worrywart, Kazu-san," Tamaki said, as carefree as ever. "We'll be fine!"

I stared daggers back at her, prompting her to flinch and shrink back after giving a quiet "Eep!".

Not even a few hours ago, you peed yourself before even seeing the thing, and now you're trying to act all confident? I sighed inwardly. *I think she needs another reminder.*

"Normally, I'm not the type of guy to bring up old wounds. However, considering your life is on the line, would you like me to remind you of what happened last time?"

"W-wait, no, hold on a second!" Catching onto what I was referring to, Tamaki's expression flustered almost immediately. She waved her hands around in a panic. "I hear you loud and clear! I'll follow your orders down to the T, I swear!"

All of the movement her hands were doing caused her pigtails to bounce around like yo-yos.

Seriously, what am I going to do with her...



“As for you...” I switched my gaze from Tamaki to Arisu. “I’m not worried about you going rogue, but don’t try to do the impossible, okay?”

“Got it!” She nodded with a tense expression. *Ahhh, she’s just so honest and cute. What a good girl.*

“And lastly,” I said, turning to face the most petite of the group. “If everything goes according to plan, the most you’ll have to worry about is casting Heat Metal. That being said, if you think either of them is in a tight spot, don’t hold back. Shoot every spell you can and adapt according to the situation.”

“Mm!” Mia gave as enthusiastic a nod as her frame could muster.

All right. That takes care of that, I thought to myself as I took one final glance over everyone before giving one final burst of encouragement.

“Okay, it’s go time. Wreck those guys and get another level up, y’hear?”

With nothing else left to be done, we warped out of the white room and back towards the forest. The decisive battle was waiting for us.

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Around the same moment as our return to the forest, there was also a change that took place amongst the orcs. Morale finally reached a breaking point and collapsed completely. The remaining orcs ignored the orders of their commanding elite orcs and instead chose to scatter and desert the battlefield. They fled in every direction; some charged forward in desperation and ended up as orc-kebabs as they were run through by spears. Others pushed into the forest to the sides, and the few that chose to run back towards the elite orcs were turned into minced meat by them. The sight of so many orcs desperately trying to flee with their lives, coupled with the gore of the ones who didn’t make it felt like I was viewing some sort of scene in Hell.

Despite the complete pandemonium unfolding all around them, Arisu and Tamaki were calmly continuing to hunt the prey right in front of them.

Good, everything’s moving as planned. They’ll take care of all the mobs standing in their way first, and then they’ll use the path they cleared to take on

the bosses.

The boost in the two's weapon skills had improved the way they handled their weapons even more than before. Their actions were sharper, more polished.

Even if they have to take on an elite orc now, they'll be fine...

The thought barely had time to register before a bone-chilling roar echoed through the forest from the direction of the enemy camp. The elite orcs had each sounded their way cry, resulting in one massive thunderous roar.

Fortunately, it doesn't look like anyone's faltering this time around. Going around and casting Clear Mind on everyone except Arisu before the battle began might've come at the cost of some MP. But considering the result, I'd say it was MP well spent.

In case you were wondering, I hadn't cast a spell on Arisu because she and I had concluded that we were at a high enough level that the elite orc's roar wouldn't have much, if any, effect on us. So, when their bellowing war cries reached me and the only emotion that surfaced was annoyance rather than fear, I realized our assumption had been correct.

Arisu appeared to have not been affected by the roar either. She was mercilessly spearing the orcs that had stopped dead in their tracks due to the powerful roar, single-mindedly focusing on butchering as many orcs as she could.

Seeing her butcher so many at once, I can't help but feel like I'm witnessing a soulless killing machine at work rather than a cute girl. I've raised a fine murder hobo, haven't I?

However, not everyone present was intent on sitting back and admiring Arisu's display. The horde of orcs had grown a lot less dense than before, owing to all of them scattering in every direction. A path leading from Arisu to the group of elite orcs had been made. One of them broke off from the rest and charged towards Arisu.

"One incoming! Look out, Arisu!" I shouted down at her from the tree branch. Before my warning could even reach her, she quickly spun around and raced

into the forest. *Very impressive*, I remarked. *She's making sure to keep an eye on her surroundings.*

Seeing its quarry vanish into the forest, the elite orc charged into the woods after Arisu. Tamaki, too, was targeted by another of the elite orcs, and it chased behind her as she guided it into the forest.

Everything was going exactly as planned. Due to the large number of orcs the pair had brought down, they'd stood out from everyone else as a high-priority threat. Had I been one of the elite orcs, my first instinct would've been to take out both. Therefore, the two of them could be used to draw out the elite orcs and lead them away from the rest of their forces... which had worked wonders. The plan was a resounding success.

"I'll be counting on you, Mia, Shiki-san."

"Mm," Mia nodded.

"Just leave it to us," Shiki-san replied.

Mia then hopped down from the tree and linked up with Shiki-san before the two of them ran off towards the forest.

Our plan was thus: Shiki-san would track down Arisu and Tamaki's location in the forest, and Mia would force the elite orcs to each drop their weapons by casting Heat Metal.

Now then, with the other two out of the way, that just leaves the one left to its own devices...

The path forward was blocked by all of the orcs running around in a panic, meaning the only path for the last elite orc was either to the left or right side of the forest.

So, who's it going to go after, Arisu or Tamaki? Depending on who it chooses, I will have to adjust my counterstrategy accordingly...

I watched the remaining elite orc intently as it made its choice... to rush straight forward. It charged into the cluster of panicking orcs and it forcefully closed the distance between us and it, using its gigantic axe to cleave through any orcs standing in its path.

Huh? I froze for a second. Are you kidding me?! It's killing its allies just to push forward!

I felt my blood run cold as its figure loomed ever closer. Something as high-handed as this had been outside my expectations.

Damn it. I should've foreseen something like this. They were already imitating barrier troops earlier, so of course, there was a chance it could resort to this, too. These guys don't think of their brethren as anything more than disposable tools. Shiki-san and I should've taken that into consideration when devising the plan. Neither one of us even thought to consider the extreme. We were too naive.

"Get out of the way!" I shouted out a warning to the three girls holding at the pitfall. Once they had escaped from the front lines, the elite orc's next target would be those of us up in the trees, meaning I was putting myself in mortal danger by having them escape. But despite the danger, I couldn't help but scream at them to flee anyway.

Ah, it's impossible... Only after my voice left my lips did I realize that my warning had come too late. There was no way they could escape now.

However, the girls didn't even try to run away; the three of them stood firm, readying their spears as they observed the elite orc draw closer and closer.

The girls are still only Rank 2 in Spearmanship. It took Arisu everything she had and more to barely hold out against an elite orc, and she was Rank 3 back then! There may be three of them, but what good are numbers going to do now...

"No, we won't run away. We're going to protect you!" One of the girls cried out. She was the one who had brought me the onigiri earlier. "We will keep you safe, Kazu-san! So please, while we're fighting, take the chance to escape!"

What? They want to... protect me? The girl's statement left me at a complete loss for words. I couldn't understand why the girls were insistent on protecting me despite the immense danger they were putting themselves in. The only feasible way we could even attempt to bring down a foe of this caliber was if Arisu, Tamaki, or Mia were here. I wasn't going to be of any help. Furthermore, even the role of commander wasn't unique to me; Shiki-san could hand down orders and keep everyone united.

“You saved us from the orcs yesterday, Kazu-san. So this time, let us be the ones to save you!”

“Ah...”

Everything seemed to click into place at once.

These girls viewed me in the same light as one would see a hero. For them, I was their savior, and they trusted and worshiped me as one. The near-brainwashing Arisu and Shiki-san had done to them prevented them from seeing me as anything else. As a result, they were overestimating my worth.

You idiots. I'm not some great person who will protect you from every wile and woe. I'm... a nobody. Just some high schooler that was an outcast from everyone else.

Nevertheless, I couldn't remain in the tree. There was no path of escape available up here other than the ground. Leaping down from the branch I was standing on I fell straight down towards the ground below. My landing was rather rough, and the force of the impact caused me to tumble into the dirt. But I quickly got to my feet and looked off towards where the girls were standing their ground a couple of feet away.

The elite orc had pushed all the way up to the other side of the pit and seemed to be hunched over slightly, its knees bent back. It was going to jump the gap.

I watched as the bronze-colored orc leapt high into the air and brandished the gigantic axe, preparing to swing. Then it swung the axe downward. The axe carved a path through the air towards the girl who had said she would protect me earlier, the blade on a direct collision course with the crown of her head.

I still had enough MP waiting in reserve to use our ace-in-the-hole, Reflection, and I desperately wished I could use it here, consequences be damned... but I couldn't. Reflection could only be used on another member of my party. I could only watch helplessly as the elite orc's attack drew closer and closer.

In the face of death, the girl didn't falter even a step and stabbed at the elite orc with her spear. The tip pierced into the orc's abdomen. But it showed not

even the slightest reaction and brought down its gigantic axe on top of her, using the force of its leap to put even more weight behind the attack.

The axe's blade connected with the girl's head and... split straight through her, slashing a path down her body until it was in two. Blood spurted out from each half like a fountain, and the two halves of the former girl fell apart in separate directions. Her hands, the same ones that had carefully molded the onigiri for me only a few hours ago, powerlessly reached towards the sky above, only stopping once as they—along with the rest of her—dropped onto the dirt.

Blood sprayed from her body and doused the elite orc's face, covering its savage expression in a layer of red.

I watched on in stunned silence as everything unfolded, not even a couple of meters away from me. My body went stiff as I processed the tragedy before my eyes, and I could feel my head growing numb.

Seeing my stunned figure and satisfied with having killed something, the elite orc's face twisted into a ferocious smirk.

Chapter 34: Second Defensive Battle at the Cultivation Center – 5

Right before my own two eyes, the life of a girl was reaped from her. A girl who had, on my orders, been on the front lines. Her death was entirely my fault.

On a subconscious level, I had been treating everything like some sort of video game. *So long as we drive the orcs into a panic and cause them to stop up the line, the elite orcs can't come forward.* My mind had been fixed on this naive conviction. I had forgotten just how brutal and relentless they could be.

And because of my naivety... one of our allies perished. Not only had my actions directly resulted in the death of one of us, but the elite orc was also still roaming free with nothing to hold it back. Arisu and Tamaki were both somewhere in the forest, fighting against the other elite orcs. Even Mia was absent at the moment, having separated from us to go and support them.

After bisecting the girl, the elite orc landed in a crouched stance a little way ahead of me and rose to its feet after a couple of seconds. Its gaze flicked towards the other two girls beside it.

“How dare you!!”

The other two girls flew into a frenzy at their friend's death and stabbed the orc. Their actions were in vain, though. Their thrusts were too weak to pierce the elite orc's thick outer skin and didn't even cause so much as a scratch. *Have all of the pig-men Arisu and Tamaki have gone up against so far really been this strong?* I wondered as the elite orc's toughness was so distinctly put on display in front of me.

As I observed the situation time felt like it had slowed to a crawl.

The girls' thoughtless attacks had placed them in mortal peril. The opponent would counterattack the moment theirs finished, and both of their heads would go flying at once. This would mark an end to their lives.

But by using the small, small interval of time they earned, I would be able to escape. So long as I ignored what was happening before me and turned around right now, I could survive. My two familiars, the gray wolves, were close by. The two of them could act as my shields, earning a little bit more time. Meanwhile, Arisu and Tamaki would have finished killing theirs by then and should return. Then, they would kill this elite orc, and everything would be over. By then, the rest of the girls hiding in the trees would have probably been annihilated... but we would've survived. Me, Arisu, Tamaki, and Mia, we'd all be alive. Even Shiki-san would be okay. When taking that into account, this was the ideal outcome. The risks and rewards of this move were the best of any other.

Thus, I handed down the order to my two familiars.

“Go! Protect them!”

Following my command, the pair of wolves raced towards the girls and leapt on them, pinning the two of them to the ground.

“Huh...? B-but why...?”

The two of them looked back towards me, dumbfounded. Above them, the elite orc's gigantic axe slashed through the air where their bodies were not a second prior. Had my wolves not pushed them now, both would be dead right now, bisected through their torsos.

Confirming their safety, I breathed a sigh of relief, and as I did, I couldn't help but wonder, *Why? Why didn't I escape when I could've? Why did I save the two of them?* But the answer was clear as day to me already.

I raised my head to glare at the elite orc. My eyes stared straight into the two deep red, inhuman orbs looking back at me.

It was because I had grown attached to them. The grief I felt when the girl died in front of me, and the pain encroaching on my heart for having failed to protect her—it all stemmed from the fact that I felt responsible for their lives.

Only now was the meaning behind the warning Shiki-san had issued to me beginning to sink in. ‘Don't feel responsible for the deaths of our allies. I will bear the burden of it all, so do not think of us as more than tools to be used. Otherwise, you may break from the weight.’

For trying to bear the weight of everything, Shiki-san, I thank you. But also, eat shit.

“Hey, bastard, over here!” I taunted as I recovered from the shock. The glare I was giving never wavered as I continued. “What’s wrong, pig-man? Come at me!”

Although I wasn’t sure if the elite orc could understand the meaning behind my shouting, it at least seemed to have taken it as a challenge. It roared angrily before stepping in my direction.

From the branches of nearby trees, fireballs, knives, and all sorts of objects rained down on the bronze-colored figure as it approached me. The girls were providing cover fire, but none was doing any damage. The elite orc didn’t even so much as shrug as fireballs slammed into its abdomen, and the knives flying at its shoulders bounced harmlessly off its thick skin.

“Yeah, c’mon! Over here, you stupid pig!”

Taunting one last time, I turned my back to the elite orc and broke into a run. Fortunately, my body was still under the effects of Physical Up which I’d cast on myself earlier, so my speed was a bit faster than normal.

I need to buy as much time as I can.

Around the same time I had that thought, my gaze turned towards the Cultivation Center, and I noticed movement at the entranceway. One of the doors opened, and a girl stepped out from inside. She was one of the ones we’d rescued from the Girls’ Dormitory a few hours ago.

Upon noticing my approach, followed by the elite orc hot on my heels, the girl’s body froze completely with an expression full of terror.

Crap. She will get dragged into this if I keep running this way. I stopped dead in my tracks for a split second and felt a chill run down my spine. Whipping my head around to look behind me, the bone-chilling and imminent scene of the elite orc throwing the gigantic axe right at me entered my vision.

“Reflection!”

Not even a second after my instantaneous shout, the gigantic axe struck an invisible wall in front of my face and bounced off. The axe headed back towards the sender and struck the elite orc right in the face. Its left eye was crushed, and blue blood spurted like a fountain from the wound.

Did I... do it?

The elite orc roared in rage and pulled the weapon embedded in its face out before making a powerful swing in my direction. Had I been closer, I got the impression that the wind pressure alone would've been more than enough to send me flying.

No, of course, that wasn't enough to be fatal. This bastard's way too strong. It's like I'm trying to fight against a mountain. Other than Arisu and Tamaki, how the hell is anyone supposed to go up against someone like this?

Despite the huge blow I'd dealt, the elite orc disregarded me entirely. Instead, it swung its axe around like a madman at its surroundings.

Huh? Why isn't it... wait a second. Can it not see out of its other eye?

Looking closer, I noticed that the elite orc's right eye was shut tight. Perhaps some of the blood that spurted from its wound went inside.

But how am I supposed to attack it? With it swinging its axe around so wildly, there's no way I will be able to get close.

One of the orc's attacks landed dangerously close to where I was standing, and I unconsciously took a step back to avoid it. The grass let out a soft *crunch* beneath the weight of my foot, and the elite orc turned in my direction.

Crap. I broke out into a cold sweat. It definitely knows where I am now.

The elite orc brandished its axe and prepared to swing, and right as it was about to send me to the next life, a chain soared through the air from the woods beside me, wrapping around the elite orc's feet. For a moment, I was convinced the chain came from the tree itself, but on closer inspection, I could spot Shiki-san's face poking out from the shade of the tree.

"Well, isn't that nice? Looks like this is considered part of the Throwing skill, too," she said as she pulled hard on the end of the chain. Her attack made the

elite orc lose its balance and topple face-first to the forest floor.

I sat there for a second in stunned silence, not moving an inch as my mind struggled to process what was happening in front of me.

“Hey, earth to Kazu-kun! Get a grip!”

Shiki-san’s scolding dragged me out of my stupor and my mind suddenly returned to working order. I ordered the two wolves to attack the elite orc. My familiars both simultaneously rushed the elite orc.

“Go for the hand holding the axe!” I commanded them. “Steal it away if you can!”

The elite orc struggled violently underneath the two wolves as they attacked it. One of them bit down on its hand, tearing off some of its digits, and the other grabbed onto the handle of the gargantuan axe and dragged it over to me.

Right now, I should still be under the effects of Mighty Arm. I had needed it so I could excavate the ground earlier, and not even an hour had elapsed since then. Which means... Consumed by thought, I momentarily looked down at the axe lying on the ground in front of me... and made up my mind. Reaching down, I picked up the weapon.

“Hold on a sec, Kazu-kun!” Shiki-san protested. “Let me do it, I can-...”

“Just stay put, Shiki-san.”

Ergh, heavy. I grunted from the weight as I lifted the gigantic axe. *But not heavy enough to stop me from swinging it down at something.*

“This is something that I have to do. Let me do this,” I insisted.

“Kazu-kun...”

I could tell from the tone of her voice that she probably knew something had happened near the front lines. Whether she saw it or simply guessed from the situation, it didn’t matter to me. Sensing the crisis I was in, she’d separated from Mia and had come to help me. She had come to clean up the mess I couldn’t, one created through my mistake.

I'm grateful for your thoughtfulness, Shiki-san. But this is something that I have to do.

This revenge was not something that could be done by anyone but me. If someone else had to come to clean up my mess, I wouldn't be able to forgive myself for it.

No, even if I do it, I will not be able to forgive myself... but I'm still going to do this.

One step at a time, I approached the elite orc's fallen figure as it thrashed around on the forest floor. Once I was close enough to where I felt I could hit it, I raised the axe overhead and swung it down. There was no weight behind the blow, and anyone could tell at a glance that it was a weak slash. But the weapon's weight added to my swing's momentum, resulting in a powerful downward slash aimed right at the orc.

Thankfully, I happened to get lucky with my mark. The slash scored a perfect, direct hit on the elite orc's nape, separating its head from its body. The orc's bronze-colored head soared through the air like a ball before falling to the ground and tumbling on the grass.

"It's... dead..." I muttered in a daze, collapsing to my knees. I felt my strength draining away as the adrenaline faded.

Shouts filled the air around me, and I looked up to see the girls up in the trees looking at my collapsed figure, cheering and applauding me.

Shiki-san walked over to me and crouched down, whispering in a low voice, "Good job."

Chapter 35: Aftermath of a Hard-fought Battle

The defeat of their commander drove the orcs into even greater turmoil, and they fled from the area as quickly as their legs could carry them. Hot on their tails with a lust for vengeance for their fallen friend were the sub-party of girls, and any of the orcs they managed to catch up to were one-sidedly slaughtered by them. This was a good chance for them to level up, so I let them go wild so long as they didn't try and chase them too far away from the area.

Arisu and Tamaki are probably faring well against their elite orcs. They've got Mia there to support them, so they should be fine.

No sooner had I finished thinking than two familiar faces popped out from the forest. Tamaki and Mia were there.

"We're all finished over here, Kazu-san," Tamaki called out as she approached. "We're going to go help Ari... su..."

The two of them froze in their tracks when they saw my face.

Oh, I must be making a really terrible expression right now, huh? That's not good. I can't let them see me like this. I'll be a failure of a commander.

Shiki-san answered in my stead. "Save the conversation for later, you two. For now, you guys should head over to help Arisu."

"Y-yeah, good idea. Let's go, Mia."

Sending one last concerned glance towards me, the two of them turned around and ran off in Arisu's direction.

That's good. Seems like they didn't notice the state of things around the pitfall I thought as I watched their two figures disappear into the forest. It'd be best if they didn't see that right now. The pain and grieving should come after the battle is over.

"And as for you. Take a break, Kazu-kun," Shiki-san ordered.

"There's no way I can do that now." I protested.

“Don’t make me say it again.” She glared at me, clearly stating she wasn’t taking no for an answer.

Dammit all... I really am worthless, aren't I?

I heaved a sigh, my shoulders dropping to my sides. Suddenly, a loud noise reverberated through my head. I had leveled up.

Oh, I see. Looks like Arisu and the others were successful.

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Inside the white room, everyone was peering at my expression with worried looks.

“Did something happen, Kazu-san?” Arisu asked me in a gentle voice, and I informed them of what had happened after they’d left. The three girls swallowed their saliva and stared at me.

“I see...” Tamaki said, breaking the silence. “So Akane-chan...”

“Akane... was that her name?” I asked.

“Mm. Akane Shimoyamada. She sat next to Arisu and me in the Cooking Club and often made boxed lunches. She was always enthusiastic about making them, smiling and saying it was for her boyfriend...”

“I see.”

I nodded quietly once she finished her explanation. The realization suddenly struck me that I hadn’t even known her name until now.

I couldn’t help but wonder what fond memories she relived as she made the onigiri earlier. She was no doubt worried about what had happened to her boyfriend. Even with the circumstances as grim as they were, I’m sure she still held onto the faintest of hopes that we would find and rescue her boyfriend.

But what’s the point of that if you’re just going to die acting as a shield for me. Now you’re never going to see him, don’t you realize that?

I collapsed to the colorless floor below. All of the strength had drained out of my body. For a moment, I simply sat there cross-legged, my head hung.

Eventually, I gave a long sigh.

Dammit... What the hell am I doing? I'm just sitting here, showing the three of them how much of a depressed mess I am. I'm supposed to be encouraging them, telling them everything's all right. I need to be tough. I promised Shiki-san that I would be...

Then I remembered.

... That reminds me; she warned me about this earlier. Even if one of us died, all the burdens would lie with her, so I shouldn't feel any responsibility towards them. But how can I not? There's no way I wouldn't feel responsible if one of them were to die... the reason she died in the first place is because of me.

I felt my teeth bite down hard on my lips, drawing a small amount of blood. The taste of iron filled my mouth.

Maybe if I hurt myself more... maybe the pain will go away a little? I could feel myself being dragged deeper into my loathing. What am I doing...? What the hell am I doing...?

Suddenly, I felt wrapped up in someone's embrace. No, not just someone—all three of them were embracing me. Two people were holding onto me from either side, and one was directly in front of me. I could feel the warmth of their skin on mine. The smell of perspiration tickled my nose, and the sounds of their breaths were loud and clear. If I listened closely enough, I could even hear the palpitations of their hearts through their chests.

When I lifted my head, I was greeted by Arisu's face right in front of mine. Tamaki and Mia's were on each of my sides.

"You're not alone, Kazu-san." Arisu spoke softly.

"That's right," Tamaki added. "You comforted me when I was feeling down, so now it's our turn to make you feel better."

"Mm," Nodded Mia.

As they looked at me, each of their expressions was as serious as could be. Yet no matter who I looked at, not one of them wore anything but a smile as they wrapped me up in their arms.

“To share both the sour and the sweet with one another—that is what it means to be a friend.”

“Mia...”

“I read that in a manga once.”

I was almost touched. Almost. Why’d you have to go and ruin it?

“You don’t have to play the macho man act all the time, Kazucchi. Guys can show their weak sides sometimes, too.”

“Hey, that’s not...”

Her comment caused me to glare at her petite figure. But she simply returned another nod with an overly sincere expression... and then leaned forward and gently kissed my forehead.

“T-there.”

“Err... and that was?”

“A-a kiss to make a certain man down in the dumps feel better.”

Her cheeks were a bright red as she spoke, but not once did her gaze ever waver as she stared at me. Even though she appeared to be fighting the embarrassment back, she never stopped looking straight at me. Her genuine concern for my well-being seemed to be overpowering it.

I shot a glance at Arisu, and the moment I did, she used both of her hands to cup my cheeks, locking me in place. After making sure I couldn’t escape, she moved closer. She overlapped my lips with hers, kissing me for just a moment before pulling away, grinning mischievously.

“Now you, Tamaki-chan,” Arisu prodded.

“B-but Arisu,” Tamaki protested.

“Right now, everyone’s consoling Kazu-san because he’s sad.”

Tamaki faced me. She nervously fiddled with her hair, and after looking down shyly at the floor for a moment, she raised her head to look straight up at me, apparently having worked up the courage.

“I-I’m going to comfort you now.”

“O-okay.”

Tamaki approached... and planted her lips on my cheek.

“Boo. You took the easy route.” Mia jeered from the side, grinning.

“S-so what? His lips are off-limits except for Arisu!” Tamaki shot back as red as a tomato. Her fidgeting appearance as she attempted to hide her embarrassment was really cute, and I couldn’t help but break into a smile.

“Ah.” Mia poked me. “You smiled.”

“Yeah, I did. Thanks to you guys.”

“Mm.”

I felt the strain in my body begin to dissipate, and in its place came an overwhelming feeling of fatigue. I let myself relax and basked in the warmth of their bodies.

Placing both of my hands on the tops of Tamaki and Mia’s heads, I began to stroke their heads. Both squinted their eyes happily as my hands rustled through their hair.

“You too, Arisu. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she smiled. “... But, um, you see...”

“Hm?”

After wavering for a moment, Arisu turned to face me directly and began to speak, “The highest form of happiness to me... is your survival, Kazu-san.”

“Ah... Yeah, don’t worry. I’ll make sure to keep myself safe.”

“Please don’t die.”

“I also would prefer to stay alive, you know?”

Is she worried because I was feeling so down earlier? No, this feels a bit different from that.

I stared deep into Arisu’s obsidian black pupils. Her pupils bounced around, and she seemed to look everywhere but at me as if something was bothering her deep down.

“Please remember this, Kazu-san,” she implored. “There’s nothing more I need to be happy than for you to be alive.”

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 9	SUPPORT MAGIC: 4
SUMMONING MAGIC: 3	SKILL POINTS: 2

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We returned back to the real world. I chose to let everyone else deal with the remnants of the orc army. Instead, I shifted my attention towards the girl who had come out of the Cultivation Center. She was the girl whose hair was wrapped up in a ponytail.

Come to think of it, I’m pretty sure she’s the girl that called out to me back at the Girls’ Dormitory, isn’t she? I thought to myself as she walked up to me.

“I apologize for earlier. I got in the way during your battle.”

The girl bowed her head. She didn’t appear to be scared anymore, but I couldn’t sense any strong emotions coming from her otherwise. On the other hand, she didn’t appear to have resigned herself to death either.

Lifting her head, the girl continued, “But I am glad I got to witness you guys slaying the orcs. We went through hell because of them, so seeing you return the favor made me happy.”

Compared to the dark contents of her statements, she sounded completely indifferent to what she was saying. She clenched her fists, her hands shaking.

“Thanks to you, I was able to see something good.”

“I-I see.”

“But it’s not enough. I want to see more of them perish,” the girl said in a monotonous, almost robotic, voice. From within her dull gaze that seemed to

bore straight through me, the dark pupils inside exuded even deeper darkness. “Please help me level up as well.”

Well, isn’t that just perfect? She’s already ready to kill. Best of all, so many orcs are running amok right now that restraining a few shouldn’t prove too difficult.

“Are there any others besides you that can move right now?” I asked.

The girl nodded and looked over her shoulder back at the Cultivation Center, beckoning her hand. From the other side of the door, several more girls stepped out from their hiding spots. Including the ponytail girl, they numbered four in total.

“Okay, so go ahead and grab the bamboo spears sitting by the door... you know what those are, right? In any case, grab one and follow me. Feel free to grab an iron spear if you can lift one. If not, don’t worry about it; either one will work.” I began to instruct the girls. “Hmm, it’d be better if Arisu was here. Then she could...”

I didn’t even have time to finish my sentence before I was warped to the white room. Tamaki and Mia had leveled up.

“Hell yeah! Perfect timing!”

Seeing me in such high spirits compared to a few moments before confused the girls, and they exchanged glances.

“Err, sorry,” I coughed. “Anyway, listen up, you guys. There’s something I need your help with.”

I went on to explain how the girls we’d rescued from the Girls’ Dormitory were wanting to level up and requested Arisu, Tamaki, and Mia to help them with that. Seeing as we were already here, I also had Mia upgrade her Wind Magic to Rank 2.

“Increasing our range of tactics feels kind of refreshing,” Mia commented as she hit the confirm button on her screen. I shared her sentiment.

TAMAKI	

LEVEL: 7	SWORDSMANSHIP: 4
STRENGTH: 1	SKILL POINTS: 3

MIA	
LEVEL: 7	EARTH MAGIC: 3
WIND MAGIC: 1→2	SKILL POINTS: 3

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Leveling up the newcomers turned out to be a lot easier than I expected. Their hatred for the orcs was practically overflowing from them. Not a single ounce of hesitation could be seen in their movements as they pierced into the orcs with the bamboo spears.

By the time the others had finished cleaning up the rest of the orcs, they’d all reached Level 1.

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The long battle had come to an end. Every single one of the orcs scattered and fled for their lives, and not a single one of them could be found in the area around the Cultivation Center. Having been thrashed thoroughly, I was certain the remnants would round up another army and swarm on us.

Even if they did come back, I was at least positive that it wouldn’t be today. Or so I was choosing to believe. When I asked Shiki-san, she said she didn’t think they would report back to their allies.

“Rather than go back to their commanders and inform them of the overwhelming defeat they suffered, whereupon they would most certainly be

killed by them, I believe they'll instead choose to pretend that nothing happened and run far. They'll run far away to somewhere they'll never be found by their higher-ups."

Having witnessed firsthand the atrocious tactics the elite orcs employed, like the barrier troops, I couldn't help but feel the same. While the methods they used to control their troops were nothing like the ones seen in the army, considering how disposable they treated their fellow soldiers, I'd like to think her judgment was correct.

Whether the remnants returned to give a report or not, there was no way any of us would be able to fight any more for the day. We were all exhausted, myself in particular. The multiple ensuing battles had sapped every last bit of my strength, and it took all I had to stop myself from falling over on the spot.

Before I could let myself rest, though, there was something that I had to finish.

"I'm going to make a grave for Akane Shimoyamada-san."

Everyone offered to help pitch in, but I refused them.

"If anyone else happens to die from now on, I might ask for help then. This time, though, let me do this. Alone."

Shiki-san stared intently at me for a while, seemingly wanting to say something. She eventually muttered, "All right. Do whatever helps you find peace of mind," and said nothing else before walking away.

Moving to the back of the Cultivation Center, I began digging a hole in silence, with no one else around. Arisu, Tamaki, and Mia picked up the bits and pieces of the corpse and put them into a bucket, bringing it over once they'd collected everything.

"Shiki-san told us to come help."

"I see."

I had a feeling I knew what she was trying to achieve. She was trying to change the sadness I was feeling into a strength for all of us, the elite party.

She really is the worst. I cursed her inwardly as I shoveled aside the dirt and rock. *But she's a damn good schemer; I'll give her that much.*

Anger and admiration. Two conflicting emotions towards the tactfulness and cleverness she displayed whirled around inside my head, causing me to groan aloud.

My hand holding the shovel was suddenly overlapped by three others.

"Hey. We told you already, didn't we, Kazu-san? You are not alone. We're here for you," Arisu reassured me, and the others nodded. Feeling the tears beginning to spill, I nodded back.

Chapter 36: The Middle School's Main Building

Noon. The sun hung high overhead over the Cultivation Center.

Currently, all of us were resting up after the long, hard-fought battle. Considering the situation, you may think that taking an afternoon nap was a little careless of us. But everyone was exhausted both mentally and physically. Before collapsing inside the lobby, the two first-year students barely made it through the door.

When they got back inside, the two surviving girls from the frontline apparently made a break for the toilets with a change of gym clothes and underwear. Everyone pretended they hadn't seen them as they walked out in fresh clothes.

What kind girls they are.

If you're wondering which person was gleefully reciting this information to me, the answer was Mia. Her level-up must've heightened her spirits or something, as she seemed a lot livelier than everyone else. Not even she could escape from fatigue though, as I watched her stagger every once in a while as she walked about. Being run around everywhere to cast supporting magic seemed to have taken its toll on her.

"They stunk," Mia said. "Like really, really bad."

You're a demon, telling on your fellow girls like that.

I thought it was extremely impressive that they hadn't lost their nerve after seeing an elite orc come right at them and slice one of their friends in half. I guess we had Clear Mind to thank for that. If that was the reason for their willingness to keep fighting, then spending our limited MP was well worth it.

And speaking of friends... one of us had died. But everyone acted a lot more calmly than I had expected. I was sure there would be one or two of us mourning the girl's loss, but from what I could see, the only one of us affected by her death was just myself.

Thinking about it, I supposed it was only natural. The girls we'd rescued from the Girls' Dormitory had witnessed many of their friends being killed and forced to undergo horrific acts. Even if they were lucky enough to have missed it, they'd gone through their own share of awful experiences yesterday.

Have they cried so much that they used up a lifetime's worth of tears? Or have they just grown numb to the deaths of those around them?

No matter the reason, their emotions gradually becoming more and more numb was a blessing in disguise if you asked me. Everyone toughening up to the point where the death of a person would not greatly affect them was a good thing.

Nowhere was safe right now. Death surrounded us at every corner. No matter where we ran, it would always be right behind us. Those that couldn't learn to live with it would sooner or later be crushed by it.

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Not even I had any energy left following the battle. I should have been focusing on more important matters than the rest right now, such as scouting the forest for enemies or posting guards to stand alert. But my mind was way too fried to even fret about that sort of stuff.

"We'll keep watching for a little while. You guys should get some rest, okay?" offered the ponytailed girl, whose name I had recently learned was Sakura Nagatsuki.

"Aren't you guys tired as well?"

"While we were getting bent over by the orcs, we managed to get a little rest after passing out."

I couldn't tell if she was being serious or just making a poorly humored joke, but her expression remained unchanged throughout. Either way, if they were offering, I was more than willing to take them up on their goodwill.

Or so I'd like to, but I think they probably will need it most, I thought to myself as I gazed down from the second-floor balcony at the sub-party of girls below. Having far exceeded their limits, they were lying on the lobby floor, already fast

asleep. Part of me couldn't help but admonish how carefree they were acting, but I imagined it couldn't be helped. For most of them, this was their first time on a battlefield.

The person responsible for overworking them to such an extent... is none other than me. Furthermore, the extensive labor I forced on them did not come without a cost.

Akane Shimoyamada. Her death fell squarely on my shoulders—and I was willing to accept that. More deaths would probably happen in the future, and I would have to come to terms with those.

But the burden would not lie with me alone. Arisu, Tamaki, Mia—even Shiki-san would be there to share the burden alongside me.

To move forward, I was going to have to change to harden my heart and become strong, learn how to share the responsibility with everyone, and learn how to live with everyone. Only by doing these three things would I be able to do right by Akane Shimoyamada's death.

From now on, I was going to do what I could. Fortunately, today's battle rewarded me with enough skill points to rank up Support Magic, granting me two new powerful spells: Harden Weapon and Harden Armor. By using these spells, I could strengthen everyone's weapons and gear. I wanted to strengthen everyone's gym shirts and briefs if possible, and maybe even some hats and the like if given a chance.

I bounced the idea off Shiki-san and was met with immediate disapproval. She then dragged me up to one of the furnished rooms on the third floor and locked the door behind her. After ensuring it was only the two of us, Shiki-san prompted me to sit down on the bed while she took a seat cross-legged on a chair, her chin turned upward in a haughty manner.

"So, you're going to enchant every last piece of gear everyone wears. Is that what you mean to tell me? Did you even stop to think about how long that would take?" She sighed before continuing. "There are currently eight of us meant for fighting on the frontlines, among which are Arisu-chan, Tamaki-chan, and the four girls we just helped reach Level 1. On top of their gym wear, Arisu-chan and Tamaki-chan will need enchanted hats and maybe even gloves. The

other girls only need their gym clothes done, nothing more. Don't even think about enchanting any of the rearguards' gear, the only exceptions being yourself and Mia-chan."

"But that's not-..."

Shaking her head, Shiki-san stopped me before I could finish my protest.

"Listen, Kazu-kun. We—all of us—are not equal. Some of us can die, and others absolutely must not. Your party is part of that group, you especially. You are everyone's hope. You are irreplaceable."

"... So, you're saying that Shimoyamada-san is?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying," Shiki-san finished in a composed tone before smiling coldly. She seemed to be attempting to make herself out as the villain.

Her acting needed work, however. Her fists were clenched tightly and trembling, and the gaze she eyed me with was not the cold, unfeeling gaze befitting a proper Demon Queen but the sad and lonely gaze of a girl. *She's not good enough to even be a B-movie villain, much less the final boss.*

"You and I, as much as it pains me to admit, are special. Unlike Shimoyamada-san, there is far more to lose by one of us dying. If either one of us dies, the rest of the group will collapse. Therefore, as the leaders of this group, it's our job to use our surroundings as shields. Grovel and beg for your life, lick the dirt if you have to; do whatever it takes to survive."

She would always tell me the most horrific things. Frightening things. Things so downright abysmal and desperate that my heart couldn't help but quiver in fear as I listened. But now, even though I wished otherwise, I understood her reasoning for telling me these things. This was her form of sincerity towards me.

Shiki-san was telling me that I wasn't alone. That she, too, was prepared to be burdened with the deaths of her friends, even if she wasn't willing to say it outright.

She really is terrible at this, I remarked. Everything that pains her, she just shoves it deep down and hides the pain behind a mask. In that regard, she's far

more capable than me.

“Arisu-chan is important to you, isn’t she, Kazu-kun? Important enough that she could never be replaced by anyone? Then you must throw away any resource you can to ensure her survival, even if those resources happen to be some of us.”

“And you’re fine with that?”

“I am.” Shiki-san smiled. “I’ve already made my decision. I’m not going to run away anymore. No matter how many hardships I may face, I will always struggle against them. If I end up hated by the end of it, then so be it.”

“Even if I’m opposed?”

“Then I just need to convince you otherwise.”

“And if I start to doubt you and raise my guard? Will you still convince me then?”

“Hmm, that may prove difficult. If I judge talking with you directly is going nowhere, then I’ll just have to crack you through Arisu-chan. If that doesn’t work, then I’ll break down in tears in front of Tamaki-chan and beg her to help. Mai-chan’s a sharp girl, so I’m sure she’ll understand as long as I explain it.”

This girl I... is dangerous. My instincts warned me. *Not that I didn’t already know that, though.*

Regardless, Shiki-san was bad news. The only way I could see myself ever getting away from her was probably by killing her personally... not that that would be possible. So long as Arisu was around, I would never resort to such violent tactics, and she was well aware of that. In fact, she was even speaking her mind so openly like this *because* she knew there was a safeguard protecting her at all times.

“Well, that’s how it is,” Shiki-san finished and got up from the chair, looking down at me arrogantly. “So don’t die, Kazu-kun. And don’t break either. You have Arisu-chan and me to turn to if things get rough. Whatever you think is necessary, no matter how selfish it may be, please tell me. Anything is fine.”

Whatever I think is necessary, huh? I smiled wryly. *If I told her I wanted a woman, she'd probably offer her own body right then and there. She might even throw in a snarky comment, like, "Did you really think I wasn't prepared to do this much?" Even if I said I wanted someone else, I'm sure she'd persuade them into offering themselves to me.*

She really should just... eat shit.

I suddenly came to a realization. *I've finally found the perfect way to describe her.*

"You really are as every bit manly as a guy."

Shiki-san's expression soured upon hearing my comment, as though I'd given her a bitter pill to swallow.

All right! I pumped my fist excitedly. *I got her back.*





Right now, I am at Level 9. For every ten minutes that passes, my MP would recover by nine. Recovering up to full would take a total of one hour and forty minutes.

While waiting for my MP to recover, I decided to do reconnaissance with some ravens. Jumping onto the bed, I got myself into a comfortable spot. Shikisan watched me from the chair, sitting with her arms folded.

One raven's gonna be 1 MP, and Remote Viewing should be 3 MP, for a total of 4 MP... Running through a few calculations in my head and making sure to include the margin for error, I summoned the raven and cast Remote Viewing on it before sending it out into the skies.

First up was the middle school's main building.

At least, at the moment, the middle school's main building was being used as a base of operations for the orcs, of that much I was certain. I'd verified it firsthand through my raven's birds-eye view when I was scouting out their forces earlier. The fact that their army had marched from the direction of the building only further pointed towards this conclusion. The subjugation force they'd sent out was rather large in number, so I hoped their numbers at the base decreased proportionally. However...

No luck, huh?

Just before the main building was a large number of orcs, about thirty strong. They were all gathered around a bonfire set up in the center of them, cheering and making all kinds of noise. The sight looked like something straight out of a festival... so long as you ignored the *fuel* they were using. Rather than use kindling and firewood, the orcs had chosen something else entirely—bodies.

Biting my lip, I gazed down at the spectacle as the raven soared through the sky above. Not even a shred of my feelings reached the bird as it nonchalantly circled above the school grounds once before it moved on to scout the next point of interest: the three-story building's interior.

The first floor was in tatters. Not one of the glass windows on the first floor was intact, every last one of them having been smashed. Judging from the lack of broken glass on the ground below, whatever destroyed them had done so from the outside. If I had to guess, the orcs probably smashed them to break inside.

Although the initial earthquake had occurred after classes were finished for the day, there appeared to have been quite a number of students still inside the building. I spotted several corpses of teachers whose heads had been split wide open by axes, and not too far away from them were the stark-nude figures of the girls, nearly buried under the orcs. Every single one wore listless, exhausted expressions and barely even moved as much as a muscle.

Next, the raven toured the second and third floors. Many small-fry orcs were wandering about on both floors, and every so often, I'd catch sight of a bronze-colored orc among the mix. Nearing the end of the bird's exploration, it'd come across around seven or eight in total.

From the looks of things, there are probably about ten or so. There are way too many of them. Feeling my mood drop into the negatives, I grimaced as the raven continued its search.

Finally, the raven approached its final destination and the most inward of all the rooms, the music room. The huge, bulky door leading inside had been thrown wide open, and the bird poked its head inside.

Sitting atop the piano in an imposing manner, gleaming silver sword in hand, was an especially large-built, black-skinned orc. Wrapped up in a golden mantle, it gazed down upon its subordinates, serving them with a listless expression.

A general orc...

That was the only moniker that came to mind as I gazed upon the orc's burly figure. Though it seemed a bit grandiose, it probably wasn't too much of an undeserving title. The orc gave off the implicit impression of a general who had fought through many battles and reigned victoriously.

Off to the side of the general orc was some kind of creature resembling an animal sporting a dark, thick coat of fur. *What... is that?* I wondered as I stared

at the unknown figure. *It's hiding in the shadow of the piano. I can't see it very well.*

Compared to the gray wolves summoned as my familiars, the creature was huge in size. Two red eyes peered from its head, and seemed to almost glow as they looked around the room.

All of a sudden, those glowing red eyes glanced in the direction of the raven... no, not glanced. They *locked* onto the raven. Realizing this, my body shivered. I felt as if its gaze had gone straight through the raven's beady eyes all the way back to mine.

Not a second later, the creature raised its head to look at the general orc. The general orc's right hand moved to its waist, reaching for something. Its hand wound back in a throwing motion, and then a sharp object flew right towards the raven. I reflexively shut my eyes tight, waiting for the impact.

I felt the connection severed between me and my familiar. The raven had been killed.

Chapter 37: Scouting Mission from the Skies Above

Sighing, I sat up and hung my legs off the bed, turning to face Shiki-san. She had been watching over me as I was using Remote Viewing to scout, and she continued to eye me as I began to briefly explain what I'd seen.

"... I see." Shiki-san offered a plain response, but her face was twisted in anxiety.

Is she worried about there being another kind of orc out there that outclasses even an elite orc? I wondered. Or maybe what's getting to her is the fact that there's some other type of monster out there besides orcs.

She remained silent for a moment before asking, "How strong do you think it is?"

"Which one?"

"The general."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Dunno. But from the sense of intimidation I felt... probably a hell of a lot more than an elite."

"Do you think you could win if your entire party faced it?"

"With our current abilities, it'd be difficult even if we fought it four-on-one."

Rather than give her an optimistic response, I held nothing back as I responded to her questions.

Supposing that an elite orc is Level 5 and has a Rank 4 Pigman skill... then the general orc has at minimum a Rank 6 Pigman skill, possibly even Rank 7. Assuming that min-maxing one of their skills takes the same number of points as ours do, then it's gotta be at least Level 14. And considering how overpowered I felt in its presence, that estimate probably isn't too far off...

No, hold on a minute. Who's to say that it actually spent all of its points on one skill? Could it be hiding some kind of secret weapon? The possibility can't be ruled out... I frowned as my conjectures reached a dead end. *In any case, it's*

clear to me that Arisu and Tamaki's chances at victory are extremely slim unless we do something to rank up their weapon skills from Rank 4.

I explained this train of thought to Shiki-san.

"Mind if I speak my mind for a sec, Kazu-kun?" she asked.

"Go for it."

"Naming the skill something as crude as 'Pigman'... kind of irks me."

"You think so too, huh?" I replied, and she shrugged her shoulders in response.

"Getting back on topic," Shiki-san began. "We don't have a chance at victory with Arisu-chan and Tamaki-chan's weapon skills at Rank 4. Therefore, to increase our chances from a total washout to a proper matchup, they must reach Rank 5 at minimum. Is that correct?"

"Yeah, that's the long and the short of it. We'd really be pushing our luck without getting to Rank 5 beforehand, and while I *can* buff them to some extent, it can only close the gap so much." I explained.

That's not even mentioning the followers, either. If we add them to the equation, then not even Rank 5 feels like much of an improvement to our chances at victory. Pushing for Rank 6 is probably the best option of the two, but they only just attained Rank 4 in the last battle, and that was a long time coming already.

"So Arisu-chan's six levels away, and Tamaki-chan needs another four."

"Yeah. But... attacking the main building might have to wait for another day," I said sheepishly. The depressing contents of our conversation left me feeling demotivated.

Shiki-san, meanwhile, seemed more annoyed than worried. She groaned in frustration, arms folded under her chest.

"I'd really rather we try to tackle this now rather than later."

"What's with the rush?"

"If we wait until tomorrow, I don't believe those captured girls will make it."

“So that’s why...” I nodded.

I could see why she was concerned for them. Those girls had been held captive by the orcs for nearly an entire day now and, considering that they probably were being used like toys for the entire time, it was nothing short of a miracle that they were still breathing.

“Also, there’s another thing I’m concerned about.”

“What is it?”

“Counting both the survivors and the corpses we stumbled across inside the girls’ dormitory, the number of girls collectively adds up to around eighty. Rather low, don’t you think? Furthermore, the main building has a similar problem.

“According to what I heard from you, there are around a hundred and fifty people there, the bonfire side of things included. We can assume the boys’ dormitory is probably similar in numbers to the girls’. But even if you add up everyone else who is off in other places, like clubs and other activities... doesn’t the total feel too small for how many students there were?”

Uhh, let’s see, so 80 and 80 for both of the dormitories, and then another 150 for the main building... a little bit more than 300 people in total, isn’t it? But wait, didn’t the middle school section have around 700...?

“Huh, you’re right,” I mused. “So then during the earthquake more than half of the student body was... at their clubs?”

“Unlikely. Our school clubs weren’t *that* popular, and there wasn’t a huge spot for people to gather,” Shiki-san replied.

We exchanged a glance.

“Hold that thought. I’m going to go and ask our juniors downstairs. Maybe they know something about this?” Shiki-san suggested.

Of the ten girls we’d rescued from the Girls’ Dormitory, four of them were currently taking turns standing guard outside the entrance of the Cultivation Center. Having reached Level 1 already, they had offered to keep watch while the rest of us got some rest.

Declaring that she was going to find the juniors, Shiki-san hurriedly got off the chair and began to walk at a brisk pace... only to stumble on her first step. I quickly stood up and rushed over to support her by the shoulder so she could regain her balance. The soft scent of soap tickled my nose.

Wow, she smells nice. That reminds me, they just came from the bath, didn't they? I should probably take one myself after this. I'm sure I totally reek right now.

In that brief instant, I was lost in thought. Shiki-san pushed my arm away in a frightened manner. Her breaths came in as rapid gasps and she shook her head vigorously as though trying to shake off some kind of thought.

"S-Sorry, Kazu-kun," she squeaked out. "I just..."

Is she still frightened by a man's touch? Maybe she's still recovering.

"... Hold on a sec. Did you not let Arisu cast Clear Mind on you?"

Confirming my suspicions, Shiki-san shook her head with a grief-stricken expression. "No, I didn't. I... couldn't. I do not wish to forget this pain. This pain is necessary for me to continue fighting. My hatred for the orcs, as well as the regret I feel for those who died right in front of me... Right now, those emotions are the only thing keeping me going."

She's going through a lot right now, isn't she? I mused as I watched her slowly regain her composure. Of course, I wouldn't belittle her for how she handled her hardships. If that's the way she wanted to keep fighting against the world, then who would I be to stop her.

Nevertheless, I couldn't stop the surprise that I felt from seeing her stubbornness and plain honesty put on display so openly from showing on my face. Shiki-san seemed to have noticed this as well, and she smiled bitterly.

"I'm fine with it, you know? I'm not valuable enough for you to need to concern yourself over me. The me of the past, the me that abandoned you when you needed someone most, is undoubtedly still a part of me even now."

"You're just tired. Get some rest."

She gave a lonely, dejected smile. "Yeah. Maybe you're right."



Declaring that she was heading downstairs to ask the underclassmen, Shikisan exited the room and headed downstairs. Now alone in the room, I laid back on the bed and conjured another raven. After casting Remote Viewing on it, I ordered my familiar to take to the skies.

Sharing my familiar's vision, I watched as "my" body hopped up to the windowsill and leapt into the air from the third-story window. The raven soared high into the sky, riding on the flow of the wind, and began to glide through the air in the direction of the main school building.

Even after reaching the main school building, the raven made no attempt to land and instead flew high overhead, continuing into the distance. This time, I aimed to explore the other, separate locations that hadn't been searched yet rather than go back to the main school building.

First on the list was the faculty building. While I held no high hopes for their survival, a small part of me still prayed that some of the staff had survived the initial onslaught of orcs, even if only a couple of them. Now, though, I was beginning to realize that this fleeting hope of mine had been hopeless from the very beginning.

What was I even thinking? The faculty building is within the vicinity of the main school building. So even if there were surviving staff members, there's no way they'd just barricade themselves inside and try to wait it out with so many orcs teeming in the surroundings.

Anyone who survived would have long since fled from the area to somewhere with far fewer orcs to decrease their chances of being spotted by them. Having reached this conclusion, I was preparing myself for the worst as the faculty building came into view. Instead of seeing my fears realized, what entered my vision stunned me.

The faculty building was no more, or more accurately, no longer building-shaped. What had once been the building where the staff lived was now a mountain of broken rubble, having collapsed at some point yesterday.

This must've happened during the earthquake; I mused as I looked down at the rubble. My mind flashed back to yesterday when Arisu told me about the school's plans to renovate the faculty building. Of all the middle school buildings, the faculty building was by far the oldest, or so I heard from her.

If the collapse had taken place during the earthquake, any teachers and administrators inside would've been killed instantly. With most of the staff dead, the middle school section would have been forced to try and fight against the orcs with few, if any, adults on their side.

Although, even if all the adults did make it and stayed with the students, it's doubtful whether the outcome would've changed...

That being said, the situation may have been a bit better. Perhaps with the help of the adults, a small portion of the students would have managed to escape.

Unfortunately, things hadn't ended up like that. With most of the faculty perishing in the initial earthquake, the students were forced to try and overcome the orc threat through their own efforts. Consequently, nearly all students failed to escape and were either captured or killed.

According to Tamaki, Mia was one of the few fortunate enough to have escaped by themselves. After running away from the main building with another student, she happened to cross paths with Tamaki, who then saved the pair.

Would the same fortune that blessed Mia also be shared with the rest of the students? I wondered. Although the chances of that happening weren't zero outright, I couldn't see the situation playing out in favor of the majority.

Forget it for now. I need to get back to scouting.

Following the orders given to it beforehand, the raven moved on from the faculty building and flew towards the next target: the boys' dormitory.

To be completely honest, I was hoping that we could find some boys. Many anime and manga depicted situations where there was a single guy alone in an entirely female environment. They made it seem like some sort of ideal

situation, having the guy scream out in joy as though a harem paradise awaited them.

Reality, on the other hand, begged to differ. This was neither ideal *nor* did it make me want to scream out in joy. Between trying to be considerate towards them and having them reciprocate, making sure everyone was comfortable, etc., there were too many things to worry about.

Another problem with that kind of situation was the issue of manual labor. Regardless of how much strength I could grant a person by buffing them with Support Magic, digging still required tremendous physical exertion. Not one of the girls could match even a fifth of my speed when it came to digging.

Okay, so maybe a part of that is due to how experienced I am at digging holes, but I digress. The point is, having some guys around will improve our current situation, if only slightly... I really hope it will, anyway.

For those reasons, I was placing my bets on finding some surviving guys when my familiar reached the dormitory... which was why I despaired as the building came into view.

The boys' dormitory had been burnt to the ground. I couldn't tell if the fire was started by the orcs or a panicking student during the ensuing chaos, but regardless, the building was no more. What's more, piled up in front of the burned wreckage was a mountain of the corpses of students. Every single one of them was male, and judging by the pile size, there must've been around two hundred of them.

Following that, the raven flew around and visited every one of the buildings belonging to the middle school section. It did not come across a single building that hadn't been destroyed or occupied by the orcs, meaning the Cultivation Center was the only building currently not in the hands of the orcs.

So that's how it is then... My mind felt completely numb as I processed everything I'd seen. *This is a hopeless situation.*

No one was going to come and help us. The only ones left were just we few here in the Cultivation Center. Whatever came our way after this, our limited strength was the only thing that could fight against it.

Having completed all the tasks given to it, the raven returned to my side. Remote Viewing still had a lot of time left before its effects would expire, so after giving a few orders to my familiar, I sent it back outside.

Once more, the raven soared up into the blue afternoon sky.

Chapter 38: The High School Section

The raven soared above the forest as it flew eastward, heading towards its destination—the high school.

Up until now, I had completely disregarded the high school section because both paths connecting the two schools were currently unusable. One had been rendered untraversable by a landslide, and the other was frequented by orcs, making it dangerous to travel on.

With no path connecting the two sections, it had been clear that no help would come from the high school section. Therefore, searching the middle school section for survivors would be significantly more worthwhile.

That is, until now.

Now that I had finished scouting out all but the extremities of the middle school section, understanding the state of affairs in the high school section had become necessary.

Frankly, I didn't care much for anyone at the high school. There was not a good memory associated with the place in my mind, and as far as I was concerned, everyone there could just eat shit and die to the orcs. If you'd asked me yesterday what I thought about them, that's the answer I would've given you. Even now, I still agree with that sentiment, albeit only half as much.

Nevertheless, as much as I utterly despised them, dealing with the orc threat was a more pressing concern. As such, I was going to need more people—more allies. Had there been more of us when we fought against the orcs in the forest, maybe Akane Shimoyamada wouldn't have needed to die.

When she died, I was forced to reconsider my thoughts over leaving the high school section people to die. Sure, they may have ridiculed me, mocked me, and looked down on me like I was a bug. And yeah, maybe they did punch me, kick me, hit me, step on me, and give me all sorts of humiliating orders while laughing at me. They pushed me to my physical and mental limits... but despite

all the harsh bullying they put me through, they never went so far as to take my life.

But the orcs? They wouldn't hesitate to split my skull wide open the moment they got the chance.

Therefore, if Shiki-san came to the conclusion that we could work together, I would even have to think about joining forces with the people from the high school section. Not willingly, of course; not even a micron of my being didn't feel outright disgust at the thought of joining forces with *them*. Furthermore, they would be free to spill every embarrassing thing about me to everyone.

If one of them tells the others here about how pathetic I was up until yesterday, then everyone's going to abandon me. I couldn't stop myself from getting cold sweats once my mind conjured up this possibility.

No, they won't leave me. Even if they do spread all of that stuff about me, Arisu and Shiki-san will still be on my side. Tamaki and Mia too. They'll probably ignore it and still continue to advocate for me anyway. As for the others... I wasn't sure how they would react, but something inside me was telling me that they'd be on my side too. Having fought tooth and nail against an overwhelming adversary, barely wringing out a win after a long battle, we'd forged a strong sense of comradery amongst ourselves. Though maybe that was simply me one-sidedly and selfishly wanting to believe as much.

While I was lost in thought, the raven had flown over the forest and was now near enough to where I could get a good look at all of the high school section buildings. The high school building was the first of them to catch my eye.

Standing at four-stories tall, the high school was a sight to behold. Having been renovated around five years ago, both the interior and exterior of the building were captivating. Not a single thing had gone unpolished during the building's remodeling—not even the toilets, which had been switched out for ones with bidet functions.

However, the building was barely a shell of its former self. Every one of the windows was smashed, and I caught glimpses of orc-shaped figures moving about within.

“Damn... They didn't make it either, huh?” A curse slipped out from under my breath as I observed the high school from above.

The raven continued to circle around in the sky as it moved from building to building, following my orders. Nothing of interest entered my vision for a while, and right when I was beginning to believe the worst, something caught my eye.

There were survivors. Fighting against the orcs in front of the high school section's second boys' dormitory building was a group of living, breathing people. I could spot the figures of both girls and boys among the mix of humans and orcs.

There are survivors... People other than us have grouped up. And seeing as they're using swords and magic to fight the orcs, they must be at least Level 1! My eyes scanned the group of survivors in disbelief before my gaze stopped on one of them in particular. It was a tall, thin guy with a hunched figure. Similar to a cat's, their eyes were slanted and narrow, and their aquiline nose stuck out like a sore thumb. He was standing near the back of the group, grinning with the same smirk he always had on his face. I knew who he was when I laid my eyes on him. There was no way I could ever mistake him for someone else.

This person was none other than Shiba Saso, my classmate and the perpetrator responsible for putting me through so much hell.

Shiba was ordering around the group from the very back, looking rather proud of himself as he did so. Propped up against his shoulder was a hunting rifle. I had no idea where he'd gotten his hands on one, but sure enough, he was holding a real, genuine gun.

We didn't have that somewhere in the school, did we? I didn't remember seeing one, so someone must've snuck it in then? I was puzzled over the origins of this mysterious weapon. *Well, regardless of how he obtained it, the fact remains that he's holding an actual rifle.*

One of the orcs assailing the group snuck up on a girl. After knocking the sword out of her hands, the orc jumped at the girl and pinned her to the ground. She let out a shriek as she squirmed underneath, attempting to free herself.

Shiba noticed the girl's predicament and, grinning maliciously, pointed the end of the barrel towards the orc's head. His finger squeezed down on the trigger, and the orc's head was blown away instantly. Its now-headless body flopped down on top of the girl.

My entire body went rigid as I watched the scene from above. My throat felt parched, and I could barely feel my tightly-clenched fists over the beating of my heart. *What... the hell is going on? This must be some sort of joke, right Shiba? This isn't how... you can't be...*

Before long, the raven had flown far enough that I could no longer see the group of people from its vision, coincidentally marking an end to its scouting mission. Making a U-turn, my familiar entered a return course and began to head back towards me.

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"Hey, Kazu-kun?"

Shiki-san's concerned voice rang in my ears. I canceled Remote Viewing and lifted my head to look in the direction of her voice, only to discover that she was already right next to me.

"Woah?!" I cried out in surprise. I hadn't sensed her approach, so suddenly finding her so close to me nearly made me leap out of my skin. "O-Oh, hey, Shiki-san. Sorry about that; I wasn't expecting you to be so close."

"Don't worry about it... are you okay, though?" Shiki-san asked while giving me a concerned look. "You're drenched in sweat."

"Y-Yeah, I'm just, uh... hot."

"Hot enough to bleed?"

She pointed at my right hand, and I followed her gaze. Upon opening my fist and examining my palm, I noticed the skin had broken from how hard I was clenching my fist. A small amount of blood was dribbling down my palm.

Seeing the surprise on my expression, Shiki-san asked incredulously, "You just noticed? You were shaking really bad a minute ago, too."

“Oh. Was I...?”

I was... shaking, huh...? My head felt so numb that I could barely think straight. Oh, that's right... My body was trembling for a moment there...

As irrational as it sounded, just seeing him from afar like that had paralyzed my mind with fear. Much like childhood trauma, this had been carved deep into my heart. My scars from the past were still eating at me. I couldn't even look at his face for a second before my heart began to race and my breathing became ragged.

“Kazu-kun? Did something happen?”

Deciding that it would be better to tell her than not, I began to tell Shiki-san about everything I had seen a few moments ago. Explaining everything took a while, and I had to pause at moments to catch my breath while feeling like my throat was closing up. When all was said and done, however, I managed to finish telling her without leaving a single detail out.

Shiki-san remained silent throughout and listened intently to my recount. Only after I was finished with my explanation did she speak again.

“I'm going to sit next to you, okay?” Shiki-san took off her shoes and climbed onto the semi-double bed, sitting next to me. She was close enough that her skin was almost touching mine. Being so close to a man must have still frightened her a little, as her shoulders were trembling slightly.

“Why'd you get so close?”

“Much like how I feel frightened by being near a guy, you've developed a fear of Sasou-kun,” Shiki-san began, ignoring my question entirely. “However, I believe this sort of fear can be overcome if you work at it. Painful though it may be, you need to fight against it to rid yourself of your fear... and don't think about using magic to make things easier on yourself, either. You're going to have to overcome this through your own efforts.”

Though her speech was directed at me, a part of it must've been reflecting back at her. Shiki-san wasn't looking at me as she spoke and instead was staring straight ahead at the wall, smiling almost cynically. Once she finished, she leaned sideways onto me in a playful manner. Her shoulder was touching mine,

and I could feel her warmth transmitted to me through her shirt, as well as the occasional tremor.

Is she cold? I questioned for a moment before realizing that she was shivering due to another reason: fear. *She's not cold... she's scared. Even though it's hurting her to be so close to me, she's doing her best to comfort me.*

“... Thank you. I know this must be painful for you,” I said after a small pause.

Shiki-san smiled wryly. “You noticed, huh? Sorry.”

“Is there something you want to say?”

“Yes.” she nodded. “You are not alone, Kazu-kun. You mustn’t forget that, okay?”

“Yeah, I won’t.”

“Make sure to rely on Arisu-chan, Tamaki-chan, and Mia-chan if you happen to cross paths with Sasou-kun out there. If he’s willing to talk things out, let me deal with him... and if push comes to shove, no matter what you have to do, even if it’s embarrassing, don't hesitate. Never forget that we’re here for you, Kazu-kun. Believe in us and believe in yourself. Face him head-on... this is something you cannot run from.”

Oh, that reminds me... I haven't told her about that yet. While listening to Shiki-san comfort me, I suddenly remembered something I hadn't yet told her about. Something important. *Or I guess 'forgot to tell her' is the truth of it. I told Arisu about it yesterday, so maybe I was trying to avoid it more than anything.*

“Hey, Shiki-san. What I’m about to tell you is something I did in the past... a crime I committed. Would you hear me out?”

“Sure. Go ahead,” Shiki-san prompted.

“Yesterday, due to certain circumstances, I could defeat an orc by myself and reach Level 1. Do you know the reason why?”

“Hm... come to think of it, no, I don’t. I was never told how you managed to defeat an orc.”

“Do you know why I’m so good at digging either?”

“No clue. Why is that?” Shiki-san gave me a perplexed look.

So even she can make a face like that, huh? I couldn't help but break into a grin as I looked at her puzzled expression.

“C'mon, tell me already. What did you do?” Shiki-san urged me, frowning.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to grin. I wasn't trying to make fun of you or anything,” I apologized.

“Nevermind that, get back to the point. Why are you so good at digging?”

“Yesterday, right before the earthquake struck, I attempted to murder a person. I lured Shiba Sasou out into the forest. I was going to trick him into falling into a pitfall, douse him with gasoline, and stab him to death with a bamboo spear.”

“Oh, so that's why?”

“You don't sound very surprised.”

“Well, it makes sense,” she reasoned. “It feels like I've found the missing puzzle piece, I guess. It also explains why Arisu-chan was dodging my questions earlier. Considering he's still alive now, I'm guessing your plan to kill him failed?”

“The earthquake happened right before he fell into the pitfall. Once it ended, he gave up and headed back towards the high school.”

“So after that, an orc came along... and dropped in instead?”

“Yeah, basically.”

Upon hearing my answer, Shiki-san exaggeratedly shrugged her shoulders.

“How lucky.”

“You're telling me.”

“No, not you. *Us*.” Shiki-san shook her head. “Thanks to you deciding you would kill Shiba Sasou, a series of events were set into motion, eventually leading to now, where we're all still alive and well here in the Cultivation Center. Had you done things differently, there's a good chance I wouldn't be alive right now, having been killed after being reduced to the orcs' plaything.”

"Oh. N-No problem... I guess?" I nodded with a stiff expression. "I don't really think that's how it works though..."

"In any case—thank you, Kazu-kun." Shiki-san turned to face me, beaming a smile. "Thank you for making preparations to murder Sasou-kun."

"You do realize that's a crime, right?"

"Perhaps in our old world. Here, though, there are no laws. Whether or not something is a crime is something we have to dictate ourselves. I will always be on your side, no matter how far you go. I am choosing to endorse your actions... and so what you did was no crime. In fact, I believe you did the *right* thing."

"What a twisted sense of logic."

"Maybe so. But morals change from place to place and era to era. They most certainly are not something absolute." Shiki-san stated. "Therefore, make sure to have some confidence in yourself. You're the leader everyone's looking up to to guide them, you know?"

I hesitated for a moment before eventually nodding.

"So, I should become the arbitrator then, is that what you're saying?"

"Exactly," Shiki-san nodded. "If you so desire it, you can even make every single girl here in the Cultivation Center yours."

"No way. Arisu would never let me hear the end of it."

"That's true. Arisu-chan is your arbitrator." Shiki-san giggled and then switched back to a serious expression. "One more thing, Kazu-kun. You need to prepare yourself."

"Prepare myself? For what?"

"To kill someone. Sasou-kun may not be the only person whose life you have to end. There may come a day when someone else needs to be killed."

I'll have to kill... someone else? My lips twisted into a grimace as I digested her warning. Shiki-san, on the other hand, simply shook her head slowly.

"Naturally, the responsibility won't fall onto you. When the time comes, I'll be the one to give you the order. 'You must kill them, Kazu-kun. Kill your former

classmate—just like that.”

“Then you're...”

Shiki-san placed her hand atop her chest, her lips twisting into a devilish smile. I couldn't help but get the chills when I looked at her bewitching expression.

“I will be your villain. All of your sins... all of *everyone's* sins... I'll bear the weight of them all.”

Her grand declaration, coupled with her captivating smile, caused me to gulp nervously.

Chapter 39: Shiki-san's Confession

Time seemed to fly right by as I occupied myself with enchanting all of the clothing and weapons deemed “necessary,” and before I knew it, it was 2pm. My MP was sitting at a flat zero right now, and I would need to wait one hundred minutes before it would be fully restored.

Around the time I finished enchanting all of the gear provided to me, Shiki-san returned to the room on the third floor where I was. Once again, I found myself sitting on the bed while she sat on the only room chair facing my direction.

“Get ready to move out. We’re going on the attack once your MP finishes replenishing.” Upon returning, the first thing she did was boldly declare so. “Though the only one who is really going to be doing any fighting will be the four of you.”

“So we can focus all of the experience points onto our party, right?” I asked, to which she nodded.

The strategy that Shiki-san had devised was rather simplistic, all things considered. First, we were going to have Mia cast a certain spell on our party. Then, the four of us would storm the middle school.

“The orcs aren’t gathered in one spot but scattered throughout the building in the many classrooms. So long as you stay within the radius of Silent Field, you can slip into the rooms through the windows and crush them without alerting the rest,” she explained.

Silent Field—a Rank 2 Wind Magic spell. Upon leveling up near the end of the previous battle, Mia had increased the rank of her Wind Magic and obtained some new spells, one of which was Silent Field.

Akin to a magical barrier of sorts, Silent Field prevented the transmission of sound inside a certain area and could be affixed to persons or objects. If the affixed person moved, the spell would move with them. The spell’s radius was a roughly ten-foot sphere centered around the targeted object or individual.

Presently, with Mia's Rank 2 Wind Magic, the spell would last around two to three minutes.

So long as the entire party stayed inside the field, one could even render the sounds of their approaching footsteps null while moving from one place to another. Fighting inside the field meant even the sounds of combat could not be heard from outside its radius. This meant you could get away with some bold strategies. For example, rushing into a classroom and exterminating all of the orcs within without so much as a peep being heard in the classroom next door. That was, of course, provided you were constantly moving without making a single misstep. I was not so conceited as to believe we could fight in ideal conditions every time.

Now then, concerning Arisu and Tamaki's current abilities...

"Elite orcs shouldn't be too much of a problem for them, provided it's just one of them."

"That's true. If we can kill those without alerting the rest of them, we'll be in a pretty good spot."

According to Arisu and Tamaki, once their weapon skills reached Rank 4, they were able to hold a slight advantage earlier when fighting against the elite orcs. A major part of that was likely due to my Support Magic being in play, naturally. But with the pair's current combat ability, there was no need to overly fear having to fight them.

"The problem is how many orcs Arisu and Tamaki will have to kill before their weapon skills can reach Rank 6?"

It was time for some mental calculations.

Arisu and Tamaki had leveled up at the end of the previous battle. Afterwards, they had gone around helping the girls from the Girls' Dormitory level up. Therefore, after their level-up, neither one of them should have killed any orcs... supposedly. *I'm gonna have to ask them for the details again later. Well, whatever, let's just calculate it as is. Just like before, assuming a single orc is worth 60 XP, we're going to need... Okay. I got it.*

Tamaki's experience bar was at its initial state upon reaching Level 7. In other words, 1680 XP in total. Arisu was Level 8, thus sitting at 2580 XP, 900 XP more than Tamaki. Additionally, Tamaki had 3 skill points left over, whilst Arisu had zero.

Therefore, for both of them to increase the rank of their weapon skill twice, this is what they needed to gain:

Tamaki needed to reach Level 11 to reach Rank 6 in Swordsmanship. Reaching Level 11 required 3960 XP cumulatively, meaning she was missing 2280 XP. Considering she only received 1/4th the XP of each kill, we would need to defeat 152 orcs to reach our goal.

Arisu needed to reach Level 14 for her Spearmanship skill to reach Rank 6. Reaching Level 14 required 6300 XP in total, meaning she needed to gain 3720 XP more. This increased the number of orcs we needed to defeat to 248.

"Hmm... even if we slaughter every single one of the orcs and elite orcs in the middle school building, I don't think we'll have enough," I told Shiki-san my thoughts outright.

"Seems so. We're running out of orcs to kill," Shiki-san said jokingly, but she wasn't far off from the truth. Even if we were to defeat a few elite orcs in the mix, finding over 100 orcs to subjugate in such a short amount of time was no walk in the park.

"We should at least get Tamaki's weapon skill to Rank 6 for the battle with the general orc. We're going to have a hard time facing it otherwise," recommended Shiki-san.

"You really think we have to do this today?"

"Do you honestly believe those girls will still be alive tomorrow?"

My mind flashed back to the appearances of the girls we'd rescued from the Girls' Dormitory. They looked like they'd been through hell until Arisu used Healing Magic on them. *One more night of going through treatment like that would be... Yeah, there's no way they'll make it. Guess it's gotta be done by today, huh?*

"By the way, considering how awful I was treated when I was being-"

“Stop, I understand. Quit being so hard on yourself.”

Shiki-san smiled cynically. *I wish she'd quit it with all the self-deprecation. It's just depressing to listen to!*

“There's another thing I need to tell you,” Shiki-san said, her face turning serious.

Come to think of it, she went downstairs to ask the underclassmen what happened, didn't she? I bet it's regarding that.

“Did you find something out?”

She nodded. “I found out the reason why there seemed to be some girls missing. Some of the orcs apparently took them somewhere else.”

“Somewhere else...?”

“Yes. I'm not sure if there were some criteria they chose from or if it was random, but they picked some of the girls and took them away from the rest. Allegedly, they were a bit different than the rest of the orcs and wore purple robes.”

Purple-robed orcs? I wonder what they can do... maybe they can use magic? And why did they kidnap some of the girls? I pondered the reason. Maybe violating them inside the girls' dormitory wasn't enough for them and they needed to use the girls for another purpose as well?

I paused. *Hold on a second... another purpose?* The realization hadn't ever struck me before. Rather, because there didn't appear to be any obvious deeper reason behind their attacks, I hadn't seen any point in musing about it.

“Why did the orcs attack us in the first place?”

“Good question. Let's see... maybe they needed to use us for rituals in a sacrifice or something?”

Hearing Shiki-san state it aloud, I suddenly reached a conclusion. The two of us faced one another.

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“The orcs came from the northern summit of the mountain, didn’t they?” I asked.

“Seems that way. I believe the chances the girls were taken in that direction are likely. With that said, there's also the possibility they may be locked up somewhere in the middle school building where we couldn’t find them.”

“Guess we’re going to have to sneak into the middle school to find out.”

What was the reasoning behind the orcs attacking us? I hadn’t thought about it too deeply, stopping after concluding that they attacked us because there were girls for them to mate with.

I mean, they are pretty stupid, y’know? They’re literally pigs, and they don’t have much going on upstairs. They’re not in the slightest suited for acting as a big group. Once I figured out that they were pretty straightforward enemies, my mind fixated on that, and I hadn’t noticed their smaller peculiarities. But perhaps there was something out there leading the orcs... and perhaps that something was trying to accomplish some goal by using them. Using the students it needed for whatever purpose it had in mind and discarding the rest... which could only mean:

“Take them away and do whatever you like!”

“That is very kind of you, sir. Well, boys, you heard Commander Oz! Have at them!”

I feel like I could see the orcs having a conversation similar to this... I wonder who Oz would be in this case, though?

“Hey, Kazu-kun.” Shiki-san called out to me, pulling me away from my comical musings. “This is more conjecture than anything, but there’s most likely a foe waiting at the place the orcs came from that is even more powerful than a general orc. So...”

“We should build up our strength while we can to obtain the power to combat them, you mean?”

She nodded. “We shouldn’t consider the orcs in the middle school to be their main force. According to what you saw when you were scouting, the orcs in the high school seem to be around the same number as the ones in the middle

school. Their main force is most likely hiding somewhere in the depths of the forest.”

“Then you’re saying we should try and attack the high school by the end of the day as well?”

“That’s... most likely impossible, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, not a chance.” I shared her opinion.

As far as thinning down the number of orcs and increasing our war potential as much as we could, I was completely on board. Saving the girls trapped in middle school was something I was in complete agreement with. And as for why...

“I believe I can guess what you’re thinking about,” Shiki-san said, smiling sadistically. *Great minds think alike, huh?* I thought as I prompted her to continue.

“You’re thinking about gathering more pawns for when we confront the high school section. Correct?”

“Bingo. I’m thinking of using the people we rescue as pawns to fight against them. You have no objections, right?”

“Not one; I completely agree with that idea. From what I heard from you, I don’t believe our two groups can coexist as long as Sasou-kun is leading the other one. You mentioned he was hiding behind the rest of them and using them as shields, didn’t you? He’s no different than the elite orcs from earlier.”

“That’s the impression I got from viewing them. Though haven’t you considered the likelihood that I’m lying to kill Shiba?”

“Considering how shaken you were earlier, I doubt you’re lying. You’d have to be one hell of an actor to ad-lib fear like that, and seeing how you’ve been so far...” Shiki-san grinned.

Shut up. Who asked you, anyway.

“Worst case scenario, we have to eliminate both him and his clique following him.”

“You decided on that pretty fast, you know?” I said incredulously.

“No, this was something I arrived at after a long time of thinking.”

Huh? When did you have the time to do that?

On my prompting, Shiki-san explained further. “When I reached Level 2.”

“Ohh, so that’s when. Makes sense.”

She had been fighting solo during the previous battle and reached Level 2 in the middle of it. *She must’ve spent an agonizing amount of time thinking about things while she was in the white room, huh?*

... Hold on a minute. She more or less predicted even as far as the current affairs in the high school section? Curious, I asked her about it.

“Not exactly. I made a list of many different ways things could have unfolded, and then rearranged and moved them around in different orders before finally playing out many different scenarios in my head to find the more likely ones.”

Ohh, of course. That makes total sense... not! Truth be told, I *did* understand the logic behind her explanation, but there was no way I could ever hope to imitate it.

“You’re the type of person best suited for sudden situations. When the unexpected happens, you’re the type that can make the best decisions based on the information you have,” Shiki-san said encouragingly. “I, on the other hand, am the type that prefers careful planning. I lay out many choices and then pick the most suitable for the situation. Coming up with something on the spot is impossible for me.”

“Doesn’t seem that way to me.”

“That’s because I’m normally quite adept at hiding it. Yesterday, though, I failed miserably. Being suddenly attacked by a bunch of mythical creatures, such as orcs, made me freeze in my tracks. I was frozen in fear, unable to move an inch...”

Shiki-san cast her eyes downward as she spoke and eventually trailed off. She seemed to be hesitating over something. After thinking in silence for a moment, she raised her head and looked directly into my eyes.

“Listen to me. Because of my weakness, I... grabbed the hem of my friend’s shirt, and she couldn’t get away.”

Oh, so that’s why. I nodded. *I always wondered why she would see her fake smile when it looked like she was about to cry. Now, it all makes sense.*

This was her confession to me. Something deep she had hidden, refusing to tell anyone up until now. She had—by her own actions, no less—caused her friend to not be able to escape, resulting in their death. And despite being the one to foolishly act, resulting in her own friend's death, she survived alone, made to bear the guilt.

That was why she was acting as a martyr, accepting hardships onto herself of her own accord. She had often spoken in a self-deprecating manner about the horrendous treatment she received from the orcs because she was likely intent on punishing herself for her misdeed. She refused to receive any help from Arisu because she believed her pain to be a punishment from above.

Choosing to mock her for her stupidity would be simple... but I could not bring it upon myself to do that. Bound by her past mistakes but still trying her best to move forward despite the harsh trials she was going to face—mocking someone like that and telling them that they were putting themselves through the fire and brimstone for nothing was impossible.

Furthermore, to stop her would be labeling myself a hypocrite. I made a similar mistake yesterday.

Before we came face to face against the elite orc, I had not explained my relationship with Shiki-san to Arisu when we rescued her. As a result of that, Arisu hadn’t gone to escape and instead attempted to protect her. My own foolish act put Arisu in danger, and I nearly lost her because of that.

Everything ended up working out in the end, of course. Thanks to Arisu choosing to save her rather than forsake her, I could converse with Shiki-san like this. We took a huge bet and won, and the rewards we received for doing so were extremely huge. A risk worth taking, one could say.

Nevertheless, all of these events still originated from my mistake. A mistake that happened to have ended well, but a mistake nonetheless. Knowing that, I could not mock her.

If I had lost Arisu then, would I have been able to recover? I definitely wouldn't have been able to smile like I could now; that much I knew. Or would I still be smiling if something similar happened in the future?

If that happened, I'd use a time machine or whatever it took to go back and beat the hell out of past me. That was simply how horrible a mistake I would've made. Failure was unacceptable.

Therefore, I could not mock Shiki-san. But I also couldn't give her any words of comfort. She probably wouldn't want that anyway. She simply wanted to abuse herself in peace. To use the pain, she felt, as energy to give everything she had and more for everyone's sake.

No matter what she was using to move herself forward, she was helping us. There was no chance we could've been doing what we were now without her being here.

And, most importantly, she was...

"So, Kazu-kun," Shiki-san smiled cynically once more. "Let me say it again. Give me more of your burdens. Force something onto me so heavy that I writhe around in pain. I will bear everything you give me. I will do anything you require of me. Even if that something means my bones will be worn down to dust, I will achieve what you ask of me."

So long as her sacrifice would be for the benefit of all of us, Shiki-san saw no issues undergoing it.

Chapter 40: Operation Gain-Control-Of-The-Middle-School – 1

I chose to take a nap after Shiki-san left. Seeing as I didn't have any MP left, I had nothing to do. Taking a rest when you could was also important. *Now that I think about it, we've been working hard ever since sunrise today.*

The battle to stay awake was lost almost instantly, and my consciousness faded into black.

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I awoke to find someone shaking me. Opening my eyes, I was greeted by Arisu's face.

"What time is it?" I asked her groggily.

"Half-past three."

So it's 3:30 PM then? My MP should be fully recovered by now.

"Shiki-senpai told me to come wake you up. Also, um..." Arisu hesitated, her eyes darting from side to side with a bashful expression, before placing her lips directly onto mine as I lay there, still half asleep. Her tongue squirmed its way into my mouth, and for a moment, we just lay there, swapping saliva until we were out of breath.

Arisu separated from me, breathing heavily. Her face was bright red, a mixture of embarrassment and being starved for oxygen.



“She also told me to come liven your spirits.”

Yeah, and you did a good job of that. Both me and another place are raring to go now. Unfortunately, I couldn’t act on those desires, and thus I desperately endured them as I got up from the bed.

Although, even if I did spend some “quality” time here with Arisu, I’m sure the people waiting down below wouldn’t get mad. They’d probably smile at us with warm expressions and go, “Geez, what are we going to do with you guys?”

Nevertheless, my MP was at full capacity, so spending more time here wouldn’t reward me with any more MP. Having fun with Arisu would have to wait until I was all drained.

“So, where to?”

“She told us to come down to the lobby,” Arisu explained.

Following her lead, I left the room. A pair of girls walked past the doorway as we exited the room. They were the two that were fighting shoulder-to-shoulder a few hours ago. One of them greeted me with a stiff expression, and I returned an equally awkward response. I knew Shiki-san had told me to act more naturally around them. But no matter what I did, I would see Akane Shimoyamada’s face flicker across theirs whenever I looked at them. It was making me hesitate at shortening the distance between them and me.

“Please do your best, Kazu-senpai. We will ensure we’re ready to head out whenever you need us.” The girl cheered me on, balling her hand into a tight fist. Rather than being because the two of us weren’t close, it seemed her nervousness had been because her opinion of me was over-exaggerated.

How much of a hero am I in her eyes? I wondered. After I fell asleep, Shiki-san had most likely gone around and informed everyone of our plan to attack the middle school. *There she goes again, doing things as she pleases.* I admonished her inside my head, but by doing so, she’d actually reduced the amount of work I had to do, so I guess it wasn’t so bad.

Moreover, the only ones who were actually going to be doing any fighting were Arisu, Tamaki, Mia, and my familiars. I wasn’t going to be participating, just giving orders from behind everyone else's cover.

In that respect, I guess I'm just like Shiba, huh? Well, I could never be as arrogant as that guy, nor did I want to be. I want everyone to get out of this without injury if it can be done.

I was dumbfounded when we entered the lobby on the second-floor balcony. There were several pairs of tables with chairs surrounding them, presumably taken from the conference room and placed around the lobby. One area appeared to have been designated the luggage area, and four backpacks were lined up next to one another, packed with all sorts of things. Standing in front of them was Shiki-san, arms folded and looking in our direction. Next to her, I could see Tamaki and Mia's figures. For some reason, all three of them were staring at me with mischievous grins.

"Morning, Kazu-kun," Shiki-san called up to us. "You didn't take things too far with Arisu-chan up there, did you?"

"Ha-ha. She just woke me up, that's all."

Arisu hung her head downward, blushing furiously. *That kind of ruins the point of me giving a straightforward answer, you know?* I sighed inwardly. *Well, it's fine. She's cute when she's blushing, too.*

We descended the lobby staircase, walked towards them, and I quickly peeked into one of the backpacks. Not only were there bottles of water, a few CalorieMates, and flashlights inside, but also useful things like toolboxes. I even spotted some bandages and medicine mixed among the other items.

"I imagine there's going to be some things that require Arisu-chan's Healing Magic. But there also may be times when you're unable to use magic," explained Shiki-san as I looked inside. "If it's too heavy for you to carry, though, feel free to throw things out that you don't believe you'll need."

"No need. With Mighty Arm, we'll be able to carry all of this and more. Thanks for putting this together for us."

I thanked Shiki-san before turning to face the members of my party. *Well, here goes nothing.*

"While I'm sure you've heard from Shiki-san already, I'm going to say it again, just in case. I'm planning on attacking the middle school."

They all nodded back at me with nervous expressions.

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All equipment belonging to our elite party had already been enchanted with Harden Armor. Arisu and Tamaki had both been given a pair of gloves and caps to wear. Naturally, these were both enchanted, too.

Before we headed out, I cast more Support Magic on everyone, myself included. Each of us was buffed with Physical Up, Mighty Arm, and Clear Mind. Arisu and Tamaki were additionally given Keen Weapon on both of their weapons.

Even after buffing everyone with these many spells, my MP had only been reduced by 14, which meant I would be back to maximum capacity in around twenty minutes or so. Thanks to my Support Magic being Rank 4, the spell's effective time was around one hundred minutes, plus or minus twenty.

“Our main priority is to decrease the number of enemies at the middle school as much as possible. I'd like to get to the point where they won't be able to send an army off to the Cultivation Center again.”

I then gave them an explanation of everything I'd seen when I was scouting with the raven, minus the particulars around the high school section. There wasn't any need for them to know about that right now, so I decided to keep it under closed doors for the time being.

That's all I want them to focus on right now. Just the middle school section and nothing else. There's nothing else out there... ugh, who am I kidding? Even if I try to deceive myself, I just can't get it out of my mind. I might as well come to terms with it.

I was frightened of the high school section. Or to be more accurate, the person over there known as Shiba Sasou. I was scared that he might scrounge up a force and come over here to try and bring harm to our group.

Of course, things might not come to that. There was still a chance that we last remaining few humans could work together instead of causing strife for one another. Then again, Shiki-san had told me to always keep the worst possibility

in mind. “Stop thinking so optimistically,” she’d ordered me. “Moreover, we need to be gathering our strength right now.” Neither one of these points had received any objections from me.

And that led us to now, where I wanted to attack the middle school.

Everyone’s faces stiffened when I informed them about the general orc. Then, when they heard there was a mysterious animal next to the general whose true nature had yet to be determined, their faces grew grave.

Arisu and Tamaki exchanged glances. They seemed to be wondering how they would tackle these new and challenging foes.

“We are not going to fight against the general orc. Period.” I made sure to emphasize this point to everyone. “Or rather, there’s no reason for us to cross weapons with it. The general orc has never once come out during any previous battles. From what I’ve seen, I have reason to believe that it isn’t the type to jump the gun and come out on its own. Moreover, even if it does come out of hiding, there are ways for us to deal with it as long as it’s alone. For example, we could lead it into a pitfall or some other trap.”

“You really like using traps, don’t you, Kazu-san?” Tamaki pointed out with an amazed expression.

How rude. Don’t you know that we’ve won by using pitfalls in almost every single one of our battles to date? He who laughed at a pitfall would weep at the bottom of one. Such was one of the basic theories regarding man, a universal principle of life itself.

All right, enough of the jokes. Back to the main topic.

“The main goal of today’s battle is to reduce the number of small-fry orcs and elite orcs. Fortunately, the orcs appear to have not gathered in one spot and are, instead, scattered throughout the classrooms. We’re going to crush them all. As for how...”

“My Silent Field spell, right?” Mia interjected.

“That’s right,” I nodded. “Did Shiki-san give you an explanation?”

“Mm.”

Good. If they've already been given an explanation, that means I can wrap this up quickly.

"One thing, Kazucchi. That animal-thing might have a good nose."

"That 'animal-thing' just looks like one. Besides, it's holed up in the deepest part of the third floor alongside the general orc. In any case, just avoid positioning yourself upwind. At the very least, we won't have to worry about our smell being caught when we're fighting on the second floor and below."

"Ooh, I see." Mia nodded.

"If things get dangerous, we're not staying this time; we're running immediately. They already know we're staying at the Cultivation Center anyway, so there's no reason to worry about us being followed. Once we begin to retreat, Shiki-san's party will be lending us a helping hand."

We had decided that this time, we would have Shiki-san lead a group of three girls to back us up if need be. They were tasked with two main purposes: to support us if things took a wrong turn and we ended up needing to escape. The second purpose was to escort any survivors we found out of the area.

"So, regarding those pitfalls..." I glanced towards Mia, and she nodded affirmatively.

"Mm. Shiki-senpai already asked me to help. They're dug and ready. Five minutes away from the middle school building, in the forest."

With Mia's Earth Pit spell on our side, we did not have to needlessly put ourselves in danger and dig out pitfalls in the vicinity of the enemy stronghold. By using magic to quickly excavate the ground, all we had to do was carefully conceal them. Theoretically, this could be done in the span of several minutes.

"There's several of them dug and waiting to be used. I made sure to memorize the locations of each one. So, depending on the situation, there are multiple pitfalls we could lead them to," Shiki-san explained to me, and I nodded.

"I also have something for us to keep in contact..." Saying so, she reached into one of the bags and took out a walkie-talkie. This particular model was an older one and ran on batteries. It was bigger than the size of my hand.

“One of the juniors was digging around in the storage area under the Cultivation Center and happened to stumble across this. There are two of them, so I’ll take one, and you’ll have the other.”

Ohh, I see. If we’re using these, there won’t be any time lag between our messages, unlike with ravens. I wished we had found this earlier so we could have used it at the girls’ dormitory. But considering the circumstances, beggars couldn’t be choosers.

“All right, I think we’ve gone over everything. Does anyone have any questions before we head out?” I asked, glancing at everyone. No one replied.

And so, with no time left to waste, we placed our backpacks onto our backs and left the Cultivation Center. On the way, I called out to Arisu and Tamaki.

“Hey, you two. If you feel those things are too heavy for you to fight with...”

“Don’t worry. We’ll be sure to throw them to the side once we start fighting.”

“You betcha,” Tamaki chirped. “Don’t worry about a thing, Kazu-san. You just need to sit back and watch us shine!”

Despite Tamaki’s comforting words, I could only feel anxiety.

Oh well. I was planning on leaving everything to them from the beginning, so I might as well. It’s not like I could join in, considering I’m no use in a close-quarters fight. Adding my wolf into the mix, I’ll just have to leave everything in their capable hands and/or paws. Speaking of which... I cast Summon Gray Wolf and watched as a newly summoned wolf appeared in the space before me. Now I had two familiars raring to go. We were trying to do things stealthily, though, so I didn’t want to bring too many with me.

The two wolves were also quickly given Keen Weapon, Physical Up, and Mighty Arm. I also was keeping one raven handy for scouting purposes. Seeing as I had the walkie-talkie to communicate otherwise, it looked like everything was ready.

My MP was already back at its highest value of 71, having recovered as we were discussing our strategy for the upcoming battle. We were planning on ending things fast, so I was only going to give Haste to someone if need be, but

there was no telling what would happen this time around. Therefore, saving the rest of my MP for later was the best option now.

Following behind our group of four was Shiki-san as well as the three girls at her party. Two were spear bearers, and the third carried a sword. Coincidentally, one of the two spear users was the girl with the ponytail whom I had talked with before.

Hold on, isn't she one of the ones we rescued from the girls' dormitory? She also was keeping watch earlier, albeit for a short time. Is she gonna be able to make it through okay?

Upon noticing my gaze, the girl bowed and spoke in a monotonous voice, "I'll be in your care."

"Y-yeah. Likewise."

"I couldn't get any sleep anyway. Besides, my body feels fine thanks to the Healing Magic, so I hope to be of help, even if only a little."

"I see. As long as you're not forcing yourself."

"I won't. Please be sure to kill a lot of orcs, okay?"

Yeah, that's kind of the plan. That said... talking to this girl was kinda scary. Her expression did not change, no matter what she said. I understood her sentiment of despising the orcs, though.

While puzzled over the uncomfortable feeling I was getting from her, Tamaki suddenly jumped into the conversation.

"Don't mind it. Sakura-chan's always been this way, you see. She's a bit curt when it comes to words, but she's not a bad person."

"Ahh, so that's why. Were you two acquaintances?" I asked.

"Nope, I'm pretty sure Sakura-chan had no idea who I was until recently."

"That's correct. I didn't know who you were, Senpai," the ponytailed girl, whose name was apparently Sakura, nodded. Since she was calling Tamaki 'Senpai,' that must've meant she was a second-year student or perhaps a first-year.

“Anyway,” continued Tamaki. “She’s kinda famous. Sakura Nagatsuki, the second-year speedster. She was part of the track and field club and is quick on her feet. I’ve heard she’s even entered the nationals before.”

Gotcha, so she’s the talented type, is she? However, not even someone as skilled as her had been able to escape from danger. Her survival could only be called a stroke of good fortune.

Is that really the case, though? I wondered. Perhaps her survival was only prolonging her pain. *Ensuring she doesn't end up viewing it that way is part of our job... but somehow, I can't help but feel like it's not my place to interfere.*

Right now, a good move would be to comfort her with something hopeful like, “We will carve the path to your future.”

Alas, it wasn't in my nature. I could do nothing more than perform the tasks before me that I could do.

“Please leave anything that requires speed to me. For my two skills, I have chosen Spearmanship and Strength. If you need me to act as bait, I shall do my best to do so.”

“Understood. If the time comes, I’ll leave those things to you.”

So she went with Spearmanship and Strength for her skills, huh? Maybe this'll make things easier if we have to battle in the forest... I pondered as I cast Physical Up on every member of Shiki-san’s party, including her.

Upon reaching the Middle School building, I asked the support party members to conceal themselves in the brush in the vicinity. The two orcs patrolling the area outside were quickly killed by us.

Well, describing it as ‘patrolling’ might be giving them too much credit. Truthfully, they wandered around the area aimlessly more than anything else. Either way, the two of them were insta-killed by Arisu and Tamaki.

We crept through the grass, slowly and quietly making our way to one of the broken windows of a classroom. Once in front of the window, I had the raven peer into the room from the windowsill.

“Three orcs,” it reported back.

Good. I motioned to Mia, and she nodded before casting Silent Field on Arisu and Tamaki.

Meanwhile, I ordered the raven to raise one of its wings when the three orcs inside were all looking away from the window. I then had it fly back up to the window frame, where it perched and waited. One second passed... and then ten more.

The raven lifted up one of its wings, signaling the start of the battle.

Chapter 41: Operation Gain-Control-Of-The-Middle-School – 2

I cast Haste on Arisu and Tamaki, and they both broke into a sprint as soon as they received the buff. They climbed through the broken window one after the other, rushing into the classroom. Mia and I snuck over to the window and peeked inside.

It was the fine arts classroom. The busts next to the wall were broken, canvases were torn and smashed, and paint was scattered everywhere on the floor. About three or so boys were in the corner of the room, each of their necks twisted at strange angles. Finally, in the center of the room, three orcs were leaning over the bodies of three nude girls.

With their backs facing Arisu and Tamaki, the orcs never saw them coming as the pair swooped towards them. One found itself skewered by a spear, and the other's head was split in half by an axe. Their agonized screams echoed throughout the room... or at least they would have, had it not been for Silent Field. Their mouths opened wide, seemingly attempting to scream before they unceremoniously collapsed to the ground.

Every sound made within Silent Field's radius was canceled out by its effects, no matter how loud. Voices, chirps, cries—nothing escaped.

The one orc left turned around in a panic, its mouth wide open, and attempted to scramble to its feet. I imagined it was hurling swears at us for its comrades' deaths, but not even those reached our ears.

The next moment, Tamaki's axe cut through the orc's torso like butter, splitting it in half from the waist down. Blue blood sprayed everywhere like a gory waterfall before its two halves fell to the ground, signaling an end to its life.

Everything we'd just done had been in complete silence. The battle was over.

Walking back to the window, I motioned to Shiki-san's group to come over. The four of them ran over to the window and entered the fine arts classroom.

Of the three girls we found, two of them had already passed. The third, the only one still breathing, was given Healing Magic by Arisu. First Heal, then Cure Mind.

The 4 MP spent here were necessary measures. We couldn't exactly help the survivors.

While the strategy this time was mainly focused on lowering the orcs' war potential, Shiki-san and I were also trying to increase our own. There was no telling how many people we'd be able to find after this, so saving those we could was of the utmost priority. Of course, I wasn't so naive as to believe that every girl we rescued would become a fighter. However, as long as we found a few among them, like Sakura Nagatsuki, then tomorrow would be easier, and the day after, easier than the last.

Considering the state of affairs over at the high school section, this was probably the best outcome. For the moment, at least, the surviving people over there were not people we could rely on. Shiba's way of doing things was not something we could allow.

As such, we had no choice but to gather allies from the middle school. Both Shiki-san and I had come to this conclusion.

Shiki-san carefully approached the door leading to the fine arts preparation room next door and put her ear on the door, listening to the other side. She was far enough away from Arisu and Tamaki that Silent Field wasn't in effect for her. She looked back over her shoulder and raised a finger, meaning there was at least one orc in the neighboring room. We didn't have any way of telling how many there were before we entered, but regardless of the number, we were going to crush them.

Gesturing towards Arisu and Tamaki, I gave them permission to move out. They walked over to the door and stopped in front of it. Shiki-san nodded and then threw the door wide open.

There was an orc not too far into the room. From what I could see from my vantage point, this one was the only orc in the room. While it stood there,

shocked at our presence, Arisu rushed towards it. She instantly shortened the distance between them and thrust her spear towards the orc's neck. The tip pierced through, and the orc collapsed to the ground in a heap. Tamaki rushed into the room and passed Arisu, heading further inside.

There must be more, I concluded as Shiki-san peered into the room, raising three fingers this time. *Ah, so there were three? I couldn't see them.*

Four corpses lined the floor of the preparation room. One of them was the nude body of a female teacher, two were the bodies of deceased guys, and the final one was a lone girl. The orcs appeared to have been lying on top of them even after they had died. However, nothing could be gained by expressing our feelings here, as horrible as the situation was. The only thing we could do was kill as many orcs as we could during our time here in the middle school, as well as rescue any survivors we found, even if it was just one. That was all we could do.

I sent out the raven once again to do some scouting of the rooms ahead. Silent Field's effects would probably expire as I waited for it to return, but it couldn't be helped.

According to Arisu, the next room over was the home economics room, and the one after that was the science room. On the opposite side of the hallway were the 3rd year classrooms. *Did they really place all of the rooms that used fire right next to one another?*

The middle school's building layout was as so: the third year's classrooms were on the first floor, the second year's on the second floor, and the first year's on the third floor. There were eight classrooms each year, and each floor had around twelve to fourteen rooms, including the special rooms made for other activities. Some of the floors differed in the number of rooms because some of them were bigger, like the music room, and others were smaller, like the fine arts preparation room. Some were on the south side of the building, facing the courtyard, while others were on the north side, like the one we had entered through. There were a few empty classrooms, too.

The raven returned, giving me its report. There were no orcs or people in the classroom opposite us, but the classroom diagonal to us had four orcs inside it.

One of them had bronze-colored skin. *There's an elite orc in there.*

“Are there any orcs in the hallway?” I asked.

“There are none,” answered the raven. *Good. Let's get moving before one of them walks into the hallway.*

“Arisu, you're gonna go after the small-fry orcs. Tamaki, you'll be taking the elite orc.”

The classrooms were full of obstacles like desks and chairs, and the ceiling wasn't too high, either. I was worried Arisu might be unable to exhibit her full strength, considering how long her weapon was. So having Tamaki take on the elite orc would be better, considering her shorter weapon. Then again, Arisu had more experience when it came to dealing with elite orcs, so I supposed it really wasn't a correct choice as to who went after it.

“Just leave it to me, Kazu-san. I'll show you how useful I can be!” Tamaki beamed, eager to prove her worth. *Well, whatever. Let's get them moving.*

After giving both of them Haste and Silent Field, the pair sped out of the classroom. After checking one last time to make sure there were no orcs in the hallway, Mia and I followed after them. Shiki-san and her group followed behind us after a short pause, carrying the lone survivor on her back.

Arisu and Tamaki rushed into the classroom that was diagonally opposite the fine arts room. I approached the classroom from behind, peeking inside to see the interior. The elite orc, standing near the entrance, was quick to react to the sudden intruders. It caught Tamaki's axe using the flat of its giant sword, stopping her axe in place. There should've been an enormous pang of metal as the two blades collided, but no sound could be heard. The elite orc seemed confused at that fact, making a surprised expression.

One of the orcs leaning over the girls was sent to the afterlife via Arisu's spear piercing through the back of its neck. The two remaining orcs tried turning their heads to look at the person who had murdered their friend, only to find themselves joining them one after the next. She was as skillful as ever, sending three orcs to the grave in the blink of an eye.

Tamaki's weapon clashed back and forth with the elite orcs, scattering sparks into the air around them. Had it not been for the effects of Silent Field, the two's dynamic battle would've sounded like an action scene out of a movie. They both went back and forth with the other without even a moment's pause, moving so fast that I couldn't even see their weapons as they swished through the air.

Having finished off her side of things, Arisu raced over to support Tamaki. With the two of them working in tandem, both having Rank 4 weapon skills, the elite orc's prospects of winning the fight dropped dramatically.

Sure enough, a few exchanges of blows later, one of Arisu's thrusts caused the elite orc to lose its balance. Tamaki didn't overlook this opportunity and slashed at it sideways with her axe. Her attack cut through the air in a direct path towards the elite orc's neck, mowing through it. Its head soared through the air before plopping onto the ground.

Arisu leveled up.

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Inside the white room.

"I did it, Kazu-san! I won against an elite orc without struggling!" Tamaki cried out in delight, jumping around excitedly. Her blonde pigtails swung back and forth through the air, almost like the wagging of a dog's tail.

"There were two of you fighting, and that's not even mentioning Haste. Don't get cocky."

"Hehe, don't worry," Tamaki grinned. "I know it's because you and Arisu were there supporting me."

"That's not what I meant. I don't mind you thanking me, but make sure you don't lower your guard, all right?"

She stared at me with a confused expression for a moment before seeming to understand that I was genuinely concerned for her. She gave a big nod, "Okay!"

“But anyway!” Tamaki continued, taking in breaths in an exaggerated fashion. “Being quiet for so long was suffocating. I couldn’t tell if I was choking or not!”

“Well, it doesn’t matter if you shout or not, considering everything’s silenced anyway. In fact, Arisu was shouting whenever she charged in,” I pointed out. The person in question looked back at me, slightly embarrassed, and asked, “Y-you saw?”

“If giving a battle cry brings out your strength, feel free to shout all you want. Silent Field will keep everything mute, so you don’t have to worry about leaking any sound out.”

“G-good point.” Arisu put a hand to her chest, sighing in relief. Tamaki, meanwhile, was gazing at me with a stupified, half-open mouth. “Ohh, so you can do that...”

While the pair’s lack of foresight slightly concerned me, I decided it was fine. *Well, probably.*

“How funny.” Mia giggled from the side. “Arisu-chin and Tamaki-chin are like a mismatched couple.”

I don’t disagree with her sentiment, but what did she just call them?

“Hold on. Weren’t you calling them Senpai earlier this morning, Mia?”

“We asked her to stop being so formal with us. We’re friends, you know?” Tamaki explained. *Oh, I see. Friends, huh?*

“Still, isn’t Arisu-chin and Tamaki-chin a bit...”

“If you’d like, I can shorten it to Tamakin.”

I stared at Mia with an amazed look.

“Don’t you think that’s a bit embarrassing?”

“Then I’ll stick with Tamaki-chin.”

Off to the side, Tamaki was roaring with laughter. “It’s fine. I don’t mind if she calls me that,” she managed to say in between giggles.

Whoa, for real? Wow. I think that’s the first time I’ve ever respected you for something, Tamaki.

“Well, getting back on topic, everyone should rest here as long as they want. We should use our time here to rest our minds.”

While I’d only gotten a glance, corpses were in the room we had just pushed into. There had been several nude bodies of girls on the ground and a few boys as well. They had probably been in the middle of some group activity when the orcs attacked them.

I wonder if anyone got to escape? The windows were closed off, so I imagine they all... I shook my head. No good. Get a grip, me. You were just telling them all to go ahead and rest, and now you’re over here thinking about depressing things.

“Hey, Kazucchi. Hey,” Mia tugged on the hem of my shirt. “If you want to do some forbidden play with Arisu-chin, Tamaki-chin and I can face the other way while you two...”

“Not a chance,” I firmly declined her offer, shaking my head. “Get your head out of the gutter, would you?”

“Oh, I get it. So you’re the type that likes to be watched?”

I dropped my fist onto her head, and she grinned mischievously while rubbing her head. Arisu was looking at me with a bashful smile, and Tamaki was cackling.

Messing around with everyone’s fun for her, huh? Good grief. I shrugged my shoulders.

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Once everyone had finished resting up, we left the white room.

ARISU	
LEVEL: 9	SPEARMANSHIP: 4
HEALING MAGIC: 3	SKILL POINTS: 2

Chapter 42: Operation Gain-Control-Of-The-Middle-School – 3

Arisu and Tamaki finished liberating the classroom from the orcs before I made it inside. Though they did stare at the corpses around them for a moment, they only put their hands together in a quick prayer before moving on.

“There’s no time for us to mourn them now,” Tamaki said in a brave voice to Arisu, whose shoulders were slumped slightly. “But we can take revenge for them, Arisu.”

“Right.”

From the window on the south side of the classroom, the courtyard could be seen through the gaps in the fence. While the bonfire had burned out already, there were still more than twenty healthy-looking orcs standing around the charred remains of the mountain of corpses. Tamaki was right; we couldn’t afford to waste time here.

Fortunately, due to the time of day, the lighting was poor enough in the courtyard that the peculiarities of what was happening inside the classroom couldn’t be seen from there. That said, there was no telling what would happen if we stuck around here. We needed to move out of the classroom before the orcs spotted us.

Suppressing the entirety of the first floor, as well as the basement area of the building, took around twenty minutes.

We discovered three survivors on the first floor and one down in the basement, for a total of four people saved. As for the orcs, we had encountered and promptly finished off eighteen of the small-fry orcs, as well as two elite orcs.

“For the time being, bring everyone we’ve rescued so far back to the Cultivation Center,” I instructed Shiki-san. “We should also try and find some method of transporting them if we find any more survivors.”

Despite being healed by Arisu, the survivors were completely and utterly exhausted. They wouldn't be able to move anywhere on their own feet, or even stand up, for that matter. Not that this could be helped, though. They had spent an entire day exposed to horrible, rough treatment by the orcs.

"Understood. You guys, be careful." Shiki-san nodded before she and her group gathered up the listless survivors and placed them onto their shoulders, leaving the room through the window.

All right, back to business. Turning to face Arisu and them, I took a look at their complexions. They didn't seem to be showing any signs of exhaustion yet.

"By the way, if you guys need to go to the bathroom, now's gonna be your only chance."

"I'm not gonna do it again, okay?!" Tamaki barked out in a similar fashion to a wild dog. "Mr. Arisuuuu, Kazu-san doesn't have any consideration. Tell him off!"

"Umm..." Arisu gazed at me reservedly. *What is it, my angel? Have you come to praise me? Go right ahead, shower me with your praise.*

"Kazu-san... you just wanted to see Tamaki's face scrunched up in frustration, didn't you?"

No, this isn't the praise I was expecting! I frowned inwardly at Arisu's harsh words instead of praise. *Well, thank you regardless of your (not) so-kind words.*

"Let's head upstairs, shall we?" I shrugged my shoulders, changing the subject to avoid answering her, and turned my gaze towards the stairs. There were two sets of staircases leading up from the first floor to the second, each located at the opposite ends of the building. We were currently next to the staircase on the left side of the building.

I had sent the raven upstairs a while ago to scout out the rooms, and it had returned a few minutes ago. According to its report, a group of several orcs was standing around in the second-floor hallway.

That's not good. We'll be right in the enemy's line of sight when we walk up the stairs. I mused over what to do as I took a CalorieMate from my backpack, tore off the wrapper and munched on it. *We could also go outside and climb up to the second floor using the plumbing pipes on the wall. The boost in physical*

abilities from Mighty Arm should be more than sufficient for us to be able to scale the pipes. With Silent Field masking the noise, we wouldn't have to worry about being discovered on the way up.

This idea wasn't bad, so long as you ignored the fact that we would need our hands free to climb up. Arisu and Tamaki's weapons were both big and fairly heavy and expecting them to scale the pipes while holding onto them was asking a lot of them. There was also the option of having someone climb ahead of everyone else and drop down a rope, but that meant leaving someone defenseless in enemy territory. The risks overshadowed the rewards.

"Hey, Mia. Do you think, err... Open Wall would work?" I asked her, hesitating for a second as I tried to remember the spell's name. Open Wall—a Rank 4 Earth Magic spell, which did exactly as the name suggested. It opened up a hole in the wall or other similar things like hallways. Because the spell would work without making so much as a sound, the spell was best suited for stealthy operations. *Every bank robber would love this spell*, I joked to myself inside my head.

In case you're wondering, the hole wouldn't remain there forever. Eventually, the hole would fill back up again after a fixed amount of time passed.

"I can use Open Wall to make a hole in the ceiling, but without a ladder, there's no way we can make it up there." Mia pointed out.

"We could get up there with Jump Boost, couldn't we?" I reasoned.

Jump Boost, a spell belonging to Rank 2 Wind Magic, substantially boosted one's jumping power. Provided there wasn't anything weighing you down, you could even leap high enough to hop on top of the branches of trees in one jump.

Mia nodded. "We should be able to reach the next floor, yes. However, we'd have to stick the landing on our first attempt."

"Good point. If there are any orcs in the classroom above, we'd be in danger if we failed to land properly."

The small-fry orcs were one thing, but if one of us were to trip and fall in front of an elite orc... even if Tamaki's weapon skill was Rank 5, I still had a feeling we'd be in a bad situation.

“Backtracking to the Cultivation Center to grab a ladder’s a no-go, so then... is there a ladder somewhere in here we could use?”

“Um, Kazu-san,” Arisu interjected. “The ladders, along with everything else bulky in the Middle School, are currently in the storehouse in front of the athletic field. They got in the way, so we would always store them inside there. Sorry...” She spoke in an apologetic tone.

I see, so they’re by the athletic field, huh? That area was currently brimming with orcs, and as high-leveled as Arisu and Tamaki were now, facing that many at once would still be a tough fight. Furthermore, fighting on the athletic field would make lots of noise. And the orcs on the second and third floors that we’d worked so hard to conceal our presence from would notice us immediately. We’d be putting the cart before the horse.

Hmm, what should we do...? Folding my arms in front of my chest, I lapsed into thought.

“Oh, of course. Wind Magic has a spell to turn you invisible.”

“Invisibility is a Rank 3 spell. I can’t use it yet.”

That’s true, I thought to myself. *But both Tamaki and Mia are 30 XP away from leveling up. That’s just two orcs we need.* Mia has one skill point at the moment, so upon her next level up, she could reach Rank 3 in her Wind Magic.

We’ll be taking a bit of a detour to get there... but let’s go earn some XP, shall we? I couldn’t help but feel like I was back home playing an RPG. Earning XP seemed like a mundane task, yet here we were, about to go and do it for real.

Ordering the raven to find some orcs in the nearby vicinity, I let it fly out the window. It wasn’t long before it returned, bringing good news. Behind the shoe racks at the right-hand side entrance of the building, there were two orcs that just happened to be positioned in a blind spot from the courtyard. There were two entrances to the building and the one the raven reported on was the one furthest from our location.

“All right, it’s go time! I’ll be back in a second!” Tamaki cheered excitedly and sprinted off in the direction the raven had indicated, holding the giant axe over

her shoulder. Mia chased after her in a panic, casting Silent Field on her before she could get too far away from us.

About two minutes later, I found myself in the white room next to everyone else. Tamaki turned to face me and reported that she had leveled up.

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We gathered inside the white room. The two of them, Tamaki and Mia, were now Level 8.

“Oh, guess what, Kazu-san? I found a surviving girl!”

“You did? Where the orcs were?”

So, there were even girls who got captured in unorthodox places, like beside the shoe rack? I expressed my condolences to the girl, but deep down, I had grown numb to hearing about their misfortune. Having separated my emotions from my thoughts, the only thing that came to mind now was that it was fortunate she was still alive. And also, if possible, I’d like to make her part of our war potential.

Starting tomorrow, I hoped everyone we had rescued would fight to live. Recruiting survivors that were willing to fight was one of the goals of our current suppression mission.

But Tamaki shook her head as though to reject my sentiment.

“Actually, Kazu-san, she’s not injured. She was hiding in the cleaning supply closet next to the shoe rack... which reminds me.” Tamaki turned to Arisu. “It’s Sumire-chan.”

“Huh, Sumire-chan? She’s alive?! I’m so glad to hear that!” Arisu blinked in surprise for a moment before bursting into joy, her smile blooming like a flower. *Her friend, I’m guessing?* I mused as I watched her change expression.

“So, what you’re saying is this Sumire girl... is fine?”

“Yeah!” Tamaki nodded excitedly. “She was scared half to death and has been hiding motionlessly in the supply closet since yesterday. And it looks like she hasn’t left since then, either, because she peed her pants!”

“Why are you so proudly reporting that?”

“Huh? But don’t you like girls that pee themselves?” Tamaki seemed surprised.

I gave her a deadpan stare before turning to look at Arisu and Mia. The two of them nodded their heads, agreeing with Tamaki’s comment.

“I have no such tastes.”

“C’mon, Kazu-san, you don’t have to be shy about it,” Tamaki gave me a comforting gaze. “You’re a guy, so it’s only natural that you have one or two fetishes. You don’t need to hide them from me; I don’t mind.”

Why is it that she’s an understanding girl only now and not anytime else?! While I complained in my head, Arisu was staring at me with her cheeks dyed red. No, no, don’t look at me like that. This is all one big misunderstanding. I am a perfectly healthy, sound individual. These are all Tamaki’s wild delusions, so please, don’t look at me like that!

“You have to believe me, Arisu. Tamaki’s just delusional.”

“I-if you want, I can, um, pee for you...” Arisu stammered out while putting pressure on her stomach, her face now a deep crimson. *What are you saying, Arisu?... And what are you doing?!*

“No, Arisu, you’ve got it all wrong.” Mia walked over to Arisu and placed her hand on Arisu’s shoulder, shaking her head slowly.

“You see, you can’t just force yourself like that. You need to desperately endure the urge to pee, and when you finally have to go, you need to say, ‘No, I can’t hold it anymore! P-please, d-don’t look at meeee!’ and let it all out. Otherwise, there’s no appeal.”

“And what do you think you’re doing? Don’t go adding unnecessary emphasis onto everything.” I said, pulling Mia away from Arisu. *I can’t leave you alone with her. You’re a bad influence on Arisu’s education.*

Although... Arisu’s her senior, so I guess Mia’s the one who’s in need of a better teacher.

“Let’s get back on topic. So, this Sumire girl, can she walk right now?” I asked, desperately hoping to regain control over the conversation.

“Probably, but I can’t say for sure. I didn’t talk to her when I found her because I was in a rush, so I don’t know,” Tamaki replied.

“Why?”

“Huh? Well... Silent Field was active?”

“Oh, right...” I facepalmed. Everything around Tamaki was currently silenced due to falling within Silent Field’s range. “Wait, then how did you figure out that she’s been hiding there since yesterday?”

“We managed that through charading to each other. We’re on the same wavelength, you see!” Tamaki grinned. *They must be close.*

“I see. Then I guess we should have her hide there a bit longer... or so I’d like to say, but asking her to stay any longer after how long she’s been held up there would be a bit cruel, wouldn’t it?”

I wasn’t planning on spending too much time suppressing the middle school, As long as we were able to shave the number of orcs down, at least to the point where they couldn’t attack the Cultivation Center by tomorrow morning. Then I had no qualms about leaving early, preferably before the general or that animal-like monster showed up.

On the other side of things, telling someone who was happy that they were finally being rescued to wait a little longer was cruel.

“For now, I guess you can just bring her over to us,” I decided.

“Okay.” Tamaki nodded. “In that case, which would you prefer?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Do you want us to stop at a restroom and get her changed first, or do you want us to come straight here in her pee-soaked clothes?”

I gave Tamaki a reproachful stare. “Obviously, get her changed before you bring her here.”

“Aye-aye, sir!” Saying that, Tamaki saluted me. Exasperated, I sighed.

“I’m going to contact Shiki-san through the walkie-talkie once we're back.”

With this, our future actions were confirmed. All that was left was to use our earned skill points.

“Mia, as you probably know, will be raising her Wind Magic to Rank 3. As for you, Tamaki, it looks like you have enough points to acquire Rank 5 Swordsmanship, so I guess we’ll go with that.”

“Yup, I agree. Hehe, I did it! I’m finally going to have a higher-ranking skill than Arisu. Now I’m number one!”

“Congratulations, Tamaki-chan,” Arisu cheered from the side. She seemed totally indifferent to being dethroned. *Well, she’s an angel, so I guess there was never any question about that. Tamaki, on the other hand...*

“W-what’s with that look, Kazu-san? You’re looking at me like I’m a little dumb kid who can’t read the room...”

“Oh, so you figured it out?”

Tamaki’s mouth opened wide, seemingly offended.

“You’re so mean, Kazu-san!” She jeered as she raced over to Arisu. “Don’t you think so too, Arisu?”

Not knowing what to say, Arisu looked at me with a troubled smile.

“Remember, Arisu, true friendship is one where you can drop your fist on your friend’s head when they’re acting out.”

“Umm, you see, I’m not... really mad at her.”

“See, see, Kazu-san! Arisu’s okay with it! That’s why she and I are best friends!”

“Uh-huh... so long as you don’t go too overboard, I guess it’s fine.”

“You don’t need to worry about that. I am prudence *personified*, isn’t that right, Arisu?”

“... W-well...”

Arisu and I exchanged a glance, and then she slowly dropped her gaze.

“I guess it’s true when they say that best friends know each other the best, huh?” I smiled dryly.

“Huh? But I’m totally careful, you guys? Even during tests, I only forget to write my name on them every once in a while.”

“Forgetting to write your own name is supposed to be those once-in-a-blue-moon type events, you know?”

“Every year, there’s always one she’ll forget...” Arisu explained.

I-I see.

TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 8	SWORDSMANSHIP: 4→5
STRENGTH: 1	SKILL POINTS: 5→0

MIA	
LEVEL: 8	EARTH MAGIC: 4
WIND MAGIC: 2→3	SKILL POINTS: 3→0

Although I was still feeling a little uneasy, we left the white room.

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Once we returned to the real world from the white room, I pulled out the walkie-talkie and gave Shiki-san a report of the situation. However, I didn’t receive a reply.

Oh, come to think of it, there’s probably no signal with the forest in between us. In addition to the problem of distance, now there was no signal. *For how*

useful it seemed before, hasn't this thing been kinda useless?

While I pondered the usefulness of the walkie-talkie, Tamaki-chan ran over to us accompanied by a girl.

Chapter 43: Operation Gain-Control-Of-The-Middle-School – 4

The girl, whose name I soon learned was Sumire Suginomiya, was an average-height girl with a bit of pudginess to her. Her hair was tied up in braids, and she was wearing frameless glasses. In all respects, she reminded me of one of those stereotypical bookworms.

From the waist up, she looked like any ordinary schoolgirl dressed in her uniform. Her lower half, though, was the opposite. She had neither stockings nor shoes on, and her bottom uniform piece was nowhere to be found. In its stead were briefs, which I could only assume were Tamaki's spare pair.

Oh, right, she peed herself. Makes sense that she'd want to change out of them.

The first thing Sumire did after reaching us was to give Arisu a big hug. Then she turned to me and repeatedly bowed, thanking me for rescuing her. She was a size bigger than Arisu and Tamaki but seeing her timid disposition, I couldn't help but think of her as a mouse in the body of a lion.

Tamaki began to recount their encounter. Apparently, she'd been running past the area next to the lockers when she noticed movement inside the supply closet. She'd nearly swung her axe at the door out of surprise but stopped at the last second. *That's about what I'd expect from 'Little Miss Careless,' acting before thinking.* Though I guess anyone would be surprised if something suddenly moved out of the corner of their eye.

Sumire joined in as well, explaining that she'd panicked when she noticed all the sounds in her surroundings had vanished. There was a flurry of questions I wanted to ask her, but before I could get the words out of my mouth, her stomach made a cute, growling noise. She grabbed onto her abdomen, blushing furiously.

"If you want, I don't mind sharing one of my CalorieMates. You can drink some of my water, too," I offered, holding out my water bottle. Seeing as I could simply summon more if I was running low, I wasn't too concerned with sharing some supplies. *Although, at this rate, Mia's MP is likely to run out before mine.*

Sumire gleefully accepted my offer and munched down on the CalorieMate. Letting her know she didn't need to stop eating to answer, I began to question her.

"Did you see the animal that the orcs brought with them?" I asked. She looked at me blankly before shaking her head.

She doesn't know, huh...? Hopefully, I can get something out of her.

"Oh, but I did hear some growling earlier... It sounded kind of like a dog."

"And you weren't discovered?"

"No. They sounded fairly distant."

I guess if she had been discovered, she wouldn't be sitting here talking to me, would she?

I recalled the map of the Middle School I'd seen back in the Cultivation Center. Incidentally, it had been drawn by Arisu and the other middle school students. One could take several routes to reach the courtyard, such as the outdoor staircase. So, it seemed the animal in question simply hadn't gone past the area where Sumire was hiding but instead had taken another route. Her luck was both a blessing and a curse; while it was a factor in her survival, it also meant we wouldn't be able to glean any new information from her.

After giving Sumire a brief overview of the situation, I had her hide in the toilet area. Before we separated from her, though, I handed her all of the CalorieMates I had on me. She looked very delighted to be given food. Having a big appetite was a good thing.

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Invisibility—a Rank 3 Wind Magic spell. This spell would turn a single target completely invisible. Visually speaking, it looked like the optic camouflage that would appear in certain sci-fi films. I couldn't understand the premise behind it at all, though the same could probably be said for the other spells as well.

The spell's effective time clocked in at around three to four minutes at Rank 3. The clothes and objects the person was holding onto would disappear along with the target.

Becoming invisible. The very idea seemed extremely overpowering to me, but with great power came great limitations, as they said. Strong movements or making direct contact with another living being would cancel the invisibility.

We did a Q&A session while still in the white room, learning a few things.

First, smaller lifeforms, such as mosquitos and flies, did not fall under the 'making contact with another living being condition and thus would not render the spell null. 'Strong movements,' meanwhile, were actions such as running, swinging around your limbs, and speaking at a normal conversational level. Other movement methods, like walking, crouching, and speaking quietly, would apparently not trigger the spell's cancellation. Magic could only be used via speaking incantations; hence, it fell under 'strong movements.' The gist was the only thing a person could do while invisible was move slowly.

Despite all of the heavy restrictions placed upon it, however, this spell was still plenty powerful. Being able to sneak up on an enemy and catch them by surprise was an invaluable advantage. If you coupled it with Silent Field, you would have the ultimate wombo-combo for spy missions. An assassin could sneak up on an enemy soundlessly and without a trace of their approach. *Of course, their target would probably notice something was off when they entered Silent Field's range. Having all sounds around them disappear isn't exactly a normal phenomenon, after all.*

Arisu and Tamaki agreed that they were already close enough once they were three meters away from the enemy. They would be able to close the gap before the opponent noticed something was wrong. Although the spell's strict requirements meant I could not cast Haste on them, its other benefits more than made up for that.

Speaking of spell restrictions, you may wonder if magic could be used inside Silent Field's radius. I had asked the computer about this previously. According to its response, the sound itself wasn't as important as the lip movements for the incantation. In fact, you didn't have to make any sound at all when using magic. After learning this, I experimented and confirmed first-hand that such was the case.

"The orcs on the second floor's hallway are just standing around near the center of it. We're going to ignore them for now and get rid of the orcs in the rooms closest to us, starting from the left side."

Our plan was to get rid of as many orcs on the second floor as possible, so we might as well get rid of them in the most efficient manner possible.

Mia cast Invisibility and Silent Field onto Arisu and Tamaki, which caused our surroundings to go silent. I flashed a thumbs up, and although I was not able to see their ascent up the stairs, I could tell they had moved when the sounds around us were audible once more.

"Let's follow them."

"Mm."

After casting both Invisibility and Silent Field onto ourselves, we headed upstairs. The two orcs were standing around in the center of the hallway, seemingly lazing around. They didn't glance in our direction but appeared to be patrolling the area. *They understand the importance of being vigilant, yet they're standing there, slacking around?*

We slowly moved from the stairs towards the entrance to the room, proceeding carefully to not release our cloak of invisibility. *Arisu and the others should already be in the room*, I thought as I peered inside.

Inside the room were an elite orc and a regular one. Several corpses of male students lay motionless on the floor. The two orcs were using the bodies' heads to play a gorey version of bean bag juggling.

Arisu and Tamaki suddenly revealed themselves and charged at the orcs. Tamaki slashed at the elite orc with her gigantic axe and lopped its head off

while Arisu thrust her spear at the small-fry orc and pierced right through the nape of its neck.

The sound of a level-up echoed inside my head. *Oh, me this time?*

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The inside of the white room looked different than the last time. Sitting in the center of the room was a change machine with an LCD panel, with words and letters displayed on it. The place where you would normally insert coins and bills was missing; in its place was a funnel-shaped cone. *It looks like we're supposed to put something inside... but what does it want?*

The four of us exchanged glances.

“What do you think-”

“-this machine is for?”

Arisu and Tamaki stared at the machine with perplexed expressions. I first thanked Arisu and Tamaki for doing a good job killing the orcs, then faced the machine-looking object again.

So then, what to do with this thing...?

There were two things about which I was most curious. The first was what this strange machine was, and the second was why it had appeared.

“Kazucchi. You reached Level 10 just now, didn't you?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Perhaps it's a reward for reaching Level 10?” Mia suggested.

Oh, I never thought of that. That's a model otaku for you. Nice going, Mia.

“Let's ask the computer before we start touching it.”

And so, as was tradition, it was time for a Q&A session. Each of us moved to our respective computers and began asking questions, ensuring ours didn't overlap to hasten our information gathering. Most of the questions were regarding the change machine, and after a period of questioning, this is what we'd found.

This change machine-shaped object was a bonus received for leveling up. This machine would appear in the center of the room whenever there was someone at or above Level 10 within a party. Incidentally, we also asked for the machine's name and received the cold, robotic response: **Name it yourselves.**

The machine's purpose was to exchange tokens for items. The aforementioned items were not limited to solid objects but also skills, magic spells, and special abilities. *So, basically, the main attractions of the machine are the skills, magic spells, and abilities.*

The 'tokens' were apparently the red and blue gems that would drop whenever an orc was killed. *They're a currency then? I guess I'll call these gems 'red tokens' and 'blue tokens' from now on.* These tokens were also worth different amounts depending on the color. Red tokens were worth one point, while blue tokens were worth ten times as much.

Interesting, so the drops from the elite orcs are worth 10 times as much? But why do they only give 5x as much XP... They feel like they're at least 10x stronger, so what's with the mismatched values?

Tokens would not be able to be retrieved after being fed into the machine. Even if you were holding onto them in the real world, they would disappear from your person when used in the white room.

From a system standpoint, this was only natural. Until this point, when we left the white room, everything would revert to the exact same state it was in before entering the white room. I wondered if the token system was the only exception to this rule.

"For starters, I suppose we should give this thing a name. Anyone opposed to 'Vending Machine?'"

"Really, Kazucchi? Can't you give it a little flair?"

"Oh? Then, by all means, Mia-sensei, please bestow upon us a name worthy of your flair."

"Urk..." Mia shrunk back her body, clearly not expecting the responsibility to be shoved onto her. "U-umm... 'Venditor Machinam?'"

"You just changed it to Latin."

“But of course. Any chunni would agree that this is the correct choice.” She smiled smugly, holding out her fingers in a peace sign. *Why did I bother giving her a chance to name it to begin with?* I sighed inwardly before looking at Arisu and Tamaki to probe their thoughts.

“Whichever name you go with is fine by me.”

“Yep, it’s all on you, Kazu-san!”

All right. Let’s see what I can come up with... or so I would say, but honestly, I don’t really care what we name it.

“Okay, I guess we’ll go with Mia’s suggestion-...” I paused mid-sentence. *Hold on a second. Could we...?* Suddenly thinking of something, I input my question into the search field.

Can the other students that reach Level 10 also use the aforementioned machine?

Yes

Do students we have not yet met also fall into the category of ‘other students?’

Yes

“Do you think we could use this to transmit messages?” I looked at the others. We could use the machine to send messages to people we hadn’t even met yet. The idea appeared attractive, but I quickly realized its issues. *That also means those guys can see it too, doesn’t it? Shiba’s group at the High School...*

“There’s another important question to ask, Kazucchi.” Mia raised her index finger. “Doesn’t this mean you are the first to reach Level 10?”

“Ahh, that’s a good question. I believe so.”

I tried asking just in case I wasn’t, but I received no response. From how it felt whenever I would receive a response from the computer, whoever was operating it from behind the screen was neutral to whoever asked. Although I wasn’t given a clear response from the computer, I supposed Mia’s conjecture was most likely correct. *I mean, it’s asking us to name the thing, so surely there hasn’t been anyone who reached this point before us.*

Now, since we had been given the special privilege of naming the machine, as insignificant as that may be, what would be the best way to use it?

“We could give it a name like ‘Come gather at the Cultivation Center.’ That would convey to everyone who sees it that we’re holding out over there. That being said...”

“Not a good idea.” Mia quickly objected, mercilessly cutting down my suggestion. “We don’t know whether or not the survivors that reach Level 10 will be our allies.”

I was surprised to hear her veto the suggestion almost immediately. She herself had been the one to proclaim that she wanted to go to the High School to save her brother, and yet now she was turning down a possible way to reach out to him.

“Listen up, Kazucchi. Whenever you watch a zombie movie, you’re often left feeling that humans are scarier than the monsters.”

“I-I see.” I had been expecting something profound, considering how serious she sounded. Yet, here she was, talking about zombie movies, of all things.

In any case, I understood what she was insinuating. My mind flashed back to what I had seen while scouting the high school section.

But more importantly... she’s actually quite sharp, isn’t she? Mia had an adept understanding of the situation we were currently facing. She was usually busy cracking jokes and messing around, so I had never noticed this side of her.

Mia shifted her face upwards to gaze into my eyes. Her expression was normally stagnant, never showing any great changes. But this time, although it may have been my imagination, I could see hints of sadness and loneliness hiding in her eyes. Perhaps she’d come to the realization that I had scouted out the high school section.

I wonder if she’s feeling down because she thinks I can’t rely on them for these kinds of things. Nevertheless, I couldn’t tell them about the state of affairs over at the high school section—at least not yet. Shiki-san and I had talked about this and decided it would be better to keep it under wraps for the time being.

For now, we needed to focus our all on freeing the middle school from the orcs' control. Feeding them an overabundance of information would only serve to cause chaos. Shiki-san and I agreed on that front; all I could do for the moment was act accordingly.

"You're correct, though. We shouldn't ignore the possibility."

Truth be told, I had no intention of designating the name as 'Come gather at the Cultivation Center.' By telling them our exact location, we would practically be begging them to take notice of us and cause trouble for our group. *So then, how should we best take advantage of this opportunity...?*

"Then, um, do you mind if I name it? I'd like to name it... for personal reasons," Mia asked hesitantly.

"I don't mind, but what did you have in mind?"

"I want to leave a message for my brother. I want to tell him that I'm alive... if he's still alive to read it, that is."

"Oh, so that's why? Hmm... sure, go ahead," I said, giving her permission.

Her idea certainly didn't benefit our group as a whole. But I recognized that this was something deeply important to her. I saw one potential problem: her brother may have become part of the enemy's side, but we'd deal with that problem if it came up. We weren't exactly telling everyone where to find Mia, so nothing bad would come of it. *Besides, by naming the machine, everyone will know that someone out there has reached Level 10 anyway.*

"So, what are you thinking of naming it?"

"Hmm..." Mia fell silent and looked down. A few seconds and troubled expressions later, she lifted her head resolutely.

"'Mia Vendor.' Plain and simple."

"You sure? You're marking it with your own name."

"I'm positive. My brother's a big dummy, so I have to make the message clear."

Don't worry, I'm reading your message loud and clear—you have absolutely no faith in your brother. On a serious note, I wondered what the odds were that

her brother was still alive. Personally, I... didn't think they were very high. That being said, on the off chance that he had survived, the name 'Mia' was rare, so I was sure he'd understand the meaning behind her message as long as he reached Level 10.

I understood her feelings about wanting her family to know she was alive. *If this is important to her, I see no problem with it.* Thinking so, I moused over to the name blank and inputted the name.

"All right, it's been decided. Now then, what will we do with the Mia Vendor?"

"Hm. Upon further reflection, it feels like I'm being offered as merchandise."

"Shouldn't you have thought about that before deciding on the name?" I buried my head in my hands.

Chapter 44: The Item Vendor

Moving on, we come to the vending machine in the shape of a change machine—or as we'd dubbed it, the Mia Vendor.

Following a Q&A session, we discovered that tokens could be exchanged for items or abilities. Only those in the white room were allowed to use the machine.

"What are your thoughts, Mia?"

"Seems to be a type of booster mechanic, albeit an awfully suspicious one..."

Hard agree there. We exchanged a knowing glance and sighed. Being avid video game players, both of us were more or less familiar with features such as this. Arisu and Tamaki, on the other hand, looked at us with blank expressions.

"What do you mean by that?" Arisu asked, and Tamaki nodded beside her.

"First and foremost, supposing this really is some form of booster mechanic, why would it require us to go out searching for gems to use for exchange? If it's trying to help us, shouldn't a fee be an unnecessary tag? The 'owner of this room' or 'being behind the computer,' however you want to call them, answers any question you ask them *except* for when you ask anything it deems 'substantial.' That's why we're suspicious of it," I explained.

"Mm. They're neutral but also ill-natured," added Mia.

Hearing our thoughts on the matter, Arisu lapsed into thought for several minutes, eventually asking, "But didn't they give us skills?"

"That's also part of it. We don't know why they give us all these things; hence why Mia and I are puzzled about what to do. We wouldn't have been able to survive up until now without them, though, so I never gave it any consideration."

Something about the Mia Vendor seemed different from the rest. There was some sort of foreign, deeper aspect to it, but I couldn't put my finger on what.

“For example. Mia, how would you describe the meaning behind giving us this?”

“Everything has been to reclaim the tokens. That kind of thing.”

“By ‘everything,’ you mean...?”

“From the mountain being transported to this world, the orcs attacking us after, us being granted skills—literally *everything*.”

Although it wasn't like I *hadn't* considered the possibility but the idea seemed so far-fetched that I'd ruled it out. *I mean, if the owner of this room really wants the orcs to be killed so badly, then why don't they just go out and do it themselves?* Rather than orchestrate such an elaborate chain of events to coax us into doing their job for them, it seemed far easier in my eyes for them to just do the job themselves.

“Perhaps there is some entity out there similar to God, and they're unable to move or act, thus requiring them to have the job be done by someone else? It could be that kind of setting,” suggested Mia.

“Is that from an anime?”

“Anime, games, light novels, manga.”

So, it's a common story archetype, huh? Generally speaking, most of them had some form of supreme existence, unable to move and act freely or were otherwise held back by a limitation of some sort. Or so Mia went on to explain.

From a story standpoint, this made sense. What was the point of having a protagonist if they served no purpose, after all? The real world, though? Assuming there really was some kind of supreme existence reigning above, what was their true goal behind all of this?

One thing had been all but confirmed: this ‘diety’ needed some kind of being to use their strength in its stead. Otherwise, there would be no need for a system with such things as skills. It was clear there was an unnatural force at work here... and that it was playing with us like pawns. Perhaps someone was watching us struggle and squirm on the ground, laughing gleefully as though we were a source of entertainment. *If that's the case, then that means from the beginning, everything's been...*

I shook my head to dispel the thought. Even if that was the truth, it meant little in the long run. The same went for whether the entity's intentions were good or evil. We didn't need to worry about anything except for one massive and grave uncertainty. That is, if this supposed entity were to descend on the board themselves, whose side would they be on? Ours... or the enemy's?

"What do you think, Mia?" I faced her. "Should we make active use of the Mia Vendor?"

"Rather than discuss whether we should use this frequently, how about trying it out first?" She returned.

Hmm, a fair idea... in practice, at least. I frowned as I glanced over the prices indicated on the LCD screen, eventually sighing dejectedly.

"Everything's so expensive..."

The cheapest item listed on the board was, of all things, the magic spells. For instance, the Rank 1 magic Language Comprehension was listed as 100 tokens. Rank 2 magic, meanwhile, was a whopping 400 tokens. Special skills-wise, there was one called Shield Technique, which cost 200 tokens.

Special items were being advertised as well, one of which was an Item Duplication Device. This item had multiple classes to choose from: Class A and Class B, the former requiring 200 tokens and the latter 2000 tokens. There were also oddball items to choose from, such as notebooks and other trinkets, which were priced at 250 tokens.

According to the computer, the notebook and the contents written within it could be taken outside with us when we left. *Sure, that may be handy, but don't you think you're charging a bit much for it?*

The different magics and spells displayed on the screen only went as high as Rank 2. When asked why, the computer responded: **More selections will become available upon level up.**

Speaking of things unavailable to us at the moment—tokens. We only had eight blue tokens and thirty red tokens on us at the moment. The rest of them were back at the Cultivation Center. *I mean, can you blame us? Who knew they were suddenly going to gain a use...*

“We can only afford Rank 1 magic,” I lamented.

“Seems that way,” agreed Mia. “What are we supposed to do after purchasing something, though?”

We turned to the computer once more in search of answers. Below was everything we’d learned:

To purchase items from the Mia Vendor, you first must insert the necessary number of tokens corresponding to the item you want to acquire. Once the payment was given, a selection screen would pop up on the computer, asking you to select your desired item. Afterward, you just needed to follow the directions given on the screen.

If we have to use the computer anyway, why not just have the entire process on there to begin with? I sighed inwardly. I imagined it was most likely a necessary process for reclaiming the tokens, but the frustration I felt wouldn’t disappear.

For items such as spells, you first needed to select one spell of the same rank that you had already learned to get rid of before you could learn the new spell. For example, in my case, if I wanted to learn a new Rank 1 spell, I would need to get rid of one of my pre-existing Rank 1 spells in either Summoning Magic or Support Magic. *If I had to pick one to get rid of, it’d probably be something unimportant like Summon Cauldron.*

For items such as skills, you needed to spend skill points to learn them.

In short, if I wanted to learn the Rank 1 Shield Technique, I would have to spend one skill point to acquire it. Rank 2 would need two skill points, and so on. *Not only do we need to spend 200 tokens, but also skill points? Seriously?*

The Item Duplication Devices were “super-amazing items” that could duplicate whatever was put inside them. *Hello, laws of physics? Isn’t this supposed to be against the rules of the universe or something?* Regrettably, no matter how much I questioned the logic behind magic, my pleas went unanswered.

On that subject, the Class A version was a square box that could apparently hold spherical objects up to the size of a soccer ball inside it. The Class B version

appeared to be the same shape, but its measurements were larger, measuring just over three feet in each dimension. These items were for one-time use and could only be used inside the white room. You could apparently duplicate whatever you could cram into the box's interior all at once; however, some items could not be duplicated regardless of whether they fit. Tokens were one such example. *Makes sense. Being able to duplicate tokens would make gathering them pointless.*

Curious, I asked whether it was possible to stuff as many bullets as you could into the box and replicate them all at once. The word **Yes** popped up on the screen. *I see, so it can be done... well let's leave that for another time.* This was no time to be thinking about other certain individuals.

"I guess we can only purchase Rank 1 magic with what we have on hand. The question is, which one?"

There were over twenty different Rank 1 spells to choose from, and while the uses of some of them could be surmised through the name, others left a bunch of question marks floating over my head. Tedious though it might be, I asked the computer about each spell, one by one.

But perhaps I was going about it too haphazardly because the types of magic available to purchase could seemingly be divided into two categories. The first was the camp with Rank 1 spells that were weaker than their normal counterparts. At Rank 2, these spells were the equivalent of normal Rank 1 magic. Among this group, there were also several magics that appeared to be downgraded versions of normal magic.

Ahh, so that's how it is. No wonder we could purchase these. In game terms, the magic skills you could acquire using skill points were part of your main class, while the purchasable ones were meant to be auxiliary at most.

"Essentially, Kazucchi could buy magic for self-defense since he has no attack spells. That kind of thing?" Precisely, as Mia said, these complementary spells were evidently designed for unbalanced parties to pick up as auxiliaries to even out one's skillset.

The other group fell into the convenience category. Take Language Comprehension, for example. This magic would apparently allow you to read

any form of writing and understand the meaning, no matter the language. This magic was a must-have for anyone planning on living in any foreign civilization.

... Foreign civilization, huh? Had we truly come to another world, then there were more likely than not some kind of people living somewhere. In the past, when I had asked the computer about the orcs, it had told me that they were referred to as such by the locals, so I knew *someone* out there had to have designated them by that name.

“If we’re going to purchase one, it’s between Language Comprehension, Magic Hand, and Spirit Fatigue.”

Magic Hand was a spell which could manifest an invisible but slow-moving hand that you could control manually. Spec-wise, the hand couldn’t lift a sword, but it *could* be used to sneakily lift up people’s skirts. Other strong motions, such as throwing, were also impossible. Depending on how one used the hand, it could have its uses.

Spirit Fatigue could manifest feelings of fatigue in targets through direct contact. Simple but effective, as they said. The only downside was that you needed direct contact with the target to use it. *Hm... on second thought, this one’s more suited for Arisu than it is for me, isn’t it?*

Other than those three, there was one spell that could be considered attack magic, if only barely. It was an ignition spell called Tinder. Arisu and Tamaki both vouched for it, saying it was handy to have, but Mia didn’t agree.

“Why not just use a handheld or candle lighter?”

Thus, any and all defense for Tinder went up in flames-no pun intended-with just a few words from Mia. If anything for sale was something that could be substituted for an item of modern convenience, then we had no use for it. Half of the twenty listings under Rank 1 magic could be summarized as such.

“My vote’s for Language Comprehension,” Mia said, and I nodded in agreement. *Of the three, this one definitely seems to be the most likely to be useful.*

After getting everyone’s agreement, I inserted 30 red tokens and 7 blue tokens into the Mia Vendor. Then I selected Language Comprehension on the

LCD screen. I heard a chime come from the computer, similar sounding to the notification when getting an email. Peering at the screen, I saw a message stating: **Please select a magic spell to discard to receive your new magic spell.**

I moused over to Summon Cauldron and selected it. *Farewell, cauldron.* Some might have argued over its uses, but we could just go down to the Cultivation Center’s kitchen area if we needed a pot. If need be, we could also scrounge the dormitory kitchen for one.

On a side note, even after being selected for purchase, Language Comprehension did not disappear from the list of options. *Phew, am I glad about that.* My fear that every item would be on a first-come, first-serve basis was no more. If everything would stay available for sale even after being purchased once, there was no need to concern ourselves with rushing back here. If possible, I was hoping to discuss the choices with everyone, or at least with Shiki-san, and choose only the needed items.

And so, having obtained a new spell known as Language Comprehension, we exited the white room and headed back to the real world.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 10	SUPPORT MAGIC: 4
SUMMONING MAGIC: 3	SKILL POINTS: 4

Chapter 45: Operation Gain-Control-Of-The-Middle-School – 5

Mia and I stealthily made our way over to the classroom nearest the stairway, stepping silently into the room. I spotted Arisu and Tamaki's figures in the center of the room. It looked like they had just finished wrapping up their battle.

Their Invisibility had expired due to the skirmish, but Silent Field still had around half of its lifespan left. The spell's effective time was three to four and a half minutes, owing to Mia's Wind Magic being Rank 3. So, as long as she quickly recast Invisibility on the pair, they would have plenty of time to get to the next classroom and finish off the orcs inside before its effects expire.

Of course, for Mia to cast any magic on them, she'd first have to undo her own Invisibility. Having to reapply theirs and then her own every time we cleared a room was going to quickly drain her MP, but we didn't have much choice. Stealth was the cornerstone of this operation; we couldn't afford to be stingy with our MP on the off chance we might get discovered. We had discussed and agreed upon this in the white room before coming here. We would do everything we could to make this strategy a success.

Mia dispelled her own Invisibility and quickly recast the spell on Arisu and Tamaki. I sensed the two of them move away from us and then exit the classroom. Though I could neither see nor hear them, I felt a slight breeze pass by, leaving behind a faint but good smell. Perhaps it had just been my imagination.

Incidentally, a Rank 3 Support Magic spell called See Invisibility allowed you to see invisible objects or people. By casting this spell on myself, I could see their figures.

Nevertheless, I was letting everyone get used to being invisible during this mission, so I deliberately refrained from using it on them. I didn't cast it on myself because I wanted to confirm that they were disappearing. Perhaps in the

future, when we were more accustomed to being invisible, See Invisibility would be incorporated into our strategies.

All right, time to get moving. I sent the raven back into the hallway to check on the orcs further down the hallway. Per its orders, the raven raised one of its wings, indicating the hallway was safe to traverse.

When Mia and I stepped out into the hallway, we noticed the three orcs standing guard further down the hallway were all lying motionless on the floor, piled on top of each other. Arisu and Tamaki were nowhere to be found. I imagined they'd probably moved on to the next classroom.

Smart decision. Time was of the essence now that we'd cleared the orcs patrolling the hallway. If one of the orcs happened to look down the hallway, it wouldn't be long before they discovered there were intruders.

While I pondered such things, I felt myself being warped into the white room. Arisu had leveled up.

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Like the previous time, the Mia Vendor was positioned in the center of the room. It didn't look like anything had changed since we were gone. So, we moved on to hearing the report from our vanguard.

Arisu and Tamaki filled me in on the details. The two of them had killed three orcs, and there were still three more inside the classroom before the room would be completely cleared. They appeared to have leveled up mid-battle.

"Also, a few girls are alive," Tamaki added. From her forlorn expression, I could tell they must've been in bad shape, possibly only barely still alive.

I wondered if those girls considered themselves blessed to have survived such a harrowing experience or if they were cursing the world for putting them through it in the first place. I wasn't sure how they felt. That being said, there wasn't much we could do for them. We were limited to saving their lives and turning them into soldiers if they were willing.

Don't you think you're being a tad too cruel, even by your standards? I wondered to myself. *Then again, these cruel but effective measures are for the*

best when taking into account the future.

If there was any consolation, the burden of these decisions would not fall squarely on my shoulders. Shiki-san and I both agreed to undertake this operation. We were equally guilty in that regard. As such, I had to harden my resolve and do my share.

“How many?” I asked.

“Two people are alive for sure... Maybe another.” She replied dejectedly.

Not a lot of them, though I supposed it was better than none. *Count your blessings, me.*

“Arisu. When we return to the real world, cast Heal and Cure Mind on them. Move to the next classroom as quickly as you can once you’re finished.”

“Got it,” Arisu nodded. “You want us to move before Silent Field expires, right?”

“Yeah, leave the rest to us. We’ll keep them safe.”

“All right. But, um...” She hesitated and eyed me with a suspicious, almost disapproving gaze. “You can’t stare at their bodies more than necessary.”

“I will do my best,” I replied and gave a civil bow.

No matter how you spin it, though, I’m definitely going to end up looking. On the plus side, Arisu’s really cute when she gets jealous, so I don’t mind being scolded by her.

Huh. Aren’t I being way too insensitive right now? I paused for a moment to mull it over. Things had been so dark and depressing recently that I seemed to be growing numb to everything around me. *But perhaps that’s not so bad.* Rather than be dispirited and depressed over the grim outlook of our current circumstances, wasn't it better for me to smile and laugh insensitively?

The injured girls could be replaced if they died here. We, on the other hand, could not be. Not every person was valued equally in this world, though I was sure that wouldn’t stop Arisu from pouting a little, even if I were to explain as much to her.

“There’s... something else too,” Tamaki hesitated. She seemed troubled about how to approach the topic. “The classroom window frame and curtains were... completely charred.”

“Huh? Charred?” I looked at her incredulously.

“Yeah. I’m not sure how, but it looks like they were scorched by something. There’s also a body on the window... I think it may be the teacher’s, but it’s burnt beyond recognition, so I can’t tell for sure.”

Beyond recognition? Did the orcs torch the teacher’s body for fun? My mind flashed back to the bonfire out in front of the school—another example of the orcs’ poor taste in pastimes. *Hmm... it’s likely, but I can’t say for sure.*

I was going to need to see the scene for myself before I could make any more conjectures. Thankfully, the guards in the hallway had been disposed of by Arisu and Tamaki. We no longer needed to fear being spotted by one of them if we lingered in one spot for too long.

By the way, although we were here now due to Arisu’s level-up, I was going to have her save up her skill points instead of spending them right now. I was hoping to have her obtain Rank 5 Spearmanship.

ARISU	
LEVEL: 10	SPEARMANSHIP: 4
HEALING MAGIC: 3	SKILL POINTS: 4

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We flashed back to the real world. I quickly went to pick up the red gems that had dropped from the orcs in the hallway with Mia not far behind.

Arisu and Tamaki exited a nearby classroom when we'd finished picking up the red gems. They seemed to have finished killing the orcs as well as treating the girls.

Still under the effects of Silent Field, we simply exchanged a nod and then moved into the room in their stead.

Looks like Tamaki wasn't kidding. The curtains are practically cinders. The faint but pungent scent of something burnt lingered in the air. Due to the other overpowering odors in the room, I couldn't discern too much about its origins.

In the corner of the room was the charred corpse of a man. Lying nearby were four more bodies, all male students. Each of their heads had been split in two.

Looking over to the opposite corner, we discovered the figures of three girls, alive but completely drained. Not a single article of clothing could be seen on their naked forms. They didn't appear to have any external wounds, most likely due to Arisu's healing magic, but they were drenched in orc fluids. Arisu should've also given them Cure Mind as well. But they made no attempt to cover themselves even after noticing me.

Regrettably, we couldn't do anything for them at the moment. They would have to endure until Shiki-san's group returned.

In any case, I'm glad everyone's still got everything attached. Turning them into fighters would have proved difficult had their limbs been twisted and torn off.

On the subject, lost body parts could be restored to working order using Cure Deficit, a Rank 4 Healing Magic spell. Arisu's Healing Magic was still Rank 3 now, though, so we weren't going to be able to use it for a while yet.

While we waited for Arisu and Tamaki to return, I made the decision to call over my two wolf familiars that were waiting downstairs and have them guard us. The girls' faces went pale as the wolves slunk into the room, clearly frightened by their presence. *Oh, duh. Didn't think that one through, did you, me?*

I wasn't too bothered with leaving the explanations for later and keeping them in the dark for a while. On the other hand, once Silent Field's effects expired, we would be in a pinch if they shrieked out in terror.

With Silent Field in effect, there was no way for me to directly explain to them that the wolves were friendly. There was no need to panic, so I did my best to

gesture and charade to pass on this information to them. Despite the best of my efforts, I couldn't get through to them at all.

Somehow, I'm getting the feeling I look like an idiot right now. Turning my head to look next to me confirmed my suspicions, as Mia was holding her sides while she shook from laughter. *This little rascal...*

Seeing as gesturing wasn't going to get my intentions through, there was no choice left but for me to wait for Silent Field to run its course. I made sure to explain to them that the wolves were our allies once I could speak again.

See? They're not so bad. Nothing to be scared of, right? Just their cute lil' faces; their small, adorable puppy eyes; their claws; their sharp teeth... Okay, so maybe they are a bit scary. My bad.

While I was busy apologizing to them in my head, one of the girls shook their head. "Sorry, we mistook them for the strange dog that those pigs brought with them."

"Hold on. What did you say?" I moved closer in an attempt to question them further but was stopped by Mia tugging on my sleeve.

"You're not acting very gentleman-like, Kazucchi. You need to look away."

You were laughing your ass off a few minutes ago when I was doing my best impersonation of mime, but now is when you want to act all serious?

"I'm not trying to look. I just want to-" I hurriedly tried to explain my actions.

"Arisu-chin's glaring at you."

I spun around and looked at the doorway to find Arisu looking at me with a saddened expression. Once I saw her face, I no longer felt like protesting.

"Kazu-san." Tamaki's face popped up beside Arisu's. "We've checked all of the classrooms on this floor. There were two elite orcs and nine small-fry orcs. The only survivor was this girl here."

Tamaki motioned to the half-nude girl whom she was supporting with her shoulder. *So, she's the final survivor of the second floor, huh?*

"Also, you soured Arisu's mood."

Figured that one out myself, thank you, I grumbled internally. But do we really have to be doing this right now? Asking about that strange dog the girl mentioned is far more important than this.

Most likely, the animal-thing I had seen back when I was performing recon was the very same one the girl referred to. Next to the general orc, that thing looked even bigger than my wolves.

“That huge dog or whatever. What did it look like?” I asked the girls, facing the wall opposite them. I couldn’t see their figures, but through some odd sixth sense, I could tell they were cracking smiles. *Oh well. If they’re smiling, then at least it means they’re lively enough to smile.*

“The dog was all black, and it could spit fire from its mouth. That’s how our teacher, well...” The girl trailed off.

Flames came from its mouth? I believe those types of attacks are called 'breath attacks' in games. Are you telling me there are more RPG-like monsters on the loose?

That said, I didn't find it strange that monsters of that variety existed in this world. I had even held a sneaking suspicion (if a very small one) that we would one day come across enemies with those kinds of attacks in their arsenals.

Furthermore, there was another piece of evidence that supported this theory. Listed under Rank 4 Support Magic was a set of spells going by the name of Resist Element. There were 4 different versions of the spell, and each would greatly boost resistance against attribute-imbued attacks pertaining to their particular element. You simply had to specify which element you wished to guard against when casting the spell.

Attribute attacks? As in stuff like fire breath? Does that mean there are monsters out there that can use attacks like that? Just how much of a damned RPG are you trying to make here?! Such had been my thought process when I discovered this. Afterward, I'd spent several minutes cursing and hurling all kinds of words at the computer.

In case you're wondering, this little outburst of mine happened sometime yesterday when it was just the two of us, Arisu and myself, in the white room.

She had watched me scream and shout at the computer, attempting to calm me down while making a troubled smile.

“Hellhound... or Cerberus, maybe?” I caught Mia whispering next to me.

Oh, right, they did have those sorts of monsters in RPGs. Since its fur is all black, Hellhound should be a good choice of name.

After all, naming it 'Cerberus' implied its strength was on a whole other level, so I was hoping to stick to a less intimidating moniker. Not that granting it a weak-sounding name would lower its strength anyway.

“For now, I think Hellhound will work fine.”

“Mm. Seems like it’s a really dangerous enemy,” Mia remarked. “What should we do?”

I lapsed into thought. The longer we stayed here in the building, the greater the chances of things going awry. Frankly, I did not like our chances if we were forced to deal with the hellhound *and* the general orc at once.

Although, it’s not like we can separate them either. The two of them appeared to be in the same room, and while drawing one away from the other so we could take them down separately could potentially work, I couldn’t think of a way to do so. There was only one option left for us.

“Guess it’s time to withdraw,” I muttered, glancing at Mia to probe her opinion on the matter. She looked back at me and nodded.

No objections here, then. Now I just need to ask Arisu and Tamaki... though I suspect they won't be jumping at the opportunity.

A voice from the walkie-talkie jarred me from my thoughts—it was Shiki-san. She and her group appeared to have gotten back to the vicinity of the Middle School, and now she was trying to make contact with us.

“Right on schedule,” I murmured to no one in particular.

Chapter 46: Operation Gain-Control-Of-The-Middle-School – 6

Using the walkie-talkie, I informed Shiki-san of the girl, Sumire, hiding in the restrooms downstairs before explaining that we'd found survivors on the second floor. I also mentioned the black dog they claimed to have seen.

"I see. I take it you've finished clearing out the second floor?" Came her reply from the walkie-talkie.

"More or less, yeah. All that's left is the third floor," I replied matter-of-factly. "However..."

Upon being told about my decision to withdraw, Shiki-san quickly reached the same conclusion. "I agree. We've done as much as we can. Retreating is the correct choice."

We needed to strike when the iron was hot—or in this case, retreat. Retreating right now, with our stamina still having a bit to spare if things went south, was the best course of action.

Let's give it up for today. There might be another chance for us to come back. But if we fail, there won't be any more chances. I'm pretty sure some famous commander in the military had once said something similar to this. And, having experienced the battlefield for myself now, I could wholeheartedly attest to the implications of those words.

I gazed at the ceiling above. There may have been people still alive up there, waiting for someone to come and rescue them. Perhaps they were even only barely still clinging to life as a result of the harsh way they had been treated.

I suspected they wouldn't survive long enough to be greeted by tomorrow's morning sun if we were to withdraw now. Shiki-san had mentioned something similar before as well. The reason we had put this dangerous plan to assault the middle school into motion was *that* their time was running out.

But this marked the end of our rescue operation. I could not allow us to risk ourselves any longer. We would have to abandon the girls on the third floor, regardless of whether they were alive or otherwise.

“Mm. You're making the right call. My MP won't last much longer either,” reasoned Mia.

“But Mia-chan... if we leave, then they'll all...” Tamaki looked at Mia in protest. She was clearly hesitant to leave, knowing there could be survivors upstairs.

But Mia remained firm, shaking her head softly as she responded, “We cannot make a mistake. Even a single mistake could cost all of us our lives. You understand, don't you?”

Tamaki grew quiet and hung her head dejectedly. Mia had refuted her with such sound logic that she couldn't object to it. She couldn't have said it better.

“We... have to leave them, don't we, Kazu-san?” Arisu sounded a little saddened as well. But she, trusting my judgment, swallowed her own feelings and begrudgingly agreed.

“Yeah, we have to end things here. Everything's been smooth sailing so far, but who's to say the same will happen once we're up there? What's more, there are powerful enemies up there. Going any further is just too risky to justify doing.”

“B-but, Kazu-san...” Tamaki lifted her head and protested once more. I looked towards her and waited for her to continue.

“L-listen. There might still be girls up there who are alive. We can't just...”

“I know, Tamaki. But we have to leave.”

Tamaki's face scrunched up as though she was a moment away from breaking into tears. Arisu reached out and placed a hand on her shoulder before speaking in a gentle tone, “Believe in Kazu-san. Okay?”

Tamaki pursed her lips tightly and made a pained expression as if desperately trying to endure. After a moment, she shook her head vigorously, causing her pigtails to bounce around erratically.

“Sorry, I was being selfish,” she apologized. “Forget I even said anything.”

“Hey. Don’t be sorry.” Reaching out my hand, I placed it on top of her head and began gently stroking her hair. I both understood and sympathized with her feelings. Nevertheless, making sure every one of us survived to see the following day was one of my duties.

All right. Now that we’ve decided to withdraw, I need to get everyone ready to go. Facing the girls we rescued, I asked, “Can you guys walk?”

They nodded and attempted to get to their feet, staggering slightly as they shifted their legs. However, they only got about halfway up before they wobbled and fell. Before they could fall to the ground, Arisu and Tamaki quickly stepped in to support them.

I guess asking them to walk themselves is a bit much, isn’t it? We were going to have to find another way to move them.

“Okay. I’ll get Shiki-san’s group up here.”

I contacted Shiki-san on the walkie-talkie and instructed her to bring her party up to the second floor. Meanwhile, Arisu and Tamaki stood guard in the hallway.

A few seconds passed and Shiki-san’s party plus Sumire cautiously ascended the stairs before coming to the classroom.

“Sumire-chan and these four are the only survivors, right?” Shiki-san confirmed.

“Yeah, that’s all of them,” I replied.

We couldn’t afford to dawdle here any longer. Shiki-san and her group helped the three girls in this room stand up and took the one girl from Tamaki.

“Okay. Let’s move down the staircase one group at a time,” I said.

Thus, everyone shifted out of the classroom and into the hallway... unexpectedly crossing paths with a group of three orcs coming from the third floor. Perhaps they were changing shifts or simply wanted to mess around with the girls down here. They froze when they saw us, making shocked expressions.

Damn. Talk about bad timing. Cursing inside my head, I immediately cried out, “Arisu, Tamaki!”

“On it!”

“You betcha!”

They closed in on the enemy with agile precision. Although the orcs were shocked to have run into intruders, they regained their senses upon seeing Arisu and Tamaki closing in. They quickly gave a warning cry to upstairs before shifting into a combat stance.

But they were too late to save themselves. Tamaki closed the gap between herself and the orcs in the blink of an eye, bisecting one of them with her gigantic axe.

We were thrown into the white room. Tamaki and Mia had leveled up.

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Inside the white room, we all exchanged nervous glances. Everyone’s expressions were serious, no doubt reflecting on what had just happened.

“The third floor... heard that, right?” Tamaki reluctantly asked.

“Yeah. No doubt about it.” I replied.

I didn’t know how many orcs were on the third floor, but I did know they were most likely going to gather en masse before coming down to attack. We needed to stall them for as long as possible to buy time for Shiki-san’s group to retreat.

“Arisu, Tamaki, line up on the staircase and make a wall for us. We’ll make a gap for them to escape.”

“Okay. We can manage that,” Arisu nodded in agreement. “But what about the other staircase?”

Her fear was a valid concern. The middle school had a set of stairs on *both* ends, not just on our side. These staircases went all the way up to the rooftop from the first floor. Even with Arisu and Tamaki preventing one side from

descending the staircase, the other side would be unguarded. Nothing would be there to stop the orcs from swarming down the other staircase to the first floor, which would put Shiki-san's group in danger.

Man, what should we do? I fell into thought, arms folded over my chest.

“Oh, wait a second.” Suddenly remembering something, I turned to look at Mia. “How about Open Wall?”

“Mm.” Realizing my aim, she nodded. “Where should I cast it? Ceiling or floor?”

“Neither, use it on the wall. We’ll be in full view of the courtyard if you open one leading outside on a southside classroom, so open the hole on the north side wall, where we’re out of sight. We’ll jump down and then hightail it into the forest.”

“Ooh!” Her eyes lit up in admiration.

All right, the plan’s set. Time to put it into action.

TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 9	SWORDSMANSHIP: 5
STRENGTH: 1	SKILL POINTS: 2

MIA	
LEVEL: 9	EARTH MAGIC: 4
WIND MAGIC: 3	SKILL POINTS: 2

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Back in the Middle School, I immediately called out to Shiki-san, who was behind me helping carry the girls.

“Go to the classroom on the north side! We’re going to make a hole in the wall and jump!”

Shiki-san seemed to have understood the situation from just my brief words. She turned around, calling the other girls.

In the meantime, Mia burst into the northside classroom and rushed to the wall facing north. She placed her hand onto the wall and cast Open Wall, and the surface began to contort and shift. I didn't know if the spell would also affect windows, so I instructed her to use it on a windowless area.

The spell worked its magic. Before long, a hole large enough for two grown men to pass through side-by-side had been created. The side of the building could be seen through the hole. A bit further ahead lay the forest.

Not even a beat later, we charged into the room right behind Mia. I kicked aside desks and chairs en route to the hole, making room for Shiki-san's group. Now that the upstairs had been alerted to our presence, we didn't need to fear being too loud. We could make as much noise as we wanted.

“Get through! Hurry!” I yelled.

“All right!” Taking the initiative, Shiki-san grabbed tightly onto the girl she was helping walk and leapt through the hole. She failed to stick the landing, tumbling to the ground, but quickly got back to her feet and turned to look back up at us.

Good. Looks like they made it all right.

“U-um, isn’t this a bit high to-...” Sumire hesitated, peering down at the ground nervously.

“Good luck, Sumire-chin~” Mia encouraged her, giving her a firm slap on the rear.

“Hurry. We need to get out while they can still hold them back,” I pressed.

Upon being rebuked, Sumire gulped and took the plunge. Beginning with her, the other girls nodded nervously and began jumping from the second floor one

after another.

Hold on. Mia, aren't you the junior here? Shouldn't you be treating your upperclassmen with more respect?

... I guess by this point, age doesn't really matter, does it?

Meanwhile, things were getting heated over by the classroom doorway. Arisu and Tamaki were locked in combat. They had killed the leading charge of orcs, as well as the four reinforcements that had showed up a few seconds later.

The third wave of orcs approached, two-strong and sporting bronze-colored skin, elite orcs. Naturally, contending with two of them at once was no simple task, even for Tamika and Arisu.

The elite orcs charged at them and brandished their gigantic axes, enraged by the deaths of their comrades. I hurriedly made my way over to their side as the two created some distance and prepared to receive the attacks.

First, Arisu. I touched her shoulder and chanted, "Haste."

Her body was wrapped in a red hue, and her movements sped up dramatically. Caught off guard by her increase in speed, the elite orcs hesitated for an instant, allowing Tamaki to take some distance herself and fall back to me.

"I'm counting on you, Kazu-san!"

"Gotcha. Haste."

Tamaki's body was similarly dyed a shade redder. Wielding her axe, she rushed forward and shortened the distance between her and her opponent. She gave a sharp cry and unleashed a lightning-quick slash... missing the elite orc entirely, instead smashing the fluorescent lights on the ceiling.

No, not missed, I realized. *She aimed for the lights.*

The lights shattered on impact, showering glass fragments down to the floor. Bewildered by her actions, the elite orc froze for just a second. Tamaki used this instant to completely close the distance between them, stopping right in front of it. Then, she tossed her weapon to the ground and reached into her bosom, pulling out a paring knife. *Hey, isn't that...?*

I recognized the knife. She'd been requesting a spare weapon, so I had enchanted a paring knife and given it to her as a temporary stopgap.

Gripping the knife in an underhanded grip, Tamaki slashed upward and tore through the elite orc's throat, the enchanted weapon's blade tearing through the thick bronze outer skin like it was made of paper. She nearly severed its head in a single blow.

Tamaki's attack took the elite orc by complete surprise. And blue blood sprayed from its neck like a bloody fountain as it collapsed to the carpet below.

“Hooray! I did it!” she cheered excitedly. Storing the paring knife, Tamaki quickly went to pick up the gigantic axe before running over to support Arisu. The two moved in sync, attacking as a pair and, not long afterward, the other elite orc crossed over to the other side.

I leveled up.

※ ※ ※

Inside the white room, we discussed... nothing. Everyone was aware of their roles, so there was no point in staying here for longer than needed.

“I’m going to level up Support Magic.”

This battle was already finished. Raising the rank of Support Magic was the better choice of the two when considering future battles. No one had any objections.

All that's left is to finish evacuating into the forest. Things got hairy for a second, but we somehow managed to make it through.

I clicked the confirm button.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 11	SUPPORT MAGIC: 4→5
SUMMONING MAGIC: 3	SKILL POINTS: 6→1

The footsteps of many orcs racing down the stairs reached our ears as soon as we were back in the middle school. But they were too late.

“All right, let’s get out of here!” I shouted and jumped out of the building first.

I landed on the hard ground below, using both hands to disperse the impact force. As I scrambled to my feet, I wondered if my body had gotten much tougher compared to before, thanks to all the level-ups. I barely even felt so much as a tingle in my legs.

I quickly moved out of the way as Mia jumped next, landing where I had been a second before, followed immediately by Arisu and then Tamaki. The wolves were the last to jump and landed similarly nearby.

That's everyone. We're outta h-. I froze mid-thought. My entire body was seized by a foreboding sensation.

Looking up, I watched as a window on the third floor shattered outward as something flew outside. The unknown object, black in color, fell to the ground and landed right beside me. The ground made cracking sounds as it impacted, swaying violently from the force. I nearly fell over onto my backside but barely managed to maintain my balance as the ground quaked.

The something then rose to its feet—its four feet. Its massive frame towered over the gray wolves.

It was an enormous black dog. And it was not even a meter away from me.

When I lifted my head, right in front of me was a massive beast 3 meters in length. Piercing red eyes glimmering with malice stared straight at my frozen figure. Paralyzed by fear, I couldn't move so much as a pinkie as the creature's eyes remained locked on me.

Chapter 47: Operation Gain-Control-Of-The-Middle-School – 7

The two of us stared each other down atop the paved asphalt ground. To my left spanned the forest, and to my right was the side of the school building. Front and center, however, was a large black dog three meters in length.

Large doesn't even begin to give it credit; this thing's massive! It's even bigger than my wolves. Has it always been this big? Back when I had been scouting with the raven, its body had been curled up beside the general orc, so I hadn't noticed its size.

The hellhound stood before me, its body fully stretched and ready to attack at a moment's notice. Red ruby eyes glared at me. *Oh shit. It's locked right on me—it's going to attack!*

We had aptly named the creature 'Hellhound' after its appearance. *If it truly takes after the ones in myths and stories... and if I add up all of the information we've obtained, then it's going to...*

The hellhound opened its mouth wide, revealing the insides of its maw. Near the deepest part of its gullet, behind its razor-sharp teeth and dark red tongue, was a flickering flame.

Suddenly, it began to suck in air. A sack-shaped mass directly below the hound's throat began to swell rapidly, like an inflating balloon. *That's... not an ordinary organ. I've never seen a dog with that before.*

Then it hit me. That peculiar organ's purpose was for something similarly peculiar.

“Kazu-san!” Arisu cried out in alarm. She attempted to run over to me but couldn't get to her feet. Her balance was still broken from jumping down from the second floor. Tamaki and my familiars were similarly unable to move.

No one was going to be able to protect me.

Fine, then. I readied myself, praying I would be the only one in range of the attack.

“Resist Element: Fire.”

The words barely escaped my lips before a wall of bright red flames spewed from the hellhound's maw, engulfing my entire body.

Argh, it burns! I groaned loudly as I writhed from the heat. *I used defensive magic, so why the heck is it still scalding hot?* My skin burned, and my hair made sizzling noises. I covered my eyes with my hands to shield them from the flames.



My throat ached. The insides of my lungs felt like they were on fire. I stepped back one step, then another...

“Air Blast.”

Mia's voice rang out from somewhere. The next moment, the inferno surrounding me subsided, and clean air rushed into its place. Lifting my head, I gulped in a huge breath and then looked to the side.

The flames shooting from the hellhound's mouth were being directed towards the forest by a powerful gust of air. Upon impact, the nearby trees were scorched.

The hellhound ceased its breath attack before sending a glare of pure hatred towards Mia. Crouching low, the hound tensed its legs, preparing to spring itself at her.

“How dare youuu!!” Before it could, however, Tamaki sprang into action. She brandished her gigantic axe and charged the hellhound with surprising agility, closing in on it from its flank. Her body was wrapped in a red aura; Haste was still boosting her.

Tamaki closed the gap between them faster than the hellhound could react to the threat approaching from its side. Turning its body, the massive black hound attempted to take a step back to avoid her attack. However, it was too slow to dodge completely; she swung the axe towards its forelimb and sliced off a thin piece of flesh, scattering blue blood into the air.

As it soared through the air, the hellhound's blood transformed into falling pieces of flame. Most fell harmlessly to the ground, but some landed on Tamaki's clothing.

“W-what the?! What is this!” Panicking, she threw down her axe and quickly began swatting at the fire with both hands, attempting to extinguish herself. The hellhound used this momentary gap to distance itself from her. Then, it began to suck in another breath.

“Oh no, you don’t!”

This time, Arisu was the one to charge towards the hellhound. *Good. With it preoccupied, I can help Tamaki.* I rushed over to her side and placed my hand on her shoulder.

“Resist Element: Fire. There, now you should be able to deal with it a little bit.”

The moment the spell was invoked, the flames on her clothes were put out. *Oh, Whoa. An immediate effect.*

“Th-thank you, Kazu-san.”

Having been exposed to the naked air, the nape of Tamaki's neck was slightly burned. Although so severe that Healing Magic would not be able to heal the injury, it still looked painful. *This damned mutt! How dare you do this to my companion!*

Tamaki went to pick up her discarded weapon and, sending a fleeting look my way, nodded before looking back towards Arisu's battle with the hellhound.

Making use of her spear's reach, Arisu repeatedly thrust at the hellhound from far enough away so that the blood splatter wouldn't reach her. The hellhound seemed a little troubled about approaching her increased range, but it wasn't letting her get in any fatal blows.

Despite its hesitation, the hellhound's movements were quick. Should Arisu lose focus for even a second, it'd surely close the gap between them instantly. She must've realized this as well, as she was making the most of Haste's buff to keep the distance between the two of them at a fixed level.

Even if the hellhound used its fire breath, Arisu could barely dodge it at that distance. That was how delicate the distance between her and her opponent was. An incredibly precise, selected distance made possible only by her combat prowess. *Wow. Arisu really is something else when it comes to fighting, isn't she?* I found myself admiring her anew.

Incidentally, I had asked her before about her knack for battle. Supposedly, she had been the kind of girl that hated all things violence. Hence, her talents had remained hidden... until yesterday. Her day of awakening.

Right now, Arisu was preventing the hellhound from landing any hits on her, albeit barely. However, this stalemate wasn't going to last forever.

“Now, Tamaki!”

“Okay!” Nodding, Tamaki raised the gigantic axe and charged towards the hellhound, shouting, “Switch with me, Arisu!”

Tamaki slashed downward at the hellhound, which it evaded by leaping backwards. Arisu took some distance from the fight, falling back until she was next to me.

“Y-you’re burned!” She spoke in a concerned voice as she looked at me.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it. More importantly... Resist Element: Fire,” I said, casting the same fireproof buff onto Arisu as Tamaki.

By the way, Mia was hanging back away from the scuffle even farther than me, watching Shiki-san's group as they escaped into the forest.

That reminds me... I hope they're all right. They've got extra baggage with them right now, and the flame breath from earlier was deflected right towards the woods... Worried, I sent a sweeping gaze towards the forest.

Fortunately, the flames from the hellhound's breath attack appeared to have missed Shiki-san's group and gone into a section of the forest a fair distance away from them. Nevertheless, the trees had been reduced to near cinders in an instant. Those flames must've been seriously hot.

Most likely, this mutt's the cause of the human bonfire over in the courtyard. Seeing the power of its breath had all but confirmed this. *Had I not been so shaken up when I first saw the bonfire and investigated thoroughly, maybe I could've... no. Forget about it.* There was no point in worrying about what could've been at this point.

First and foremost, we needed to focus on the enemy in front of us. The more time we wasted here defeating the hellhound, the more time we were giving the other orcs to close in on us. Before they arrived, we needed to... to...

... Hm? Hold on a second. My thoughts were interrupted by a sudden realization. *If I remember correctly, wasn't this mutt next to the general orc?*

That guy had given off major "Hey, final boss here" vibes, so it was strange that it was nowhere to be found now.

... Unless...!

"Oh crap," Mia muttered, gazing up toward the school. I didn't bother looking up myself. Instead, I broke into a run towards the forest, leaping to the bare ground from the hard asphalt. My foot caught on a protruding rock and turned my would-be dive into an embarrassing fall as I tumbled on the dirt. But I didn't attempt to get up, instead continuing to roll away as far as I could. My efforts were only a desperate attempt to make some distance anyway.

As I feared, the asphalt where I had been standing not a few seconds prior was split in half alongside a thunderous boom. Small pieces of rock were sent flying, some of which struck me in the cheek as they whizzed past.

When I lifted my gaze, there was an especially large-framed, black-skinned orc kneeling on the asphalt. Its right hand was holding a silver sword. Slowly, the massive orc raised itself into a standing position.

It was the real deal, the head honcho of the orcs itself—the general orc. It leisurely cast its gaze down on its surroundings... and then sucked in a massive amount of air, opening its mouth wide.

Oh no, it's going to...! Realizing its intent, I immediately cast the new Support Magic spell I had learned a few moments ago on Mia.

"Deflection Spell."

Deflection Spell—a Rank 5 Support Magic could be cast on either yourself or one of your nearby party members. The spell amplified the range of the next spell used by the target. For example, if the target used a spell that would normally affect only a single person, the spell would instead be applied to the entire party.

In this case, only one spell could salvage the current situation.

"Mia!" *Please, notice it!!*

Thankfully, Mia wasn't one to let you down when it counted. Cleverly realizing the spell that I was asking for, she recited its name.

“Silent Field.”

Opening its mouth wide, the general orc bellowed out a roar... or it tried to. Before any sound was emitted, the field of silence expanded outward and overlapped with its figure.

Yes! Good job, Mia! I knew you would realize... or, rather, I always knew you were a capable girl! I trusted that she, a fellow otaku, would realize what a monster such as this would do upon first descending onto the field. Thanks to her magic, the general orc's roar has been can-... celled...?

Bzzzzzz. The air vibrated with a buzzing noise.

N-no... that... that isn't possible. What's going on? Everywhere around us is within range of Silent Field, so how can it...?!

Regardless of my opinion on the matter, the general orc's roar blew away the very effects of the silencing magic, as though never there to begin with. An ear-splitting bellow reverberated throughout the vicinity. It was so intense that it felt like my soul itself was being blown away alongside the magic. My body and Arisu's were sent flying from the sheer air pressure, tumbling across the ground.

What... the hell? How are we... supposed to fight this thing? Magic hadn't worked on it. No... it did work. But it was blown apart in an instant. A complete load of nonsense. Way too far outside the norm.

Despairing, I raised my head to look at it. The general orc looked back at me and curled its lips into a sinister smile, sending chills down my spine.

Chapter 48: Final Battle at the Middle School – 1

Lifting my upper body, my eyes remained on the general orc. The black-skinned orc casually lowered its sparkling silver sword and assumed a daunting pose, gazing at me with a triumphant smile.

This guy's bad news. Super bad news.

Yesterday evening, when we first saw an elite orc, I was terrified enough to make the decision to retreat on the spot. But right now, facing this one, all I could feel was despair. The gap in strength between the two wasn't even comparable.

Yesterday, Arisu and I were in rough shape. However, thanks to my level-up, we were able to formulate a plan for victory. In the end, everything fell into place, and we just *barely* managed to take down the elite orc.

This time, I had just leveled up. Even if we took down the hellhound, I was sure to be far from getting another one.

Well, that depends on the amount of XP a hellhound gives.

Perhaps Arisu would level up. If she did, then she could obtain Rank 5 Spearmanship. But even then, from the bad omen I was sensing from the general orc, I didn't think even that would make a difference.

Its roar could even destroy Silent Field. This thing was no laughing matter. Did that mean the effects of magic were not absolute? Or rather, that magic could be blown away? *Does that mean Mia's other spells, like Heat Metal, will also be useless?*

That sword was shining with silver light. *Is it a magic item? Maybe one of those 'magic sword' items you often saw in fantasy games? The blade's sharpness must be unreal, as well as the other aspects of the sword. Or maybe it gives additional effects?*

My mind suddenly flashed back to something I'd read in a web novel somewhere. Magic swords could do special things like devouring souls or

destroying the world. *I doubt this one's at that power level, but there should be some sort of additional effect tacked on... right?*

An opponent was holding an unprecedented weapon... and Arisu and Tamaki were going to have to fight against them?

Arisu, my important lover. While not on the same level as a lover, Tamaki was an important companion. And I would have to order them to fight against that thing?

I was beginning to regret attacking the middle school, though it was too late now. I'd known that one wrong move would cause the situation to end up like this.

No, I can't blame Shiki-san for this one. She was only giving me the best method for dealing with the current situation. I even recognized that this was a necessary gamble... but!

My thoughts went around in circles. Useless and trivial thoughts raced through my mind at incredible speeds.

Get a grip, me! You need to focus! What is the best move here? What can I do to get rid of the enemy in front of us...

"Smog." Someone's voice rang out—Mia's voice. She had invoked Smog, a Rank 1 Wind Magic. This spell created a plume of smoke that blocked one's field of vision. The magical smoke quickly dispersed over the entire area, masking everyone's vision in the blink of an eye.

Yes, that's the right call. There's no way we can face both guys simultaneously. There's only one path forward: Retreat.

"We're leaving. Shiki-san, use those!"

I didn't know if Shiki-san could hear my voice, having fled into the forest. Despite that, I scrambled to my feet and broke into a sprint towards the forest, stumbling slightly. Arisu and Mia followed after me.

Tamaki continued to fight against the hellhound. She could not turn tail and run, but she was gradually shifting towards the forest.

"Now! Run away, Tamaki-chan!"

“Aye-aye!” On Shiki-san’s cue, Tamaki abruptly jumped back and headed for the forest. The hellhound didn’t intend to let her get away and crouched low, preparing to pounce.

Shiki-san appeared from the forest then. She opened a tin of food she was holding and used her Throwing skill to hurl its contents at the hellhound. They flew through the air and splattered right on the hellhound’s face. Roaring angrily, it writhed around in pain. It frantically shook its head left and right as it tried to clean itself off.

The odor of the contents rode the wind, reaching our noses. If I had to describe it, it was a strong sour smell, like the smell of rotten eggs. Either way, it was something *rank*.

“Fermented fish. Stinks, doesn’t it?” Shiki-san muttered indifferently as though she hadn’t been the cause. She signaled to us as we stared in shock and began to run.

“This way, hurry! I’ve already confirmed the girls are being taken back to the Cultivation Center!”

“What about the one you were carrying?” I questioned as we desperately fled into the forest.

“Passed her to Sumire-chan, I think her name was? Y’know, the chubby one?”

Oh, she went and said it. She really just outright called her chubby. I had made sure to restrain myself and just do it in my head.

Whatever. That doesn’t matter right now. She’ll get plenty of exercise later, anyway.

“Let’s move,” ordered Shiki-san. “We’re luring them to the pitfalls.”

“R-Right.”

Forget that; where’d you get the canned food from? I’ll have to ask her later... On second thought, maybe not. I don’t want to have her explain how she prepared a can of rotten food.

Right now, the four of us, Shiki-san, and my familiars, were dashing through the forest. We had distanced ourselves as much as possible from our enemies

to lead them to the pitfalls.

Though the hellhound was sure to catch up with us before long, even if we had dropped its speed considerably for a moment, that didn't mean it would be stopped forever.

Sure enough, distant howling echoed through the trees. Behind us, the forest burst into flames.

That damn mutt! Doesn't it realize it's going way overboard here?! That magical fire was most likely difficult to extinguish. Maybe it was something like 'only magic could be used to deal with other magic'. Conversely, it was sure to extinguish on its own after a fixed amount of time.

On the other hand, if it's sparking up the trees... does that mean it intends to cause a large-scale forest fire? Hasn't it ever heard of 'Save the trees'?! I cried out inwardly. No, calm down, me. Even if you try to lecture it about nature's importance, it will not listen.

On another topic, I felt like the dog's movements were a bit... odd. Behind me, I could hear the sounds of something heavy smashing into trees one after the other.

Hold on, is it because we ruined its sense of smell? Isn't this the perfect chance to take it out?... Though, on second thought, the general's right behind us. Even if we turn back and fight, it'd be a tough battle. I guess there's no other choice but to lead them to the pitfalls.

So long as we dropped them into the pitfalls, we'd find a way to kill them afterward. *Come on, me, keep your head in the game!*

"Here, Kazu-san." Running right beside me, Arisu reached out and placed her hand on my shoulder. "Heal."

Oh, right, I got burned earlier by the hellhound. I didn't even remember. Thinking back on it, I got blown away by the general orc's roar, and I'm pretty sure a few fragments flew out and hit me on the forehead. I reached up to touch my forehead and saw blood on my fingertips when I brought my hand back down in front of my face.

Superficial injuries such as these didn't even feel like injuries to me anymore. It appeared my body had gotten considerably tougher since I reached Level 10. I hadn't even received that much damage when I was bathed in flames earlier from the hellhound's attack, though I *did* have Resist Element: Fire at the time. *I'm becoming a monster in my own right, huh?*

Oh well. If I become a monster, then so be it. So long as I could survive, no matter how many modifications happened to my body, I didn't mind if becoming one meant I could keep Arisu and the others safe, so be it.

A feeling of warmth spread through my body, starting from the area Arisu had touched. The pain vanished.

"Thanks, Arisu."

"I'm so glad you're not hurt. When I saw you get wrapped up in those flames, I... I thought my heart might stop."

"Don't worry, I'm fine. I actually *did* think my heart would stop beating for a second there, though. I'm seriously glad we have magic to protect ourselves to some extent."

On the other hand, without it, I'm pretty sure I would've died instantly. Well... maybe not? I'm Level 11 now, so if my HP has inflated alongside my Level, like in games, I could have held out until the hellhound's breath attack finished.

That said, I wasn't keen on using myself as a human experiment to find out, and certainly not using someone else. I *definitely* didn't want Arisu's fair skin to be scalded by those flames.

In conclusion, we needed to get rid of that hellhound fast. The best case was for Arisu to finish it once it had fallen into a pitfall, rendering it defenseless. *If* we could get it in there, anyway...

"Seems the general has circled around front," Shiki-san remarked from ahead of us. *Huh? How do you know that?* I didn't put my thoughts into words, but she sent a fleeting glance over her shoulder towards me.

"If you focus, you can tell through sounds. It became a lot easier to do once my Reconnaissance skill reached Rank 2. Takes a bit of skill to do, though."

Whoa, seriously? The Reconnaissance skill's amazing! Admittedly, I was a bit worried about what she meant by 'skill.' Surely she hadn't done some weird training in the white room, had she?

"You can use your left and right ears to narrow down the precision. Pinpointing the location and narrowing down the sounds is something even a Rank 1 user can do if they practice hard enough."

Nope, she totally did something your average joe could never hope to understand. This is why MMO fanatics are such... well, whatever. Right now, that 'skill' of hers greatly assists us.

"We'll drop the general into the pitfall, then we'll have everyone gang up on the hellhound."

"Sounds good," I replied. "Let's roll with that."

To ensure the pair's safety, I cast Resist Element: Fire on both Shiki-san and Mia while we were running towards the pitfalls. I wished I could've used Deflection Spell to magnify its effects and place the resistance across all my party members. Unfortunately, I didn't have the margin to do so, so we would simply have to live without it.

Now, everyone present could survive even if they got cooked by the flame breath... supposedly. *Shiki-san's level is pretty low, so maybe she'd be in a pinch?*

"Shiki-san, once we get them into the pitfalls, step away from everyone else," I warned her.

"Will do. Charging out in futility in front of a hopelessly powerful enemy is a fool's errand. Dying here would be no more than self-satisfaction. I intend to use my life more efficiently."

Can't you just openly admit that you don't want to die? Why not? You troublesome girl.

"They're up ahead. Stick close." Shiki-san stopped for a moment before heading left towards an animal trail with us not too far behind. We stopped after circling around a huge tree trunk on the opposite side of where the apparent pitfalls were.

With nigh perfect timing, the general orc stepped out into the open, cutting through the underbrush. It was about ten-odd steps or so away from us. Shiki-san, Mia, and I retreated behind while Arisu and Tamaki stepped forward, readying their weapons.

The general orc grinned and brandished its silver sword before rushing towards us. Arisu and Tamaki were ready and waiting for it, but its charge was casual. Was its confidence in itself absolute, or was it a fool? Or maybe it was both. Regardless, the general orc charged towards them.

And dropped right into the pitfall.

“Very nice.” Mia celebrated and assumed guts pose.

“Heck, yes!” Tamaki cheered. “Now let’s go kick its teeth in, Arisu!”

“Right!”

Arisu charged over to the pitfall and casually peered inside... and an overpowering sense of foreboding assailed me.

“Get back, Arisu!” I was casting the magic before I even realized it. “Reflection!”

A rainbow-colored wall appeared in front of Arisu. Something bounced back off of it, and a dull sound came from the pitfall.

Then a bone-chilling roar rang out. The fallen leaves soared through the air like a tornado had spun through. Arisu and Tamaki both stepped back a couple of steps unknowingly.

The large black orc flew out of the hole. When I realized it had jumped out of the pitfall, it was standing on the ground in front of it.

Did it just... jump out of the pitfall? I shuddered at the realization. *The invincible pitfall trap was destroyed... in a second? And what did I just reflect? Was it... no, it couldn’t have been...*

While I hadn’t seen what had bounced off, if my premonition was correct then the same thing that had killed the raven back then was...

I had some sort of premonition about what the general orc had fired at Arisu. So, when I saw the general orc use its left hand to reach into the pouch hanging

on its waist, I immediately realized its intentions.

It's coming. But to whom? My mind raced as, in a panic, I attempted to foresee its target. *No, rather than try to decipher who the target is, who would be worse off if they were to be the target?*

Finding that out was easy. Of our current members, there was only one with the highest chance of dying in a single blow.

I rushed over in front of Shiki-san and assumed a protective stance. "Reflection."

My guess proved correct. Something shot out from the orc's left hand and zipped towards me. *No, not something.* Perhaps I should just say it outright: it was a pebble. Though the method by which it could launch them was a mystery to them, the general orc apparently could launch them at high speeds.

The rock flashed through the air towards me and collided with the barrier, ricocheting off.

However, this pebble was not the only projectile the general had launched. It had launched two of them at once, and the other target...

"Huh?" A voice of surprise leaked out from Mia a split second before her body was launched backwards. At the same time, the pebble repelled by my barrier collided with the general orc's left hand. The impact bent its thumb in an odd direction... which meant the other projectile was similarly powerful.

Crap. I was careless. Had the reflected rock gone to a different spot, someone else could've died... *no, wait!* Glancing back, I saw something long and cylindrical soaring through the air next to Mia.

It was her arm. Mia's arm had been severed and blown clean off her body from the sheer force of the rock.

"A-Ah..." She tumbled to the ground, her face in disbelief.

Chapter 49: Final Battle at the Middle School – 2

We succeeded in preventing the general orc from doing any more high-speed pebble attacks by breaking the bone in its thumb... but we paid a heavy price. Mia had lost her left arm.

Maybe 'lost' is too extreme a descriptor. It wasn't as though her limb was forever gone. Her injury could be undone with Healing Magic. But a normal Heal was unable to reattach severed limbs. We would need to use Cure Deficit, a Rank 4 Healing Magic spell, to reattach her limb.

However, Arisu's Healing Magic was only Rank 3 at the moment. We needed her to reach Rank 4 before we could use it.

Though Cure Deficit was not in the cards at the moment, there was another spell in Rank 1 Healing Magic called Stasis, which could stop the flow of time on targeted objects. You could prevent food from rotting by using this spell on it. Hence, we could use this spell to preserve Mia's arm without the worry of damaging it until we could increase the rank of Arisu's Healing Magic.

But never mind that. How are we going to salvage this situation?

Both Arisu and Tamaki were frozen stiff. The general orc was standing directly in front of them, but they didn't dare attempt to attack it.

Haste's effects had already expired on both of them. The other Support Magic spells were still in effect but fighting against the general would be difficult even with the two of them. Furthermore, the hellhound would be here before long.

We were cornered.

Dammit. What should we do? This is hopeless.

"Kazu-san. Go over to Mia-chan," Shiki-san called out from behind me. "Leave this to me. I'll find a way to get us through here."

Stepping forward, she moved in front of me before barking out orders to Arisu and Tamaki in a sharp voice, jarring them back to reality. They leaped

backwards to gain some distance, narrowly dodging the general's side-sweep attack.

"Now, while it's distracted!" she cried out.

"G-got it."

I first used Deflection Spell to amplify my next spell and then cast Haste. Arisu and Tamaki's figures were wrapped up in a red glow, accelerating their movements. Casting Haste on them like this was a waste of MP compared to doing it individually, but we didn't have the leisure for that right now.

Afterward, I ran towards Mia who was lying fallen on the ground. She was rolling around in pain, clutching her bleeding shoulder.



I lifted her tiny figure into my arms.

“Hey, Mia, it’s me. Are you awake?”

“Nngh...”

She turned her head to look up at me. Her face was pale, and her lips were purple and trembling. She managed to squeak out “Kazucchi...” between pained gasps.

“How is... every... one?”

“They’re fighting hard. But it’s going to be a while before they’re done.”

“Help... me stand. I’ll... back them... up.”

Is she an idiot? I wondered for a split second. But then I realized the reason Shiki-san had sent me over here. She wanted me to rouse Mia’s spirits so she could fight. On my orders, she would strain herself to help them. In the span of one day, she and I had built a sense of trust. And Shiki-san wanted to use this bond between us to exhaust her for all she was worth, even when she was at death’s door.

Curse you, Shiki-san. You really would make for a wonderful army officer. Complimenting the parts that I am unable to do myself. Damn you.

I relented and helped Mia sit up while all the while she groaned in pain. She pointed her right hand, stained with blood from holding down her wound, towards the general orc.

Arisu and Tamaki were valiantly fighting against the orc , but their attacks were less sharp bites and more like nibbles. Their physique, power, and ability were all severely lacking. It was like watching two toddlers try to take on an adult. Each time the general orc swept its sword, they would be sent flying backwards, trying to block it. They landed roughly on the ground below but, gritting their teeth, they stood up again and charged back at it.

They were fighting way too recklessly. But this was all they *could* do right now. They were simply buying time. They were waiting... waiting anxiously for Mia’s magic.

“Heat Metal,” she spoke in a trembling voice. The palm of her hand pointed straight at the general orc. A brownish-reddish plume shot out from her palm, scoring a direct hit on the general’s sword. It groaned slightly and stopped moving for a second. It did not drop its sword... but with it was stunned momentarily...!

“Now!!” Shiki-san shouted. Arisu and Tamaki struck at the general orc like the crucial moment had come.

And then it happened. The general orc let out a roar. It was a fearsome roar, enough that I could feel my body and mind both freeze.

The roar spread throughout the surrounding area alongside a shockwave, sending Arisu and Tamaki flying backward. Even Mia and I, far away from the battle, had to lower ourselves to the ground to avoid the pressure of the wind.

The roar ended. The general’s grip on the sword was tight once more. It clenched on the handle of the sword without any signs of hesitation, as if the heat was no longer there.

No, it most likely is no longer there. I had a feeling. It was the same as when the general orc had torn apart Silent Field earlier.

The general orc’s roar could rip magic apart.

“What the hell? How are we supposed to deal with someone without magic?” I grimaced.

“Shhh... Kazucchi.” Mia looked up at me and muttered as though to scold me. “You can’t... show any weakness...”

I had just been rebuked by someone who was heavily wounded. Regretting my folly, I fell into thought once more. *There’s gotta be some way to take this guy down...* I glared at the general orc.

To make matters worse, I could spot the dark figure of the hellhound closing in on us from behind the general orc. It was approaching us at an astounding speed.

Damn it! Why does it have to be here now?!

Suddenly, a spear jutted out from a nearby tree towards its right flank. The attack didn't connect, blocked by one of its claws, but the creature's focus shifted from us to the assailant.

One of the second-year students had recklessly launched an attack on the hellhound. That person was none other than the ace of the track and field club—Sakura Nagatsuki.

“Get away! You can't handle that foe!” I shouted for her to escape.

But Sakura did not heed my words and kept her gaze on the hellhound, seemingly taunting it. The hellhound pounced at her and tore into—*huh?*

Sakura swiftly turned her body to the side before jumping upwards. She then grabbed a thick branch of a nearby tree with her left hand. Putting some strength into her grip, she agilely twisted her body. She then moved from branch to branch upward, dancing in the sky, before finally coming to a stop on top of a healthy-looking branch.

Huh? What's with her? She said she was in the track and field club, didn't she? How can she move like a gymnast?

She was pretty impressive. I found myself captivated by her agile movements. *Is this power a result of her Strength skill? Or has she always been capable of doing this?* Once things calmed down, I needed to ask her. Now, though, I needed to focus.

“Missed me, mutt,” Sakura taunted the hellhound. I imagined the hellhound wasn't capable of understanding our language. But it seemed to have recognized what she was doing based on her actions. Enraged, the hellhound fired its breath at the branch she was standing on. The entire tree was wrapped in bright-red flames.

But by that point, Sakura had already jumped to a neighboring tree. She leapt from tree to tree, taunting it all the while. “Stupid.” “Slowpoke.” “Fleabag.” The hellhound appeared to have completely forgotten about us. The only thing it cared about right now was ridding the world of the girl mocking it from above.

N-no way. I watched on in awe. Sakura was leading the hellhound around by the nose, a foe that *Tamaki* had struggled with.

In any case, the hellhound wouldn't kick the bucket from her playing around with it. I needed to find something to flip the situation on its head. I frantically racked my mind for something.

"Kazucchi," Mia called my name. Her body shook as she continued, "Let me... help..."

"You? But you're..."

"I'll... kill it. Even if... I have to... die with it..."

True, if she used her magic to attack the hellhound without restraint, we could bring it down for good. But she's badly injured. If she tries to take it on right now, the only end result I see happening for her is...

"My magic won't... work on the general... So..."

Therefore, even if she stayed here and fell unconscious, the end result would be the same—that was what Mia was implying. *True. That's certainly the case. But even if it is, with her major injury...*

Mia clung to me and gazed up at me earnestly, begging me to let her do it. I matched her gaze for a moment and then resolved myself.

"All right. But don't you dare faint before the job's finished, y'hear?"

"Mm..."

Mia had lost a lot of blood, but her consciousness was still clear. It was nothing short of a miracle. *Or maybe not...* She was already Level 9. If my theory was correct, her HP should've risen along with her levels. While she looked to be on the verge of death, she was actually holding out fine.

Okay. Mia can do this. We can do this, I muttered inside my heart as though trying to convince myself that was the case.

"Listen up, Sakura-san!" I shouted in a loud voice to Sakura as she bobbed and weaved across the tops of the branches of trees, the hellhound in hot pursuit behind her. I was positive (-ly hoping) that the hellhound couldn't understand our words, so I began to explain our strategy.

"All right!" she gave a short reply back.

Here goes nothing. I nodded and then picked up Mia in a princess carry, rising to my feet. Now it was our turn. The counterattack began now.

Chapter 50: Final Battle at the Middle School – 3

Calling this a 'battle' was, admittedly, embellishing a little. Our strategy was extremely simplistic for what was needed to do to bring the hellhound down.

"Smart Operation."

As I carried Mia in my arms, I cast a Support Magic spell on her to increase the damage of magic-based attacks. Due to her never needing to use offensive spells in our usual strategies, this spell had never really gotten its chance to shine. Now, though, Mia's magic, and by extension, Smart Operation, were going to be the stars of the show.

Mia extended her right index finger, pointing it directly toward the hellhound as it relentlessly pursued Sakura Nagatsuki, who was up in the tree line. A bolt of light arced outward from her finger, striking the hellhound. Not long afterward, the pungent smell of ozone reached my nostrils. She had fired a bolt of lightning.

The hellhound stiffened for a second, its entire body twitching. Her attack appeared to have done not only damage but also a considerable amount. *It's working. Another one.*

"Lightning." Mia shot off another lightning bolt, which scored another direct hit on the hellhound. A scream of pain came from the large black beast.

The hellhound was not a fool, however. Once it realized Sakura nimbly moving about the trees above was nothing more than a decoy, it shifted its target to us. Pushing off the ground, it charged toward us, closing the twenty-odd meters between us in the blink of an eye.

"High Jump," Mia muttered weakly. Part of her Rank 2 Wind Magic repertoire, High Jump boosted (take a guess) one's jumping ability.

Feeling the power of the wind wrap around my body, I pushed off the ground and soared high into the air, dodging the hellhound's charge by a thin margin. We landed on the branch of a nearby tree.

"Ngh..."

Mia groaned in a small voice. The intense movements had put even more pressure on her already weakened body; she clenched her teeth, bearing the pain. The only thing I could do for her was to strengthen my grip as I held onto her. Right now, taking advantage of her willingness to fight was my job.

Damn it. I cursed inside my heart.

The hellhound suddenly stopped beneath the tree and glared up angrily at us. I had been worried it would simply jump and reach us, but my fears seemed unwarranted. And then, it... stopped below us. Completely unmoving.

"Restrain it, Mia."

"Mm. Earth Bind."

The grass below the hellhound began to warp and entwine around its legs. Once it realized we had done something, the hellhound began to thrash around in an attempt to free itself from the vines, but to no avail.

"Stone Blast."

Dozens of stones manifested in the air and rained down on the immobilized hellhound. Bigger than fists, rock after rock slammed into the hellhound. Head, back, body—hard bits of stone slammed into the hellhound unilaterally. Unable to escape or defend itself against the barrage, the hellhound was attacked one-sidedly. One of them scored a direct hit on the hellhound's left eye socket, spraying blue blood—which turned into fire—into the air. A portion landed on the ground below it, igniting the grass around the hellhound. It screamed in pain.

Glaring up at us, the hellhound began to suck in a huge breath, the sack below its throat expanding to match.

Good, it fell for it. I grinned.

Initially, I had been caught off-guard by the hellhound's breath, but there was a huge weakness to it. The hellhound could not launch its breath without first undergoing some preparatory measures, being the inhalation of a huge breath alongside the expansion of its throat sack. So long as you understood how it prepared to launch the attack, learning the timing was also simple enough.

Even I, someone with poor reflexes, could reliably counter an attack with distinct preparations. Thus, I used a certain spell right as the hellhound began to spew its flames.

"Reflection."

A rainbow-colored thin veil of light appeared below us, bouncing the hellhound's breath right back at it when they collided with it. The creature's body was wrapped up completely within the bright-red flames. I wasn't sure if they would affect the hellhound, being its own flames and all. But the surprise left it defenseless nonetheless. This was a chance we wouldn't miss.

"Lightning."

The bolt of lightning Mia unleashed mercilessly arced toward the hellhound. Fortunate if it connected, and if not, then another. Both lightning bolts struck the hellhound. Not able to bear the brunt, the hellhound leapt back from its spot.

Huh, it escaped? Oh, I see. The bindings were destroyed by the flames.

Although it escaped from the restraints, the hellhound looked to be on the verge of collapsing. One of its eyes was crushed, and its body staggered and limped. The creature's dark black fur coat was frizzled, and parts of its skin were burnt. It reeked of charred flesh.

It's not immune to its own flames? Seriously? I supposed even if it could breathe flames, that didn't necessarily mean it was immune to them. How lucky for us.

The hellhound most likely wouldn't be using its breath anymore. Now that Reflection had scarred it, it surely feared suffering the same wounds again. So then, what exactly could an enemy do to us when we were so high above it?

Following my predictions, the hellhound gathered its remaining strength and charged the tree trunk. It was trying to knock us out of the tree. Unfortunately for it, though, I'd seen through it completely.

"Stone Blast."

Dozens of stones formed in the air and pelted the hellhound's body right as it collided with the base of the trunk. The tree shook with a tremendous tremor, but by that time, we'd already leapt off to another one.

High Jump's effective time was around one minute per rank. Mia's current rank was 3, meaning there was still plenty of time left before it expired. We landed on a robust branch of a neighboring tree. Mia groaned in pain again.

Every time I did extreme movements, Mia's life force shrunk. But I killed my emotions and gave her the order.

"Do it."

"Mm. Lightning."

Mia launched the nth lightning blast at the hellhound. And, when the blow connected, the hellhound finally lost strength in its four limbs, collapsing to the ground there and then. The monster's body vanished slowly, leaving behind only two blue gems.

Two blue gems, huh? I wondered if it was because the hellhound was different from the orcs. *Well, let's put aside confirming that for now. More importantly...*

"Good job, Mia."

"Mm."

Then, the two of us were taken to the white room. Arisu had leveled up.

※ ※ ※

As soon as we were inside the white room, Arisu was already running over toward us. She and Tamaki both looked beat up. Despite the magical strengthening, their gym clothes were torn and ripped in places. And the exposed areas were covered in lacerations and bruises.

Despite the pain she must've been in, Arisu paid no mind to her injuries as she cast Heal on Mia, half-crying. Again and again, she chanted the spell's name.



"Sorry, Mia. It must've been painful, right? It couldn't have been easy."

"Mm. I'm... all good." Mia smiled weakly, looking up at me.

Only a few minutes had passed at most since her injury. But her eyes were sunken, and her cheeks were thinned. With her pale complexion, she looked like the many corpses we'd come across today.

"I got to be held tight by Kazucchi. Worth."

I pursed my lips tightly. I knew that Mia adored me. She, at the very least, believed in my capabilities as a leader. Therefore, I needed to explain to them. I had to outright explain our next course of action.

"Just wait here for a minute, okay, Mia? I'll go raise my Healing Magic, and then we can reattach your arm with Cure Deficiency."

"No, Arisu," I said in a commanding tone. She turned to look at me, astonished. But I held my gaze and continued, "Right now, you have six skill points. I can't allow you to raise the rank of Healing Magic. You have to raise Spearmanship to Rank 5 instead."

"What? B-But Mia's arm is...!"

"After the battle is over, we can grab her arm and use Stasis on it. With your current rank, Stasis should keep her arm preserved in a frozen state for around 3 weeks. So, sometime in the future, we can raise your Healing Magic to Rank 4 and acquire Cure Deficiency. However, I cannot allow you to get it now. Right now, the skill we need the most is your Spearmanship."

I looked down at Mia in my arms, and she looked back up at me with a small smile.

"Mm. Good ordering, Kazucchi."

"Sorry. Mia."

She shook her head.

"It is a calm and correct judgment."

"I think you know, but Kinnikuman Soldier lost brutally in the end, you know?"

Mia and I exchanged a look and broke into forced laughter, hoping to dispel one another's fears through the laughter.

"But Mia, your arm..." Shocked, Arisu's gaze alternated between Mia and me.

"It's all for victory." "This is necessary to win." The two of us insisted, looking back at Arisu. We both understood the goal. We would all die if we were swayed by emotions in our decisions. Both of us knew this.

I'm sure even Arisu knew this deep down. But she couldn't get rid of her emotions in her decision-making. She operated on a "want-to-do" rather than a "need-to-do" basis; that was her fatal flaw.

On some occasions, people could unleash great powers through their emotions. Most of the time, however, being guided by your emotions on the battlefield was an easy way to die. Therefore, I had to control Arisu's actions. I needed to make sure she stayed on the right path.

"Arisu. We're making sure everyone survives. We have to win the battle in front of us, or else Mia will die. Taking down the general orc takes precedence over anything else."

"B-but..."

"This is an order, Arisu. Hate me if you must; I'm only giving the most optimal orders for the situation so everyone can survive. You need to do what I say, okay?"

Arisu stared straight at me. Her lips were pursed, and her fists were clenched and shaking. After a moment, she cast her gaze downward seemingly in resignation and spoke after taking a huge breath. "Okay... I understand."

Her voice squeaked out in barely a whisper.

"But you need to promise me one thing."

"What is it?"

"Now, while we're still here, you need to give Mia a huge hug."

Huh? What kind of request is that? I glanced down at Mia in my arms. Her complexion had improved slightly after being healed by Arisu, and she looked back up at me, blushing.

"I'm going to be held tight in Kazucchi's arms. A blessed thing."

"Seriously?" I looked down at her, exasperated.

"The head wife's given her permission. Commence the flirting," she said, wrapping her arms around my neck. She pulled herself up a little and kissed me on the cheek. The soft feeling of her lips pressed against me gave me a small shudder.

I cast my gaze toward Arisu. She was looking at me worriedly.

"Kazu-san. Is Mia... going to be okay?"

Arisu seemed unwaveringly worried about Mia. She acted like she hadn't even seen Mia and me flirting right in front of her. I couldn't help but think it was a bit lonely.

"Don't worry."

I had no idea whether or not her current state could be defined as "okay," but I nodded confidently. I also used the moment to give Mia's small body another tight squeeze. She let out a muffled "Mm."

"Though, she's down for the count. You're not going to be getting any more support from her in this battle, so you'll have to make do without," I added, alternating my gaze between Arisu and Tamaki. Tamaki gazed back at me with a concerned gaze.

"Do you think... we can do it?"

"Don't worry, I'll be there to support you still. We just need to worry about getting Shiki-san's group as far away from the battle as we can..."

"Good point. Being nearby is far too dangerous for them."

The general was different from any foe that we'd faced so far. Incomparably stronger than anything else, and the shockwave it could induce was bad news, too. In game terms, it was a ranged attack. *As they are, Arisu and Tamaki should be able to more or less endure the shockwave attack... though that's most likely a result of being past the Level 10 mark.* Shiki-san or Sakura-san, being low-level, would probably die from a single blow if they received the shockwave at a close range.

“All right, Arisu, Tamaki. Everything from now's going to be a gamble, but...”

"Leave it to us, Kazu-san. We're entrusting our lives in your hands," Tamaki encouraged, striking her chest with her hand. She beamed a fearless smile. "There's nothing to worry about. Just one more to go. We're gonna beat 'em down!"

I then began to explain the battle strategy to them. Afterward, Arisu went to the computer and increased her Spearmanship to Rank 5, and the four of us left the white room.

ARISU	
LEVEL: 11	SPEARMANSHIP: 4→5
HEALING MAGIC: 3	SKILL POINTS: 6→1

Chapter 51: Final Battle at the Middle School – 4

Upon returning to the forest, I hopped down to the ground from the tree, Mia still wrapped up in my arms. I laid her down softly on top of a pile of broken leaves. She seemed to be struggling to even keep her eyes open by this point.

"Leave the rest to us, okay? Stay here and get some rest."

"Mm," she weakly muttered. "Kazucchi?"

"Yeah?"

"Win."

"Of course." I grinned and gently stroked the top of her head. Mia smiled back at me weakly.

"One... more thing."

"Sure. What's up?"

"Kiss me... one more time..."

I didn't reply and instead moved closer, kissing her on the cheek. She smiled and thanked me in a weak tone before turning her gaze toward the ongoing battle. There, Arisu, Tamaki, and the general orc were engaged in fierce combat.

She observed for a second before... outstretching her right hand toward them. The tips of her fingers shone as she muttered, "Smog."

A plume of smoke billowed out in the general orc's surroundings, rising into the air and obscuring the visions of everyone inside. Arisu and Tamaki broke out from the edge of the smoke, quickly rushing over to us. Around the same time, my two wolf familiars charged into the billowing smog. They were meant to buy time.

Finally, Mia's body could take no more. She collapsed, the strength in her body fading, and her eyes slowly shut. The expression on her pale face

appeared transient, as though a moment away from fading. Her breaths, too, seemed like they might stop at any moment.

You don't need to suffer anymore. I won't let any more harm come to you. Promising such in my heart, I extended my hand toward her body. *I'll make sure you're at least safe here.*

"Repel Sphere." –

Mia's body was surrounded by a rainbow-colored orb similar in appearance to a soap bubble. Repel Sphere—a Rank 5 Support Magic spell—was a protective barrier that isolated the target inside of itself. While the barrier itself appeared soft, not even a dump truck impacting the side of it could cause so much as a scratch.

The barrier also could change color to blend into the area. Like a chameleon, the barrier's color changed to match its surroundings. If I took some distance from Mia, I wouldn't even be able to tell that she was there. However, instead of optical camo, like Invisibility, the spell provided more of a protective coloring like the camouflage used in nature. It was to the degree that you could see through it if you got close enough and carefully observed, but as the saying went, some was better than none.

According to the Q&A, the outside world could be viewed normally from the inside, as if looking through a glass window. A one-way mirror kind of effect. Very handy.

Naturally, every rose has its thorn; the barrier was not without demerits. Being completely solid, the barrier blocked any and all physical things—including sound. From the raging impact of a truck to the tiniest vibrations of one's voice in the air, nothing would make it through the sphere's walls.

Considering the sphere was locked down air-tight, I was worried about whether air would pass through. When I questioned the computer about this back in the white room, I was informed that air would be automatically generated within. I didn't know what else to say but "Hooray for Magic!"

The biggest problem with the barrier was its deployment time, which was fixed at 30 minutes. Not too short, but not too long, either. However, you

couldn't leave even if you wanted to leave sooner; you had to sit patiently inside until the spell ran its course.

When Repel Sphere was active, any wounds on the entrapped target within would slowly recover. This spell was one of few in Support Magic that boasted a healing effect. It was encroaching upon the domain of Healing Magic. But perhaps that was *why* the restrictions placed on the spell were so strict and unyielding.

Right now, though, the demerits could hardly be called such. *Besides, as long as it lets Mia relax and guarantees her safety, at least for a while, then I don't mind.*

I looked down at Mia as she rested inside of her fixed safety sphere before nodding satisfactorily and standing up. Now, we only needed to defeat the general. Then everything would be over. We could achieve a perfect victory in the battle of the Middle School.

Raising my head, I found Arisu and Tamaki had arrived at my side. Both of their bodies were covered in injuries, but none of them was fatal. Arisu appeared to have been using Heal to minimally heal her's and Tamaki's injuries as they were running over here.

"Good job, you guys."

I began to cast Haste on the two of them. Halfway through, I sensed the link between my familiars and me break. Both of them had been slain by the general orc. *Thank you for your sacrifice.* I prayed for the two of them inside my mind. The general then emerged from the smoke.

Too late. Mia's spell had bought us enough time for me to finish giving both Arisu and Tamaki buffs. Those precious seconds the wolves earned at the cost of their lives were not in vain.

Now the battle began once more.

"Go! And remember the plan!" I shouted, giving the two of them a firm pat on the back.

"Okay!"

"Roger! Leave it to us, Kazu-san!"

The two of them faced toward the general orc and, wrapped up in shiny red hues, began to rush it. The strategy I'd devised may have been—no, it *was* completely reckless. But out of every path I could choose, this was the only one that would take us to victory. Considering our current level of power, there were only a scant few opportunities we could make use of to achieve a win. We needed to take a chance on one of them and turn our victory from a near-loss to a sure-fire win.

Right now, the general orc's left hand was damaged, which, in turn, was preventing it from launching the pebbles at high speed. These projectiles had not only killed my familiar raven but also robbed Mia of her left arm. So not having to worry about them provided a huge sense of comfort. We weren't going to get another chance like this to defeat the general orc. Therefore, there was no other option but to fight. Not only were we determined, but we also couldn't retreat. Mia was firmly stuck here. If there was ever a time to defeat the general orc, it was now. Everyone here had resigned themselves to take it down.

Holding this firm determination, Arisu and Tamaki charged the general.

Did I make a mistake? What if the two of them die because of me? Weakness crept into my mind like a persistent bug, and I shook my head to clear those thoughts. My mind had been made up. Even if the worst happened, I wouldn't regret my decision, nor would I look back. I had made my choice, and now I was only going to look toward the future.

Arisu unleashed a thrust at the general orc from outside of its attack range, and her attack was warded off with a flick of the silver sword it held onto. Then, it swung its sword in a sideways arc. The motion seemed casual to the general, but a fierce wind was generated from the speed of the strike, buffeting Arisu and Tamaki. Their hair, black for Arisu and blonde for Tamaki, thrashed around wildly, threatening to send the two flying into the background.

"Lower your waist, Tamaki-chan!"

"G-Got it, I'll try!"

Arisu and Tamaki dropped their stance, shifting their center of gravity, and held on with all their might. *Good, everything's going as planned. Next is...*

"Now, Tamaki!"

"Right!"

Making an act of seeming desperation, Tamaki lunged into the general orc's range, axe at the ready. She gave a sharp cry and swung her weapon downward, to which the general immediately moved to block with its sword. She reacted immediately and... let go of her weapon, tossing it toward the ground. Reaching into her bosom, she took out the paring knife, gripping it tight.

Her unexpected actions made the general orc freeze for just a second, and Tamaki stabbed the blade of the knife into the top of the general's right hand. Blue blood spewed from the wound, and the general orc writhed in pain, dropping the silver sword.

All right, she pulled it off! I thought gleefully. The general's left hand was disabled, and now its right hand, too, was incapable of movement. *With no hands, it's finished!*

This had been our strategy—if it could even be called one. Using the heat of the moment to rob the general orc of its other hand. A reckless bet, yes, but a reckless bet we had won.

"Now, Arisu!"

"Here goeeees!" Arisu shouted as she sent out a sharp thrust. Her spear surged forth, aiming directly at the general's chest. Without any weapon to block her attack, not even the general orc could escape unharmed.

Or so I had believed.

I watched as the general orc kicked the axe that Tamaki discarded before it hit the ground and used its injured left hand to catch the grip. I heard a stunned "Wha?" come from me, and my mind screamed a fierce rejection at the impossible reality before me. I'm sure Arisu and Tamaki must've been feeling the same way.

The general orc used the edge of the gigantic axe to block Arisu's spear thrust, sending a loud, shrill noise reverberating through the air. She groaned in pain, and the upper half of her body wavered. In a competition of strength, the victor between Arisu and the general orc was already clear. Despite the orc's one-handed grip and heavy injuries to the said hand, overwhelming strength pushed back Arisu's blow until both weapons were repelled back. The general orc's upper body was forced backwards—not. It strengthened its core and held strong, taking a step forward instead. The general swung the gigantic axe. The air around seemed to groan as it was pushed aside, launching a gale at Arisu and Tamaki.

Tamaki made a split-second decision to discard her knife and grabbed onto the silver sword, having dropped to the ground in the axe's place before being swept up by the tempestuous winds and rolling across the ground.

Damn it! So the wind wasn't a product of the sword but simply the general orc's own strength?

We'd damaged the general's right hand despite lacking a killing blow. Furthermore, we'd taken its weapon. In exchange, Tamaki had lost hers, but looking at it from a plus-and-minus perspective, we'd come out net positive. The blow should've weakened it a little bit. It may take a little more time, but we were going to defeat it.

Just then, a whole racket of noise came from the direction of the school building. Shiki-san ran over to me in a panic, clutching Mia's detached arm in hers.

"The orcs are here. There are dozens of small fries, and one bronze. Sakura-chan told me she'd keep them occupied and rushed off before I could stop her."

"My lips twisted into a scowl. Stopping Sakura Nagatsuki from recklessly engaging them was the correct decision. *She may have done well earlier against the hellhound, but going any further is just reckless.*

I gazed back at Arisu and Tamaki fighting against the general orc. Finally, after injuring it to this extent, they were starting to gain the upper hand, if barely. Moreover, the general orc appeared weaker than it had been before. It was struggling to keep the fight even, especially when it had to guard against

Tamaki's swings with the silver sword. *Hm?* Looking closer, I noticed that small bits of silver light scattered in the air whenever Tamaki swung the sword.

What is it? Some kind of dust? I floated the idea but quickly reconsidered. It seemed different from that. Furthermore, the longer I watched, the more I got the impression that Tamaki's attacks were getting sharper and faster.

"Kazu-san!" she shouted without looking back. "I don't know why, but I'm feeling really energetic! I feel like I can fight forever!"

I imagined what she was feeling was akin to a runner's high, but I couldn't figure out why. *Unless... no, it couldn't be...*

"So magic weapons do exist, huh?" Shiki-san muttered next to me as she watched Arisu and Tamaki's fierce battle.

Ahh, so that's it. Magic weapons, huh...? Monsters, skills, magic spells—these RPG-like elements now existed in our present world. So for there to be a fantasy weapon with fantasy-esque effects almost seemed a matter of course... I supposed.

Assuming such was the case, did that weapon have the effect of increasing one's fighting spirit? Or was it actually restoring the stamina of the user? For all I knew, it could have been another effect entirely, but one thing was clear: an amazing object had come into our possession.

With that weapon on our side, then maybe... just maybe, we can work this out.

"Arisu, we have enemy reinforcements en route to us! I'm sending you to intercept them! Tamaki, you and I will lead the general orc away from them! We need to take some distance from the small fry!"

Both of them wore stunned expressions but quickly regained themselves and nodded in agreement. If things devolved into a free-for-all melee, the situation would turn bad and fast. Everyone shared that sentiment, and the two of them sprung into action.

Considering how far we'd gone, there was no way we would let the general orc escape now. Arisu broke off from the general and united with Shiki-san before running off in the direction of the reinforcements.

Meanwhile, Tamaki and I pretended we were escaping and fled in the opposite direction, making sure the general orc followed behind as we slowly took it further and further from the other orcs. Fortunately, the general orc seemed to lack the ability to think tactically and blindly followed us further into the forest.

The sun hung low in the air as our two groups split away from each other, heading toward our respective final battles. The forest was covered in an orange glow.

Chapter 52: Final Battle at the Middle School – 5

Evening was already bearing down upon us, covering the forest in an orange glow as we distanced ourselves from the others, Tamaki exchanging blows with the general orc all the while. Gripping the silver sword in a double-handed grip, she used the blade to parry another strike from the general's axe before launching one of her own, which was similarly blocked. These exchanges had happened countless times as we traveled further and further within.

Both of them were nearly equal in strength. Each attack forced the other back when they collided, sending sparks flying.

All right, we can do this. We're going to win. I watched intently over the battle as it continued, clenching my fist in anticipation. I had loaded her up with buffs from Support Magic, and even though I had gone as far as giving her Haste, she was still barely able to keep up with the general orc. But Haste wasn't going to last forever.

However, just before its effects expired, Tamaki suddenly murmured something. I barely caught the word "Lev..." before understanding.

Both of us were warped to the white room.

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Once inside the white room, we discovered Arisu bent over an injured Mia. She'd apparently been temporarily released from Repel Sphere's effects. *Support Magic or not, I guess even these kinds of effects don't last in the white room.*

Mia was sitting on the ground, having collapsed upon getting into the white room. She sucked in labored breaths as Arisu healed her, and before long, her cheeks regained their usual red tinge. I couldn't tell if it was because of Repel Sphere's small restorative effect. But she looked much better than when we separated a few moments ago.

"Thanks, Arisu-chin."

"I'm so glad you're safe, Mia-chan," Arisu said, pulling her into a hug. "I really am."

As I watched the two embrace, I lapsed into thought. *Okay, so Mia should have 4 skill points now. The question is, do we want to rank up her Wind Magic or save them for a future Earth Magic rank-up?... On second thought, before we delve into that, there's something I need to confirm.*

"How many did you kill?" I asked Arisu.

"Let's see, two elites and two normals. The order was first a normal one, then both elites, and finally, the other normal one."

Huh? Wait, are you serious? You killed two elite orcs in that short of a time frame? A-amazing.

Arisu must have seen my surprise as she moved panickedly to explain. "I-it wasn't just me! Shiki-senpai and Sakura-chan helped, too... Sakura-chan skillfully drew their attention, which made killing them a simple task."

Seriously? I was in awe. Sakura Nagatsuki had done the same earlier with the hellhound, and now she was doing it to elite orcs, too, all at Level 1. She really was a daredevil, doing all sorts of reckless behavior. *Honestly, from my perspective, it looks like she's just courting death. Or perhaps her hatred of the orcs is so great that she lives through sheer spite, even in the face of death?*

She scared me. I feared she would do something so reckless one day that she wouldn't make it out alive. *I hope Shiki-san does something to help change her daredevil attitude before the worst comes to pass.*

"Also, um, Sakura-chan suffered some pretty big injuries, so I was hoping I could heal her... after I deal with the orcs, of course!" Arisu quickly added.

"Yeah, sure. Go ahead."

Arisu's gonna be busy healing Sakura-san, which means she's not going to be coming to our aid. Then again, we'd already covered quite a bit of distance from her and everyone else, so I hadn't been expecting her assistance to begin with.

I remembered reading in a Q&A session that when a party member was too far away, they wouldn't be counted as in the party. Hence, they would not receive shared experiences. *I thought our separation would be great enough to result in this, but it looks like we're still in range of each other, if barely. In any case, it's clear we shouldn't expect any more aid from the others.*

On the other hand, Tamaki is roughly equal in ability to the general orc. Fortunately, Arisu is taking out the enemy reinforcements and preventing them from going after the general, so we don't have to worry about any orcs jumping into the fray.

We were simply going to have to achieve victory without support from anyone else... and guiding us to that victory was my duty.

On another note, I now understood the amount of XP given by the hellhound. It was 12x the amount of an orc, or Level 12 if you wanted to look at it another way. Doing some rough calculations, that made the hellhound Demon Dog Rank 6... *I think? Even then, it should have some points left over, though.*

The hellhound didn't feel all that strong in close quarters. When she was at Rank 4 Spearmanship, Arisu seemed to be slowly but surely gaining the upper hand against it, excluding the breath attack. Tamaki had been at Rank 5 Swordsmanship during her bout with it, but she'd hung back in fear of being hit by a breath attack, so I couldn't form an accurate judgment.

Hrm... perhaps there are many different ways of calculating this? Or maybe assuming everything falls under the same skill system as us was a fool's errand from the beginning... Oops, went on a bit of a tangent there.

The point is, I no longer needed to fear being disturbed by the other orcs as we took on the general orc. All we needed to do now was bring it down for good.

"No need to fear, Arisu. I'm going to win for sure!" Tamaki energetically pumped her fist into the air before turning to face me. "Watch me, Kazu-san. This time... I'm going to prove to you that I can be useful."

I see. She still believes I will abandon her if she doesn't prove her worth, does she?... Though, I suppose believing as much has been ingrained into her such that it's instinctual for her to feel that way, huh?

My mind flashed back to my conversation with Shiki-san from earlier in the afternoon. A trauma had been etched into my heart in the form of "Shiba." In Shiki-san's case, she was suffering from her fear of men.

Similarly, there appeared to be some deep darkness eating away at Tamaki inside her heart. She was going to need to push forward past her fear, much like me and Shiki-san were. For the sake of everyone's survival, she needed to come to terms with and surpass this demon within.

Then, as her companions, the least we can do is support her in her time of need, right?

"You don't need to worry, Tamaki. I will never abandon you." I spoke in a reassuring tone and began to caress her hair. Tamaki's expression broke out into a giddy smile.

Mia watched us from the side for a brief second before tottering over to us and presenting me her head. I stared at her questioningly.

"What is it?"

"Me too. I worked hard, so give me a reward."

"How many rewards are you going to ask for..." I grumbled. Regardless, I still brought my other hand up to her head and flippantly stroked the top of her hair.

Mia frowned. "I feel like Tamaki got better treatment than me."

"Just your imagination."

"Oh, I see. So after wringing every bit of usefulness out of me, you're throwing me away now that I'm not of use anymore?"

"Could you not try to paint me in such a horrible light?"

I sighed and happened to send a fleeting glance toward Arisu. She was standing a little ways away from the rest of us and was looking back at me with a lonely expression. I motioned for her to come over and then began to caress her hair. Her eyes squinted as her face melted into a comfortable look.

Even as I switched from petting Mia's head to Arisu's, my other hand continued to stroke the top of Tamaki's head. Ensuring her mental state would

not collapse was the highest priority at the moment. I glanced toward Mia, and she gave a firm nod in return. *Somehow, Mia always seems to be the first one to catch onto these kinds of things. It's kind of... how to put it? It's relaxing. Yeah, like a weight being lifted off my shoulders.*

"Sorry, Kazu-san." Tamaki murmured in a low voice. "I'm always making you worry about me."

There's no way that's the case. I could easily tell her as much, but giving a simple response such as that would do nothing to soothe the anxiety she had. Having discussed each other's traumas with Shiki-san earlier this afternoon, I could understand and sympathize with her pain. Nonetheless, I could not turn these thoughts whirling around in my head into comforting words for her.

But what I could not speak, perhaps I could show. Maybe I could lend a helping hand to strengthen Tamaki. The best way to do this was to show that I trusted her. To leave the fighting to her. And to enforce the belief that she could *win*.

"S-So, Kazu-san. What skill should I acquire with my skill points? Right now, I..." She grew quiet.

Tamaki currently had 4 skill points able to be spent. If she were to use them to acquire a new skill, she could reach Rank 2 right off the bat. Alternatively, by upgrading her Strength skill to Rank 2, I was confident she could hold her own against the general orc much more reliably.

However, I had decided beforehand that we would not upgrade any skills. I believed in her current strength, and she believed in mine. *As such, I need to drive this point home.*

"I've told you before, haven't I? Don't grab any skills. You can *win*, Tamaki. There's no need to be so concerned with the enemy before you. It's just a lowly general orc, isn't it? Keep your skill points, and aim toward reaching Rank 6 Swordsmanship," I resolutely declared.

To be honest, there was no way I could consider the general orc weak enough to be designated as a 'lowly' foe. Even now, Tamaki could only barely keep up with it in battle.

Nevertheless, I had to mask my feelings of fear and feign a brave mask. For Tamaki's sake... for the sake of our future. We were going to win against the general with our current strength.

"Kazu-san..."

"It'll be fine. You're strong, Tamaki. You and I are both aware of this fact." I gave a confident nod to dissuade her anxiety. Even though I had a fair share of my own bubbling up inside, I fearlessly grinned as though the challenge before us was no more than child's play.

Afterward, we carefully scrutinized Mia's skills. Ultimately, we decided to raise her Earth Magic to Rank 5.

Our battle against the hellhound reinforced the importance of long-range attacks. One such spell among Earth Magic's Rank 5 spells was called Rock Fall. Essentially, it was the upgraded version of Stone Blast, a Rank 4 spell. *It doesn't matter how strong that hellhound is so long as we physically crush its body.*

"Raise the magic's rank, and then attack based on logic," Mia remarked with a self-satisfied smirk. I imagined she would've given a double thumbs-up if she had both arms. *In any case, she's not wrong, but she's not correct either; the most important thing is actually firepower.*

We then promised to reunite once we were done with our respective battles. Vowing to gain victory against the foes before us and reunite afterward, we faced each other once more.

Having regained her spirits, Tamaki bumped her fist against her chest and energetically announced, "Wait for our return, Arisu, Mia. Kazu-san and I are gonna come back together with our heads held high!" Her pigtails swung around from her movement as though alive, wanting to show their enthusiasm too.

With nothing else left to do, we left the white room and headed back to the forest. The general was waiting for us.

TAMAKI	
LEVEL:	SWORDSMANSHIP:

10	5
STRENGTH: 1	SKILL POINTS: 4

Mia	
LEVEL: 10	EARTH MAGIC: 4→5
WIND MAGIC: 3	SKILL POINTS: 2

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Thus, the curtain drew on what I believed would be the final battle of today.

Immediately upon returning to the forest, Tamaki gave a loud cry and fiercely slashed at the general orc with the silver sword. It guarded against her attack by using the flat of its blade, but the weight of her attack forced it back. *There's our opening. It's now or never.*

"Fall back!"

"Roger!" Tamaki nodded and used the momentary gap she created to distance herself from the general orc, falling back to my side. While she was in the midst of putting some distance between her opponent, I began to chant my next spell.

"Duration Boost."

Duration Boost—a Rank 5 Support Magic spell, which increased the duration of the following spell. After casting this, I reached out and touched Tamaki's shoulder, casting the next one.

"Haste."

Although Haste's effects had yet to expire on Tamaki, I still replenished the spell on her. What's more, due to the doubled duration of its effects, she would be able to continue fighting as fiercely as she had been for twice as long. *I'm not*

sure how things will play out from here on, but if there's one thing I'm certain of, it's that we don't need to worry about her losing Haste halfway through her bout.

The general appeared to have recovered from the recoil of her heavy blow and was now quickly approaching. Tamaki lashed out with a strong blow to repel its charge and then jumped away, searching for a good foothold... *Wait, hold on! Not that way!*

"Watch out! The cliff's over there!"

I shouted a warning to her, but all I received in response was a blank "Huh?" The next instant, the general orc sent out a heavy blow, which Tamaki guarded with her weapon. *Damn, it put a lot of strength into that attack. Did it notice she was at a disadvantage being near the edge?* I clicked my tongue.

Though Tamaki managed to protect herself, the same could not be said for her balance. The impact of the general orc's heavy attack rocked her body, and she teetered right at the edge of the cliff.

Dammit! Why did her carelessness have to come out now of all times?! Shouting out a complaint inside my mind, I left my rearguard position and rushed out toward the pair.

"Tamaki!" I cried out her name as I reached out my hand to grab onto her before she could fall off the edge. Seeing me completely unguarded before it, the general orc raised its axe before swinging it down toward me, threatening to slice me in two.

Fat chance! I've already seen through you! Do you really think I'd leave myself so unguarded without a plan? Grinning, I chanted the spell.

"Reflection."

Perhaps the general orc had believed my charge to be one made out of reckless abandon to save my endangered companion. In reality, however, it had been a calculated action designed to lure the general into attacking me. I even could recognize the timing at which it would attempt to strike me down. As such, laying a trap for it had been all too simple.

A barrier manifested in the space in front of my face, blocking the general orc's blow. The recoil of its blow bounced back at it and forced the general orc to stagger even more than Tamaki had.

The general orc took one step backward, then two steps... and found it had no more ground to stand on. Its feet gave way, and the general lost its balance before falling down the side of the cliff.

Okay, so maybe I've been exaggerating a bit. The "cliff," if it could even be called that, was no more than a steep slope leading down the side of the mountain. If it persisted, it would not be impossible for the general to scale up the slope. Considering how tough it was, I was at least certain that it would not perish from the fall.

And so, there was only one thing we could do.

"Let's go, Tamaki."

"Right!"

Not even an ounce of hesitation could be seen in our expressions as we leapt down the cliff, following after the general orc. We slid down the steep slope a few seconds behind, using our feet to control our descent. *This is it. We've forced it into a bad position, and now, we're going to bring it down for good. No time for hesitation. Don't think; just do.*

Naturally, the general orc wouldn't keep rolling down the slope forever. It pushed its feet against a tree growing out from the side, bringing itself to a stop. Pressing itself up against the ground to ensure it didn't fall again, the general twisted its head to look up. Upon seeing us en route toward it, still ready and willing to continue the fight, its expression twisted with surprise.

"We gotta move, Kazu-san. It's noticed us-"

"No. Keep going."

We pushed forward down the slope toward the general orc, hands linked together. I used my downward momentum to force myself into the lead and then tugged her body toward mine, building up her own momentum.

"Don't worry about me. Just focus on ending it in a single blow."

"B-But!"

"Here it comes!!"

Although standing at an awkward angle, the general orc lifted its axe and prepared to strike at us. *Is it coming? I can't tell.* There was no way for me to measure the timing this time. I had used Reflection not only a moment ago but also back when it was stuck in the pitfall and when it launched the pebble attack at us. Three times this move had been used against it; it was sure to be on guard for it now. Furthermore, my eyes weren't keen enough to observe the slash nor quick enough to react to it.

If we keep going toward it, I'm going to be bisected. Even Tamaki hiding behind me might not be safe and will be bisected with me... but that's only if we don't make any moves.

Making sure Tamaki stayed hidden behind my figure, I continued sliding down the slope toward the general orc. Closer, closer... and at the very last second.

"Repel Sphere!"

A barrier appeared around me, and my surroundings went quiet. The general orc swung down its axe in a diagonal sweep at that moment. From its trajectory, I could tell it was going to bisect both of us at once. There was no way for us to avoid the strike; our accelerated figures would be cleaved through in one single sweep of its axe.

The general orc's diagonal strike slammed into the barrier before bouncing back off entirely as though repelled by an invisible force. Its gigantic body was sent reeling from the recoil, leaving it wide open.

Now! I could feel my voice rip through my throat, but not a single sound was heard. I didn't even know if Tamaki could see me signaling her to counterattack.

But my worries proved unnecessary. Tamaki leapt out from behind me and sprung toward the general orc. Brandishing the silver swords, she swung the blade in a sideways slash aimed right toward the general orc's neck. Her attack sliced through the air—and then its neck, separating it from the rest of its body. A look of surprise could be seen on the general's head as it danced through the air before dropping to the ground below, bouncing as it rolled down the steep

slope. Its body, now headless, collapsed powerlessly to the earth below, then began to slowly fade away, leaving behind four blue gems where it had vanished.

And then, I heard the level up chime ring inside my head. I had leveled up.

Chapter 53: Tamaki–The Ever-Faithful Dog

I barely had time to adjust to my change in surroundings before Tamaki leapt at me, pulling me into an embrace. She wrapped her arms around the back of my neck and drew my body into a tight hug.

"I did it! I won!" she excitedly chirped. "Thank you, Kazu-san! I didn't fail! I didn't fail to meet your expectations!"

"Ye-yeah, you did a great job, Tamaki. So, could you..." I swept the room with a quick glance, worrying about the death glare I would receive from Arisu, but trailed off mid-sentence.

Arisu's jealous figure was nowhere to be found. Mia, too, was absent from the pure-white scenery.

Oh, right. The distance limit. After a moment, I realized the cause. Whenever a party member was too far from the leader, they wouldn't be recognized as in the party. Hence, they would not receive any experience. *We went pretty far when we were luring the general orc away from everyone else. I guess we must be too far for them to be considered part of the party.*

"Huh?" Tamaki made a confused face as she glanced around, evidently having only just noticed it was only the two of us. "Where is everyone?"

I explained to her why the others weren't there, and after a moment of staring at me blankly, her face burst into a mischievous grin.

"Then I can have you all to myself for now, can't I?"

"Hold on a-"

Tamaki pulled me into another hug, squeezing me tightly. *They're touching... they're touching me! Well, they aren't as big as Arisu's, but they're still touching!*



"Hey, Kazu-san. You don't mind if I flirt a little, do you?" Tamaki whispered, nuzzling her cheek against mine. Rather than the image of a lover comforting their sweetheart, I got the impression that she was acting like a cat playfully nuzzling against its owner. *Maybe that's how it actually is?* I mused as she continued to rub her cheek on mine. She was seeking a pillar of support, and I just so happened to be there and able to fulfill that role.

My mind flashed back to the conversation I'd had with Arisu earlier this morning, followed by images of Tamaki's wild outburst and the incident afterward. I wondered if she predicted that we would end up alone with one another like this.

When Arisu told me that, was she implying something else? Something like, "If things take a turn for the worse, don't worry about me and go ahead and embrace Tamaki. No matter what you have to do, the two of you must survive"? Or am I just thinking too deeply about it? Hmm... well, I guess I'll leave it for later.

The two of us moved to one of the room's walls and sat down next to each other, laying our backs against the white surface. We sat there for a while and chatted about all sorts of nonsense. Hours must've gone by as we moved from topic to topic, first talking about Arisu and then Tamaki herself before moving to their classmates. Sooner or later, we came to the girl we had saved earlier, Sumire. Her full name was Sumire Suginomiya, and according to Tamaki, she was a quiet kid who loved reading.

"You mentioned she likes books, right? She and Arisu must've gotten along well then."

"Yeah, she and Arisu were always chatting about books they'd read. Isa-chan and Tsukimi-chan also loved to... chat..." Tamaki's voice trailed off, and a gloomy look loomed on her face.

"Did they...?"

"Isa-chan was in the girls' dormitory. Tsukimi-chan was in one of the classrooms on the first floor."

I nodded silently. Though she had mentioned them, that did not mean they had survived. *Rather, if they had been discovered to be alive, Arisu and Tamaki would've been overjoyed to see them.*

When we had been exploring the girls' dormitory, Arisu had single-mindedly focused on healing the survivors. She hadn't paid any mind to the others who had already passed. Apparently, one among them had been a girl called Isa-chan.

Arisu was in possession of a power known as Healing magic. By using this power on others, she could save them from grave wounds. But as a result of obtaining this power, she had come to hold the conviction of prioritizing the living over the dead. Instead of searching for and mourning over the deaths of her friends, she convinced herself to use her power to heal the survivors. She had gained a ghastly but firm resolution... and I had pushed her toward it.

However, I did not hold a single regret toward doing so. If Arisu was willing to become a support for me, then I wished to do the same for her. *No, not only her anymore—if Tamaki or Mia needed my support, I'd reciprocate for them, too.*

We were a single unity. Because we supported and trusted one another, we were able to successfully triumph over the general orc. A victory brought on not just by Tamaki or me but *everyone*.

But... they don't need to know about this. Right now, I wanted to keep Tamaki's spirits high. More than anything, she needed confidence in herself.

I brought my hand up to stroke the top of her golden blonde hair, and she broke into an embarrassed smile.

"Just for now..." Tamaki murmured softly, leaning her head onto my shoulder. "Just for now, let me stay like this. You can put Arisu first when she's here... but when she's not, spoil me a little, okay?"

I remained silent and continued stroking the top of her hair.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 12	SUPPORT MAGIC: 5

SUMMONING MAGIC:	SKILL POINTS:
3	3

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We returned to the real world, finding ourselves back on the side of the slope.

I was going to be confined inside of Repel Sphere for the next thirty minutes; therefore, I was fixed in place, stuck on the cliffside. We discussed our next course of action inside the white room and decided that Tamaki would return ahead of me.

Upon returning, Tamaki quickly went to gather the blue gems before they could slide down the slope. After ensuring they were safely tucked away, she began to slowly ascend the slope. When she reached the top, she looked back over her shoulder and down toward me, and a confused look broke out on her face. She tilted her head to the side, staring down at where she had last seen me.

Oh, I see. So even this much distance is enough for the camouflage effect to kick in? Rather impressive, I had to admit.

Tamaki seemed to remember this ability after a moment and gave a haphazard wave before turning around and rushing back toward the forest. Before long, her blonde-haired figure was no longer in my sightline.

Geez... I leaned against the side of the barrier surrounding me before heaving a heavy sigh. 30 minutes... Once 30 minutes have passed, Tamaki will come back for me, just like we agreed upon... Hold on a sec. Can she make it back here? This is Tamaki we're talking about... she's probably going to get lost somewhere along the way.

Oh well. In that case, I'll simply summon a familiar to keep myself safe until she returns. I don't mind walking back, either. Feeling all of the tension fading out of my body, I awaited her return.

The day had gone by almost completely, and an evening sky hung in the air. Yet only now was I finally able to get some rest. It felt like I had been fighting

since I woke up until now. Truthfully, I'd had some breaks sprinkled throughout the day where I could catch up on a bit of sleep, but for the most part, it felt like I had yet to leave the battlefield. I was exhausted. From the depths of my soul, all I felt was fatigue bearing down upon me. I slowly began to ease into unconsciousness under the evening glow of the sun, and right when my eyelids were about to close completely, a figure appeared atop the reddened cliffside.

My mind woke up with a start, and I froze in place. This mysterious person was not a girl—it was a guy. Their hunched and lanky figure stood near the edge of the slope, staring down the side with slanted and narrow eyes. Their expression was carved into the same characteristic smirk as always.

It was Shiba Sasou. After all the horrible treatment I'd endured because of him, I could never mistake him for another person.

Shiba observed the surrounding area with a self-satisfied smirk before shrugging his shoulders nonchalantly. He had not noticed me—I knew for a fact that he hadn't seen me. But even knowing this did nothing to stop the endless amount of sweat pouring from my entire body. My teeth chattered noisily, and my heart pounded in my chest like an alarm.

Oh. I see. So I really have been this afraid of him? Even though I tried to kill him, my mind still cannot shake the fear he's ingrained into me.

Flashbacks of what he had done to me began to play inside my mind.

In judo class, Shiba grappled and pulled me to the floor before pressing his entire weight down on top of me. I made a sound similar to a frog being crushed underfoot, and everyone began laughing at my pathetic appearance. Even the PE teacher joined in, snickering from the side.

When I tried retaliating, one of Shiba's lackeys stepped on my hand and pinned it to the ground. Shiba himself noticed my failed attempt to strike back at him and sneered. "Cocky brat," he taunted before putting more force on me.

Classroom cleaning duty. Shiba tied both my arms and legs behind my back, leaving me wiggling on the ground like a caterpillar. He stuffed the cleaning rag into my mouth and forced me to clean the classroom walls and floor in that state, arms and legs bound. "Not good enough. Redo it!" He kicked me and punched me, taunting me all the while. Whenever his fist slammed into my gut,

my classmates would laugh at me. Shiki-san shot me a glance, her expression devoid of any emotion, before exiting through the classroom door. Meanwhile, he continued to ridicule me and threw the wet cloth back at me whenever I dropped it. By the end of it, everyone had joined in on kicking me.

After school, Shiba forced me to undress and bend down on all fours. He rode me around the school, forcing me to walk through the corridors under the eyes of all the other students and teachers. Whenever I stopped, he'd kick me in the side like one would a horse. He'd pull my hair and laugh, ordering me to neigh like one. I had no choice but to comply. The young female teachers would send looks of sympathy toward Shiba whenever they saw me, as though I was the problem for not obeying his orders down to the dot. My skin broke and tore as I moved about on my bare hands and knees, and blood would drip down onto the floor. He'd curse and kick me more whenever that happened, yelling at me for dirtying the floor with my filth. By the time he'd had his fill, scars and bruises covered every inch of my body.

One past event after another flashed through my mind, flooding me with a collage of misery. I begged for the images to stop, but they incessantly ran through my head. I screamed. But the images continued.

Is this some form of PTSD? I wondered as I rolled around inside of the barrier, calmly analyzing my symptoms. *Haha. What a joke. I thought Tamaki was pitiable but look at me. I don't have the right to mock her for being the way she is. My trauma's so much bigger, so much more pathetic.*

I was glad that I was trapped within Repel Sphere's confines. Shiba was holding onto the hunting rifle I had seen him with earlier. Right now, with me unable to summon a familiar to protect myself, I was no match for him.

That's right... I'm no match. Alone. By myself. I stand no chance of winning. So please... please don't notice me here.

My begging, as well as my writhing on the ground, was interrupted by a sudden movement from atop the cliff. Shiba had turned to look over his shoulder back toward the forest. *Huh? What's going on? Is someone there?*

Another figure emerged on the edge of the cliff, standing next to Shiba. They, too, failed to notice me stuck halfway down the cliff's edge. When their face

came into view, my breathing stopped.

It was Arisu. Standing next to Shiba was the unmistakable figure of Arisu Shimozono.

Arisu glanced at Shiba and murmured something. The two of them were around five steps apart from one another. She readied her spear and pointed it at him for an instant, but Shiba waved his hand and nonchalantly spoke to her.

Then, Arisu lowered her spear. Shiba did the same with his hunting rifle, setting it on the ground. She shook her head, bewildered, but Shiba leisurely approached her. She stood there, seemingly unsure what to do, and then he... and then he...

Shiba pulled Arisu into a tight embrace. Any resistance in her body seemed to fade at that moment.

The two of them stood there for a moment, not separating. They seemed to be having a hushed conversation with one another.

Night had nearly fallen by this point, and it was too dark for me to view their expressions anymore. Repel Sphere eliminated all sounds from getting inside, so I could not hear their voices. Nevertheless, the pair continued to discuss something.

Finally, the pair separated. Shiba grabbed Arisu's hand, and she meekly followed with her head hanging downward as he began pulling her away. He stopped to pick up his gun and disappeared back into the forest with Arisu in tow.

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Everything around me had been bathed in pitch-black darkness. I showed no reaction to the darkness all around me, lying there motionlessly. Unmoving. Unfeeling.

Repel Sphere's effects came undone then, and my body began to roll down the slope. I made no effort to move, instead allowing my body to roll continuously. My brain was not functioning, nor could I put any strength into my body.

Soon, my body reached an area of level ground, and I was thrown onto a patch of grass as my tumble came to an end.

I slowly got to my feet. My mind was incapable of processing anything, as though some sort of haze was hanging over it. Nothing came to mind as I gazed blankly down at my hand. The red ring had vanished from my finger.

I had no companions. Once again, I was alone.

Hm. That's... a problem. What... should I do...? Ah... right... I need to... protect myself...

I cast Summon Gray Wolf four times, and a quartet of wolves appeared before me in a single line. They weren't going to need more than Keen Weapon; if necessary, I could give them Haste.

So... where should I go? I glanced around at my surroundings. *Too dark. I can't tell. I don't know which direction the Cultivation Center is.*

Forget it. I don't want to return. I don't want to think about anything.

I began to half-stagger in the direction leading down the mountainside. The path was dark, and my foot caught against a protruding rock. I tripped and fell onto the hard ground. *Nope. Can't go on like this.*

"Night Sight."

I cast the Rank 5 Support Magic spell on myself, granting me night vision. My vision brightened, and before long, I could see everything as well as during the evening.

Now able to see, I continued trekking down the path with unsteady footsteps, making my way through brush and bramble. Before long, I stumbled upon a group of orcs. There were three of them standing absentmindedly around some sort of stone pillar.

What is this...? Whatever, it doesn't matter. Just kill them and move on.

I first cast Deflection Spell on myself and then Haste. Due to the amplification, the bodies of everyone in my group, including me, were surrounded by a red glow. I then gave the order to attack, and my group of wolves rushed the group of orcs. When the orcs noticed the sudden assailants, the wolves were already

bearing down on top of them, intent on burying their teeth into their enemies' throats.

A few moments later, each orc lay unmoving on the ground, all four of their throats torn open and windpipes crushed.

So, this stone pillar is...? No. Doesn't matter. Don't care. Gotta move on, move somewhere else.

Fast forward through a bit of walking, I happened upon another pillar. There were three orcs at this one as well. I killed them all before moving on.

Soon, another. Four orcs were standing around it. Three of them died instantly, but the fourth managed to survive and charged me. Once in front of me, it swung the axe it was holding right down at my head.

"Reflection."

I waited until the last moment and cast Reflection, causing the orc's strike to bounce right back at it. Due to me having been intently watching the movement of the axe, I had done so much more relaxed than usual. *Oh well. Not that I care if it hits me or not.*

Yeah, that's fine. Even if I die, it doesn't matter to me. Whether they die or I die, I don't care anymore. Whatever happens, happens.

The reflected attack bounced back at the orc and struck it directly in its face, killing it instantly.

I leveled up. The world around me shifted as I was warped into the white room.

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I stood motionlessly inside the white room. No one was inside but me.

.....

I walked over to the laptop. *What should I do after this...? Is there anything I can do...?*

I have 5 skill points. Should I upgrade Summoning Magic? Or should I save for Support Magic?

My head was wrapped up in a haze. I stood there in front of the laptop, not moving a single inch, staring blankly at the screen. *Forget it. Deciding what's best is too much of a pain. Just pick whatever.*

.....

I made a selection.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 13	SUPPORT MAGIC: 5
SUMMONING MAGIC: 3→4	SKILL POINTS: 5→1

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I returned to the area I had been to before. Looming in front of me was the stone pillar.

Come to think of it, I haven't been picking up the gems. Even though I've been walking for a while, I should go back for them... no, forget it. It's too bothersome.

"Summon Soldier."

Heeding the call of the Rank 4 summoning spell, a soldier adorned in blackened armor and a helmet manifested before me. Seeing the armored figure, complete with sword and all, I couldn't help but be reminded of a medieval knight. *It looks pretty strong.*

I buffed the dark knight with Keen Weapon, followed by Mighty Arm, and then resumed walking. Despite its seemingly heavy armour, the dark knight moved with nary a sound as it matched my gait. *Oh, I forgot. I didn't give it*

Physical Up. If I don't give it this spell, it will not be able to escape if we need to run.

... Whatever. Too much trouble. Just keep moving.

The stone pillars appeared to be scattered around the mountain in a radial pattern. I discovered pillar after pillar as I crossed through the thicket. There were also orcs standing around at each one.

Each time I came across one of the pillars, I would slaughter the orcs one-sidedly. Every once in a while, one of my familiars would eat a counterattack. One by one, the wolves disappeared, and I would replace them with a dark knight each time.

How many orcs have I killed? I wondered as I came across the nth stone pillar. Everything whirled around inside my head. I should've been feeling some form of fatigue, but my footsteps continued regardless.

When I reached Level 14, my group had two dark knights and three wolves. When I reached Level 15, those numbers switched to three dark knights and two wolves.

Oh, a level-up? That's good. That means I can raise Summoning Magic's rank again.

I should just keep raising Summoning Magic. Yeah, that's a good plan. From now on, I only need to focus on Summoning Magic.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 15	SUPPORT MAGIC: 5
SUMMONING MAGIC: 4→5	SKILL POINTS: 5→0

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Once my Summoning Magic reached Rank 5, I learned a new spell called Banishment. I could use this spell to banish familiars, recovering 90% of the MP I had spent when I originally summoned them.

I used Banishment to get rid of the two remaining wolves. Banishment also cost MP to cast, so I was essentially only regaining 3 MP per use. *Whatever. An MP saved is an MP earned.*

To replace the wolves, I summoned a Rank 5 familiar.

"Summon Elemental: Wind."

The semi-transparent, naked figure of a girl manifested in front of me—my newest familiar. Summon Elemental called upon a spirit of one of the four elements (chosen by the caster) and bound them to my bidding.

Having a fire elemental around in a forest seemed like a bother, so I ignored that one. Summoning a water elemental on land just felt like a terrible idea, so I excluded it. The earth elemental didn't seem like a bad choice. But I already had a reliable vanguard in the form of my dark knights, who were proving extremely useful. As such, I chose to summon the wind elemental.

Oh... but maybe not. I stared at the nude girl, and two huge breasts stared back. Instantly, something pounded in my head. I could feel an unpleasant memory crawling its way back into my mind.

I used Banishment to remove the wind elemental from my sight. In exchange, I went with the only other option, the earth elemental. Following my spell, a giant made of rock with no discerning features formed in front of me. *Yeah, this is fine. I don't mind looking at this. It's way better.*

Ordering the earth elemental to walk in front of me, I resumed searching for the next pillar. *Hrm. Why am I following these pillars...? Whatever. Just keep moving.*

My head pounded. I could no longer tell my legs to stop moving; they simply carried on. I stumbled on something but managed to keep myself upright somehow. Once I recovered, I happened to lift my head up to look forward and noticed something off about my surroundings. I was surrounded on all four sides by enemies.

Oh. Right, that's right. The orcs may be idiots, but even they will take notice of me if I keep attacking them like this. Then again, I've not exactly been trying to hide the sounds of battle.

Guess I should counterattack. I ordered my familiars to attack the enemies encircling us. Not even stopping to wonder how much MP I had left, I summoned another two earth elementals. The dark knights skillfully struck down the orcs with their blades. And the earth elementals used their lumpy, misshapen rocky arms as cudgels, slamming them into the orcs' bodies.

Then one of the dark knights suddenly fell. Looking in its direction, I saw an elite orc rushing toward me.

That's not good... Oh well. If I'm gonna die here, then so be it.

Please, bring me peace. I watched as the elite orc closed the distance between us in a fierce charge and hazily waved my hand at it.

"Go ahead. Thank you for ending it."

My lips lifted upwards. I looked up at the gigantic axe bearing down upon my figure, smiling peacefully. A feeling of calmness overtook me as the axe traced a path downwards toward the crown of my head.

But the relief I was waiting for never came.

"Kazu-san!!" An alarmed cry came from somewhere behind me—Tamaki's voice. There was a noisy *clang* of metal colliding against metal. And a shrill sound reverberated through the air as she repelled the elite orc's attack, sending its weapon flying into the air above.

Tamaki's figure then rushed past me. Her right hand gripped the silver sword tightly, and the other was holding onto a flashlight. She used said flashlight to illuminate the elite orc's face, and a trace amount of surprise could be seen in its expression as the strong beam of light struck its face. She used this small gap of hesitation to close the distance between them, and then a white flash illuminated the night.

The elite orc tumbled to the ground, a deep gash spanning its chest.

Not a moment later, I found myself in the white room. *Huh? I didn't hear a level-up chime, so why am I...?* Feeling puzzled over the reason, I happened to catch sight of the red ring on my finger. *Ah, I see. So Tamaki leveled up, is that it?*

My thoughts reached a conclusion, and I lifted my head.

Chapter 54: The Past, The Present, Tamaki

Inside the white room, Tamaki and I stared at one another. No one else was there besides us.

"Kazu-san! I finally found you!" Tamaki cried happily in between breaths and jumped at me. She nuzzled her cheek against mine, like a dog greeting their owner after they'd been separated for a while.

Why is she here? Why am I here...? My mind felt blank. *Forget it. For now, though... you're so annoying.* I coldly shoved Tamaki away from me.

"Kazu-san...?" She stared up at me with wide eyes. Her expression looked bewildered, and I could see traces of fear mixed in. She peered timidly at my expression before continuing, "Are you okay, Kazu-san? What happened? Why didn't you wait for me? I searched and searched for you. What's more, Arisu has also vanished... Is she not with you?"

Arisu...? Oh, right. Arisu... she... Flashbacks began running through my mind once again. I watched Arisu hug him. I watched Arisu walk away after him.

I screamed, crouching down on the floor. My body began to shake uncontrollably. Seeing the sudden shift in my behavior, Tamaki rushed over to me in a panic.

"Kazu-san?! Hey, are you okay? What's wrong?"

I could feel her shaking my shoulders. When I lifted my gaze, Tamaki was in front of me, gazing at me with a concerned look. Even though I was acting so pathetically, she still looked at me with such worry.

"I..." Tamaki began, her face tightening up as if resolving herself. "I don't know what has happened to you since I left. But I do know your pain, Kazu-san. I understand how you're feeling."

"What do you know?!"

Something snapped inside of me. My mind went blank, and some deep blackness inside my head boiled over like a river of flowing magma, swallowing me up alongside it. Before I realized it, I had pinned Tamaki to the ground. I had attacked her. I sucked in ragged breaths, hanging over her pinned figure.

But she didn't resist. Tamaki had Rank 1 Strength, so if she wanted to resist, it would've been child's play for her to push me off of her. Nevertheless, she didn't do anything and remained under me. Despite her body trembling underneath mine, she made no attempt to escape. Instead, she looked up at me directly into my eyes.

"Go ahead, Kazu-san. If someone as useless as me can be useful for you then..."

She gave a gentle smile as if to console me and slowly moved her face toward mine, overlapping my lips with hers. Her kiss felt more reserved than Arisu's passionate ones. But I could sense the desperation behind her action. I was wrapped up in her warmth.

"How can you... How can you understand..."

"But I do understand. I don't know what happened to be making you feel such pain... but I understand your pain. And I also understand that you can't be left alone right now."

Tamaki smiled and moved closer, whispering into my ear, "That's why... let me be the one to help you this time." She took my hand and guided it toward her.

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Once we had finished, Tamaki pulled my head into her chest and gave me a tight hug, embracing my sobbing, miserable figure.



"You know, Kazu-san? Today has been full of happiness for me, thanks to you. Probably even the happiest day in my entire life. So, even if I can't return all of it, I would like to give back some of this happiness to you."

Tamaki spoke in a gentle tone, softly caressing my hair.

"Tell me, Kazu-san. What happened? What darkness drove you to feel this way?"

I hesitated to speak. What was she going to think of me once I told her? Once she knew how pathetic I was, I'm sure she would...

"It's all right. I've already made up my mind—I'm always going to be on your side, no matter what. Tell me what happened to you. No matter how ugly you believe it is, no matter how painful you believe it is, I'll listen to it all. I *want* to hear about it all."

I paused and then slowly lifted my gaze upwards to look at her. She returned a gentle smile.

"Have you forgotten, Kazu-san? I also put on a pathetic show earlier this morning, too."

I couldn't help but smile wryly at her comment. *Yeah. You really were, weren't you?* She had been so scared that she couldn't move, even going as far as to wet herself. She had thoroughly put on a miserable show for all to see.

However, that had been brought about by a series of unfortunate events. The situation had deteriorated, followed by a reawakening of her past mental scars.

My circumstances were different. The scars I held onto were far more shameful than anything she'd done this morning.

"This morning, you see, Arisu came running to me. She begged me to do something."

"Huh...? What did she...?"

"She told me to look out for you if she died. 'If I die, Kazu-san's going to be extremely sad. He might even lose his mind,' she said."

Arisu... told her something like that? But... why?

"She begged me to do this not after she died but before. Arisu begged me to offer myself to you... so that I would not be killed by you."

"Why...?"

"Because you told her so. If Arisu ever betrayed you, you would take me hostage and take me with you. So if Arisu died, then you would... yeah..."

I stared blankly at her and prompted her to explain further. However, Tamaki matched my stare, clearly perplexed by my confusion.

"Don't you remember?" she asked, her head tilted sideways. "You said it this morning...?"

"Hold on a second."

This morning? Did we have a conversation like that?... I think we did. But that was just a joke, so why is Tamaki bringing it up no-... Oh no. I had a harrowing realization. What if Arisu had taken those words at face value? That explained why she had been acting so weird whenever Tamaki was the subject of our conversations. And come to think of it, earlier this morning, Arisu asked me to sleep with Tamaki, didn't she? Does this mean the reason she requested me to do that was because...

"Don't tell me... I said that as a joke, if a poor-taste one. Are you implying that those casually uttered words drove you girls into a corner?"

"Well... kind of," Tamaki laughed dryly. "But because of that misunderstanding, I got to embrace you. So I don't really mind."

"You..." I stared at her in disbelief.

"Oh, and I know I said it earlier, but I'm fine with being a substitute for Arisu. That's enough for me. Your heart should belong to Arisu; in fact, I want you to be hers. So please, Kazu-san..."

Tamaki finally dropped her smile and stared at me with a sincere gaze.

"Please tell me what happened. It doesn't matter if it's good, bad, or whatever; I'll listen to every last bit. So tell me, what is this pain that hurts your heart?"

I wavered for a brief moment before finally conceding to her earnesty. Slowly, bit by bit, I began recounting everything that had happened to me up until yesterday. The reason I had gone out to the middle of the forest to dig pitfalls, what kind of person I had been in high school... and finally, the deep-seated emotions I felt toward the person known as Shiba.

I also explained to Tamaki what I had witnessed when she was gone. That Shiba had come to the cliff's edge and embraced Arisu before taking her away with him. My voice felt indifferent, almost far away, as I recalled the scene. It felt like I was describing a nightmare.

Tamaki would occasionally give a non-committal response, but for the most part, she kept quiet as I explained everything to her. Once I finished going over every last bit, she pulled me into her chest again. My face was squished against her two bouncy peaks, and a warm feeling enveloped me. I could hear the sound of her heartbeat pounding behind her chest. Her body heat flowed into me, and the worries running rampant inside my head seemed to fade as a peaceful feeling overtook me.

Tamaki released me from her prison of flesh when she noticed me having trouble breathing and looked down at my face, smiling angrily.

"I really feel like killing all of those idiots at the high school now," she spoke in a cheerful, sarcastic tone.

Wow. She and Arisu had the exact same reaction. No wonder they're such good friends. I smiled bitterly at her response.

"Listen to me, Kazu-san. Compared to those guys from the high school, you're far more important to me. I know Arisu feels the same way, and I'm sure Mia does too. You can trust us." Tamaki smiled softly at me for a moment. Then, her expression donned a serious look. "Also, I need to talk to you about something."

"To me? What do you mean?" I looked at her in confusion.

"I'm not sure who did it, but somebody stole Mia's left arm from Shiki-san. We used some magic to make sure it didn't degenerate... Stasis, I think it was called? Anyway, they gave it to Shiki-san for safekeeping afterward... but then it went missing. She wouldn't tell me who stole it, but Sakura-chan mentioned hearing a gunshot."

A gunshot? I was dumbfounded. My mind flashed back to the reconnaissance I'd done with the raven, where I had seen Shiba holding a gun. *Did he threaten her with the gun? That explains why Mia's arm has gone missing... but why would Shiba want Mia's detached arm? It doesn't make sense.*

"Hey, Kazu-san. You know Arisu is an adopted child like I am, right?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

"In the past, she told me about something. Apparently, one of the relatives of the foster parents who adopted her is one of the directors on the board of this school. That's why she was sent over here."

"Her relative... is one of the directors?"

"Yeah. And the son of that relative also goes to this school... Arisu has been being taken care of by him for a long time now."

"Do you know the name of that person?"

Tamaki shook her head. *I see. I guess it's only natural Arisu didn't go into such detail that she even told her their name.*

"In any case, Shiba's bad news..." I fell into silence. Was Shiba even capable of treating someone kindly? I feared... it was possible. He was the type of person to treat someone he favored cordially and thoroughly cut down those he didn't.

That man utterly despised me. But those who snuggled up to him were treated more or less favorably. To strengthen his position within the school, he actively tried to bring everyone around him under his wing. He was a dirty schemer, making all sorts of friends for the sake of his own gain.

That was the exact reason the teachers had been at his mercy before realizing it.

If he likes having Arisu around... I lapsed into thought. The two of them were relatives, separated by a year. *If he believed Arisu would be a worthwhile pawn when she entered high school the next year, then he no doubt tried to keep her impression of him in high regard.*

Everything clicked into place. Arisu must have only seen Shiba as a good relative the entire time she interacted with him. So yesterday, when I told Arisu

about the high school... and then warned her about Shiba...

Shit. I cursed inwardly. Not a second later, I heard a low moan come from Tamaki.

When I looked up, I noticed my hands were gripping tightly onto Tamaki's arms. At some point, my fingernails had begun to dig into her fair, supple skin. The surface of the skin had broken, and blood dripped from my nails.

"S-sorry. I didn't notice I was..."

"Don't worry about it. This is nothing compared to the pain you're feeling inside your heart." Tamaki waved my concerns off, mustering a brave smile. "Besides, it'll be back to normal once we leave."

That's... not incorrect. You're speaking the truth. But even if you say that... I can't help but feel awful, you know? Seeing her comfort me after I had caused her pain had me feeling all kinds of wrong.

"Hey, Kazu-san."

Tamaki faced me and beamed a lighthearted smile. Despite the darkness she'd seen hiding away in the depths of my heart, she still could find it in herself to smile at me.

She pulled me into a tight hug and patted my back, repeatedly whispering, "It's okay," before continuing in the same lighthearted voice. "Let's go and confirm Arisu's feelings. You're hesitating about what to do because you aren't sure what she thinks of you, right? Then let's go find her together— you and me. What was she thinking when she left with Shiba? What did she really want in that situation? We'll find out for ourselves... and then we'll decide."

"Tamaki..."

"And if she's changed her mind, we're gonna smack her good and bring her home. We're gonna steal her away!"

Ah... I see. Tamaki's words struck a chord within me, blowing away the haze in an instant. *How could I have been so blinded? What was I even hesitating about in the first place?*

"Tell me, Kazu-san. Do you still like Arisu?"

"Yeah, of course, I do. I love her. I treasure her more than anything else in the world."

"Glad to hear. I would've been a little hurt if you hadn't said as much." Tamaki flashed a smile. Even though I had just openly declared directly to her face that she wasn't the most important person to me, I couldn't spot even the smallest amount of sadness behind her brilliant smile.

However, being wrapped up in her tight embrace, I did sense a small stiffness in her body as she held me. That must have been the pain she was feeling deep in her heart. Nevertheless, I pretended to not have noticed it.

"Let's go to the high school, Kazu-san. Let's sneak over and see for ourselves what the truth is," Tamaki declared, flashing a smile so brilliant I was almost blinded by its shine.

TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 12	SWORDSMANSHIP: 6
STRENGTH: 1	SKILL POINTS: 2

"Hold on a second," I paused, noticing the change on Tamaki's status screen. "Tamaki... when did you reach Rank 6 Swordsmanship?"

"Once I separated from you and headed back toward the others, I fought for a bit and leveled up almost immediately. I worked really hard to get to this point, you see," Tamaki explained.

I smiled and thanked her again, gently stroking her blonde hair. *She really is a faithful dog.* Looking at her face, her bright smile was all I could think about.

Another World Survival: Min-maxing My Support and Summoning Magic will continue in Volume 3



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