

5

Another World Survival

Min-maxing
my Support and
Summoning
Magic

Author: Yokotsuka Tsukasa

Illustrator: Manyako


Hanashi
MEDIA

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Another World Survival, Min-maxing My Support and Summoning Magic Vol. 5

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First published by Futabasha Publishers Ltd., 2014 English edition published by Hanashi Media.

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*Hanashi Media, LLC
838 Walker Road Suite 21-2 103
Dover, Delaware (DE) 19904*

ISBN: 978-1-961788-02-2

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Another World Survival

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Summoning
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Author: Yokotsuka Tsukasa

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World Tree
Resident
Rushia



3rd Year - Middle
School Student
Arisu Shimozono



College Student -
Ninja Club OG
Keiko Isogaki



1st year High
School Student
Kazuhisa Kaya



1st Year Middle
School Student
Mia Tagamiya





*"To think the **world**
might **end** tomorrow..."*

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A grayscale background illustration of a blonde anime girl with long hair, looking down with a slight smile. She is holding a human skull in her hands. The scene is set against a bright, hazy background.

ANOTHER WORLD SURVIVAL

MIN-MAXING MY SUPPORT AND
SUMMONING MAGIC

STORY BY YOKOTSUKA TSUKASA
ART BY MANYAKO



Chapter 102: Battle in the World Tree Forest, Part 6

On the third day, after both our school and a nearby mountain were transported to another world, we launched a full assault on the cave deep within the forest that had been the orcs’ base. However, we were unexpectedly teleported to a grassy plain far from our mountain by a grotesque flesh mass called the Globster, lurking deep inside the cave.

After we annihilated the monster forces that had been plaguing the grassland town, a hawk flew down to us. It spoke with a voice belonging to Leen, the leader of the People of Light, and guided us to the World Tree, where we met with Leen herself that afternoon. Then the four of us—Arisu, Tamaki, Mia, and I—added the elven princess Rushia to our party. We also fought a group of spider-humanoids known as Arachnes, who had taken over a village near the World Tree.

Having wiped out the small unit of Arachne troops that was occupying the village, the five of us began pursuing the main force of the Arachne army, which had launched an invasion.

※ ※ ※

We flew among the trees in the forest via a flying spell. The Invisible Scout took the lead, and we followed its trail.

We’d been flying for a few minutes when I noticed we hadn’t seen any stragglers from the enemy’s main force. Were we just lucky, or were the Arachnes so well organized that there *were* no stragglers?

When I asked Rushia about this, she said, “Arachnes are incredibly skilled at traveling through forests.”

“Like, they don’t get lost?”

“Right. We elves have a similar ability, as do all the other forest races. Even if we can’t see the sky, we can always find our way by studying the trees and other plants. We can also distinguish distant sounds even under background noise like leaves rustling or birds chirping.”

“So, Arachnes are creatures like that, too...”

In other words, if we let our guard down, there was a possibility of being ambushed by them. If it weren’t for the Invisible Scout conducting recon, we could have been in serious trouble.

At least it was clear which way they were going; the forest path was covered in footprints. According to Rushia, they were heading toward a teleportation gate that was open to the public, not a military one.

“They must be going after fleeing civilians.”

Her words were given grim validity as we occasionally came across corpses—soldiers of the Light Tribe, children, and the elderly. It seemed that the weak and the slow were becoming prey.

“To be honest, it would be easier if they treated us like orcs and had their way with us,” Mia quipped.

“Mia’s right. Monsters like orcs, who move haphazardly, are easier to deal with, no matter their numbers,” Rushia responded calmly.

Well, yeah, that’s true, but...

“I’ve heard that our army won some important battles by sacrificing a village or two to divide the enemy,” Rushia said.

Shit, I thought. *That’s harsh*. But I should have expected that someone in power would have a different perspective.

I guess they had no choice if they wanted to survive.

But the reality was that they *hadn’t* survived. Rushia’s country had failed to stop the monster invasion, and it had been destroyed.

If the residents of this world could obtain levels and skills as easily as we could, they wouldn’t have to struggle.

I guess those of us who have cheats shouldn't criticize their desperate methods.

After flying for about twenty minutes, we began to hear the sounds of battle. Apparently, the Light Tribe's resistance hadn't been crushed yet. The troops that had rushed to their aid from the military teleportation gate must have been desperately holding back the Arachne army.

Is that guy who mocked me still alive? I wondered. I hope he is. At least he was fighting hard for his homeland. That's probably why he was pissed off at the reinforcements. They seemed pathetic to him.

To be honest, I really want to prove myself in some real combat. But that doesn't mean I want to put my comrades in unnecessary danger...

I landed a little ways away from the battlefield and used Remote Viewing on the Invisible Scout, sending it to look for the main force.

Everything the Invisible Scout saw was projected as if I saw it with my own eyes. It skillfully maneuvered through the branches and leaves of the forest and, as a precaution, moved to the enemy's flank. Then it flew over the heads of the Arachnes once again and straight into the heart of the enemy forces.

The monster unit comprised about four hundred individuals. In addition to the Arachnes, I could see the gray wolves we'd fought earlier in the town of Hesh Resh Nash.

When I asked Rushia about the appearance of the wolves and their attacking style, she replied, "They're Lightning Wolves, wolflike monsters that can cover their entire bodies in lightning. When they move, they appear as purple lightning strikes."

I see, so they're wind-attribute wolves after all. We'd been able to defend against their attacks last time because there happened to be a Wind Elemental, but fighting off five or six of them would be quite troublesome.

Above all, they were fast, which would complicate our escape. Flying higher above the ground might be a solution, but then we'd become easy targets for long-range attacks, like the Arachnes' arrows.

The forces centered around the Arachnes were giving the Light Tribe a tough time. Most of the Light Tribe soldiers were taking positions in elevated places like trees and shooting arrows at their enemies, and the Arachnes were returning fire from their hiding spots. Occasionally, they would nimbly climb from one tree to another using their sticky threads and launch surprise attacks.

When a member of the Light Tribe would fall to the ground, the Lightning Wolves would close in—and once that happened, it was all over. The soldier would scream in agony as their throat was torn apart, creating a hellish scene of desperate cries.

The Light Tribe wasn't lying down and dying, though. Robed individuals, likely mages, used magic to animate the massive trees. The roots moved like legs, and the branches wriggled like hands, knocking down the Arachnes one after another.

"Ents..." I muttered without thinking. But on second thought, that wasn't quite right. The treelike monsters in the *Lord of the Rings* movies had a gentle nature, but the Ents of this world seemed more like violent familiars.

Even though the living trees seemed to rampage around with no particular strategy, they were gigantic; the Arachnes were clearly struggling against them. There must have been about ten of them, which I couldn't stop thinking of as Ents. As long as they kept up the fight, things might be okay.

As the Invisible Scout ventured even deeper into enemy territory, I noticed there were eight Mage Arachnes wearing robes gathered at the rear. It would be a considerable relief if we could defeat them alone.

Ahead of the group of mages stood a noticeably larger Arachne, who seemed to be the commander. Standing beside her was another Arachne with striking dark red skin, the color of fresh blood, wielding an eerie spear with a tip that matched the color of her skin, occasionally pulsating with a dull crimson or pitch-black hue. The handle of the spear was a translucent silver, creating a beautiful contrast.

As the Invisible Scout got closer to the commanding Arachnes, I felt a sinking feeling in my gut. *This is bad! Stop! Run away now!* My senses screamed those

words, but my voice didn't reach the Invisible Scout, who continued to close the distance with the commander to gather more information.

The Arachne with the bloodred skin casually looked up, her gaze immediately catching the supposedly Invisible Scout. I felt an extremely unsettling sensation, as if the Arachne were staring straight through my familiar and into my eyes.

With a quick, practiced motion, the Arachne raised her spear and threw it. I could see its dark red tip flying straight toward us, and I felt the spear pierce through my torso—no, that's not right. The spear merely impaled the torso of the Invisible Scout.

The connection was severed, and my vision returned. I took rough breaths, pressing my chest and kneeling on the ground. There was no pain, just surprise and fear.

Arisu hurriedly ran over and put a hand on my shoulder. "Wh-What's wrong, Kazu-san?"

"I'm fine... The Invisible Scout was... killed," I replied between shaky breaths.

"What?!" Tamaki exclaimed in astonishment. "How?"

"... Saw her..." I struggled to catch my breath still.

"How? Even when it's right nearby, I can't see it."

I see. If you can't notice it, then that Arachne must be quite skilled. Or maybe she has some special ability. Either way, she's more powerful than the rest of the Arachnes by far. That's the one Rushia was talking about...

"What kind of monster killed her?" Arisu asked, coming over to us.

"Must be a Legend," I declared once I had caught my breath. "It was as overwhelming as Mekish Grau, no doubt about it. Our Invisible Scout was killed by a Legend Arachne."

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But even if there was a Legend Arachne among the enemy forces, our course of action remained the same: crush their high-level monsters, then break

through the encirclement and seek refuge with the Light Tribe forces. And if possible, provide support for our allies' retreat.

The first stage was the most crucial. Fortunately, before infiltrating the enemy's main camp, the Invisible Scout had managed to circle around to the flank. While the Arachnes would be vigilant against any surprises, they wouldn't know where our attack would come from.

"I'm thinking of dividing our forces into two groups. The enemy noticed our reconnaissance, so we have to respond fast and eliminate as many of them as possible in the first strike," I told the others.

"When I say divide," I continued, "it's only for that first strike. Mia and Rushia, you'll launch area attacks against the Mage Arachnes in the rear. Rushia, use your full magical power. We want the mages taken out as quickly as possible. At the same time, Arisu and Tamaki, you'll take my two familiars and attack the commanders... the Champion and the Legend. While Tamaki keeps the Legend busy, Arisu and my familiars will crush the Champion. After that, we retreat fast."

"Aren't we going to defeat the Legend?" Arisu asked.

"She's a monster on par with Mekish Grau—a Divine-grade being. I think small fries will surround us if we fight for too long. We'll have at most ten or twenty seconds to spare. In such a short time, there's no way we can defeat a Legend, right?"

Tamaki crossed her arms and grumbled in thought, but even she knew the situation was grave.

"If we can crush the mages and the Champion, there's no doubt that the enemy's command will be thrown into disarray," I went on. "The problem lies in whether the Legend will get angry and come after us. Assuming she does chase us, let's come up with a plan for that scenario."

"Will we be able to escape from something so powerful?" Rushia asked.

Yeah, I thought, that's definitely the biggest cause for concern.

Out loud, I said, "It's crucial we maintain a high level of flexibility and adaptability as we deal with the situation on the fly."

“Hmm. Kazu, this isn’t the time to pretend to be clever,” Mia scolded.

Oh, so I guess losing the Invisible Scout was my fault?

“I understand that you’ve just lined up some fancy words, but may I assume it’s based on a proverb from your country?” Rushia asked, and she was absolutely right.

Gotta watch my jokes next time. Just explaining it simply as “something like that” would have been better.

I tried to ignore the bewildered looks coming from Tamaki and Arisu. “If it comes down to it, Mia, you’ll use Gravity to restrain the Legend. You might get overwhelmed by their strength and nearly get dispelled, but you should be able to buy us some time.”

“You should have said that from the beginning,” Mia said, puffing out her flat chest.

Well, don’t you look high and mighty, I thought with a sigh. Well, whatever.

“As for confusing the enemy grunts...” I went on to relay several tactical options. We’d be relying heavily on Mia and Rushia’s magic. Rushia joining us was a huge deal. With an additional ally who could use offensive magic, plus the fact that she had special abilities like Magic Release, our options had expanded to include “first, unleash an area attack to crush the mages”—which was exactly what we would be doing.

“Kazu, I think you understand, but this plan is quite dangerous,” Mia said when I’d finished.

“Are you scared, Mia?”

Mia shook her head. “You’d better stop before you push yourself too hard. I don’t want to become a hero at the expense of sacrificing my comrades.”

“That’s not my intention. I’m doing this because it’s the most rational thing to do.”

In reality, nobody except for us, not even Treant, could stand against the Champion or the Legend. If the mages were to get serious and attack, it would pose an existential threat to the whole army. But the Arachne forces hadn’t

shown their true strength yet, which was why we were heading out. While the Arachnes were still testing the waters, we needed to crush the area around them. Otherwise, the chances of the Light Tribe winning would diminish. Worst case scenario, we would lose this battle and get pushed back even further, and then Leen wouldn't have time to care about us anymore. We might not be able to return to the mountains.

Leen is testing us right now. We'd better achieve impressive results.

"Well, if Mia's against it, we can change the plan to gradually reduce the Arachnes' numbers on the outskirts," I said.

"That won't work," Mia replied. "It'll give the enemy time to adapt. Most likely, the Legend'll show up right away. Dealing with both the grunts and the Legend at the same time will be tough."

"So, what do you suggest, then?" I asked.

"Either go with your plan from earlier, Kazu, or keep retreating and not get involved in this battle. Information is crucial."

Don't mention the information advantage. Well, it's important, actually.

Nevertheless, intentionally retreating to withhold information from the enemy... It seemed like the right thing to do.

Leen had hinted that there would be a large-scale battle the next day. Focusing on keeping information hidden from the enemy for now might be a valid strategy. As a result, she might have to temporarily halt the exploration of the mountain where the school was located, but if the decisive battle was tomorrow...

But that's...

"We don't have that option, do we?" I said.

"No, we don't," Mia replied.

Mia and I exchanged a glance before nodding at each other.

"Considering how little time we have, we can't afford to miss an opportunity to level up," Mia said. "It was the same yesterday. By taking bold steps forward, Kazu, you made sure we survived that battle. I'm sure it'll be the same today."

That's exactly why we should take bold steps forward, I thought, nodding again.

I looked at Arisu, Tamaki, and Rushia in turn. They were all in agreement.

"All right, Mia, that's the plan. Got it?" I asked.

"As long as Kazu has made up his mind, I have no problem with it," Mia replied, lightly tapping my chest with her small fist. "Let's go, Kazu. We don't become heroes through desire alone. The actions we take are what make us heroes, right?"

If I hadn't said that line about a hero being someone who accomplishes the impossible, my words today might have been a bit more impactful.

I'm truly a disappointing guy, after all.

Chapter 103: Battle in the World Tree Forest, Part 7

At that point, I was at Level 26, so my maximum MP when not summoning anything was 260. Summoning the Rank 8 familiars, the Fire and Wind Elementals, reduced my max MP by 128, leaving me with 132. Additionally, the Invisible Scout had been summoned until just a moment before. Considering the other miscellaneous spells I'd used, my actual MP was depleted to a little over 60.

Summoning another Rank 8 familiar seemed unavoidable.

I needed to save my MP for casting spells. For now, I'd cast Keen Weapon, Physical Up, and Mighty Arm on the Wind Elemental along the way. I'd also cast Clear Mind and Smart Operation on both the Fire Elemental and the Wind Elemental.

From what I could tell, the Mage Arachnes primarily used minor technique-based magic, so Clear Mind would be a countermeasure against that. The Greater Elementals could also use offensive magic, so I aimed to increase their firepower with Smart Operation. While elemental magic did consist mainly of offensive spells, having increased long-range firepower was crucial.

I cast Deflection on Mia, and she renewed Fly on herself, which affected the entire party. Then I cast Deflection again. This time, Mia applied Greater Invisibility, an enhanced version of Invisibility, which would allow her to remain invisible even during intense movements.

However, the duration of that spell was only six to nine seconds per rank. With Mia's current rank, it would only last between forty-two and sixty-three seconds. Nevertheless, that should be sufficient.

In essence, the plan was to break through the enemy ranks and reach the mages and the Champion.

See Invisibility was active on me, making everyone except me unable to see even their allies. I instructed everyone to grab someone else's hand for

guidance.

We didn't need Silent Field; the battlefield was already incredibly noisy.

Finally, from Deflection Spell to Haste.

Everyone's bodies began to glow, but only I could see this radiance.

"Let's go!" I declared.

Mia and Rushia grabbed hands and took the lead, flying forward.

I took Arisu's and Tamaki's hands, following closely behind.

The Fire and Wind Elementals, understanding my direction, silently followed us.

We soared at about twenty meters above the battlefield, swiftly passing over the Arachne forces below us.

Before long, we spotted the mages, the Champion, and the Legend. Mia and Rushia landed on a sturdy branch of a nearby tree. Rushia concentrated her mind and activated Mana Release. After a few seconds, I felt a powerful gust of wind around Rushia. Mia sensed it too, and quickly began preparing herself for spell-casting.

It was a bit earlier than planned, but there was no other choice. Eliminating the mages was our top priority.

Arisu, Tamaki, and I flew past Mia and Rushia toward the Champion, even soaring above the heads of the mages.

"Go, Tamaki, Arisu," I whispered, releasing their hands. The two girls sped up, charging straight toward the Champion.

I swiftly turned back to the Fire and Wind Elementals, commanding them to stay still. Then I took cover behind them.

"Fire Storm!"

Rushia's magic was unleashed. A massive explosion erupted near the mages, flames raging and sweeping through the area.

Immediately after that, Mia should have released a lightning bolt, but it was impossible to tell against the backdrop of Rushia's Fire Storm.

Just then, an intense gust of wind rushed toward me. The Fire Elemental sacrificed himself and shielded me from harm.

All around us, trees were uprooted and blown away by the force of the explosion. The blast also engulfed a nearby lesser Arachne, and I could see the limbs of several Arachne being torn off and sent flying.

Bodies of the fallen Arachne collided with others, crushing their heads like crushed tomatoes. The damage spread in a chain reaction. The ground shook, and a cloud of dust rose into the air.

Incredible—this was the power of magic infused with mana release. Even though it consumed ten times the MP, with this level of power...

Oh, I've leveled up.

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In the White Room, we exchanged glances.

In unison, we announced, "I've leveled up."

"Everyone leveled up, huh..." I said.

Arisu smiled wryly. She explained that she and Tamaki had been blown away by the effects of Rushia's magic, preventing them from launching a preemptive attack on the Champion.

"I'm sorry..." Rushia apologized.

"Don't worry about it." It would be unfair to blame Rushia, just as Mia had said earlier. No one could have expected such immense power.

Besides, being in the center of such a huge explosion should have almost wiped out the enemy mages. Otherwise, we wouldn't have gained so many experience points.

Suddenly, Rushia stumbled, and I hurried to her side.

Wow, this girl has big breasts, huh? Wait, that's not important.

Rushia's face turned pale. She was sweating profusely.

“What’s wrong, Rushia?”

“It feels like... my magic power is releasing...”

Mia rushed over to the computer and jumped into the chair. She began typing feverishly. After looking at the screen, she nodded and turned to me. “Kazu, magic power release does more than just decrease MP. There are side effects.”

“You should have told us earlier!”

“We didn’t research it. That’s all.”

Well, that’s true. We were being stupid.

“Rushia seems pretty exhausted. Is that the only consequence?”

“It depends on the person and the situation. There can also be intense pain. If you use it at maximum power too often, there’s a risk of dying from the pain.”

“Maximum... Is it okay as long as the consumption’s ten times higher?”

“If you lower the MP consumption ratio, the penalties will also decrease.”

Good to know, I thought. Right then, it would have been overkill to unleash this at maximum power, so there was room for improvement.

Rushia, who had been breathing heavily for a while, finally moved away from me and tried to reassure us. “I’m okay now.” Once she’d rested for a minute, she added, “I gained two levels.”

Level 14, just like that?! That’s incredible...

No wonder she was in excruciating pain and her MP was significantly depleted.

Her max MP should have been 120 a moment ago, but she’d used up 60 of it in that one blow. All at once, her resources had been cut in half.

But it was totally worth it. The Mage Arachnes would be in a state of utter destruction from that one hit.

Frankly, it seemed that using Rushia’s magic to sweep away the mooks was the most efficient way to level up. It was also significant that the enemies were tightly clustered and hadn’t anticipated an area attack.

In addition, Rushia's skill points had increased to 7, which meant she could continue to level up her Fire Magic. She hadn't been able to do this in that last battle, but the next one would probably have an even more spectacular explosion.

At least so I thought, but after a quick search, I saw that rank 7 Fire Magic didn't have a direct area attack spell...

That's disappointing. Still, that explosion was more than enough.

"Also... Arisu can reach Rank 7 in Spearmanship," I pointed out.

"Yep! Finally, I can become stronger than Kazu-san's familiar," Arisu said happily.

Ah, she was worried about that.

Well, of course she wanted to be useful to me and was working hard. I stroked Arisu's head. She blinked her eyes and smiled, as if she were ticklish.

Ah, that feels good. I want to stroke her head forever.

"Kazu, if you're going to get cozy, do it with everyone."

"Okay, calm down." I laughed, holding Mia back as she came closer with her head tilted. "It's okay to relax and enjoy some intimacy, but let's do it after the meeting is over."

"Hmm... Can't beat the Champion, huh?" Tamaki asked.

"How about that?" Arisu replied.

Tamaki and Arisu exchanged glances.

"I was sent to the Legend... I haven't made contact yet, but I think I've been noticed," Tamaki said. "I'm sorry, Kazu-san. I messed up."

"Nah, shit happens. Let's take this as an opportunity to gather information. In that case, Tamaki, keep dealing with the Legend like we planned. You don't need to defeat her—just focus on restraining her."

On the other hand, Arisu seemed to be closer to the Champion in terms of position. She might have lost her balance because of the explosion, but she managed to regain her footing.

“My Fire and Wind Elementals will support Arisu as well. We’ll take down the Champion quickly with a three-to-one advantage. Good news: the enemy still doesn’t know where we are. We can expect a certain element of surprise.”

“Okay, Kazu-san.”

The problem is how the surrounding Arachne will act in the meantime...

“Mia, Rushia. Your priority is to kill all surviving mages. No... That’s too lenient. Rushia, since we don’t need to confirm whether they’re alive or dead, when you get back to where you were before, cast Fire Storm at the same place, multiplied by five... I’m sorry, but endure the pain.”

“I can handle it... but are you sure you want me to do that? If I do that for a Rank 6 spell, I’ll have only 30 MP left.”

“That’s okay. At worst, we can defeat the mages and escape, but leaving any mages alive is absolutely forbidden. If even one of them survives, they’ll be a threat to Arisu and Tamaki.”

After saying that, I paused for a moment and then asked, “What do you think of my approach?”

“I think your approach is consistent and very good,” Rushia said.

Yeah, I think this is the best way to go. While there are some little tricks in fire magic, direct area damage is more important right now. All we need is for Mia to support us with her little tricks.

“Mia, if the Arachnes try to support their Champion, use Poison Mist and Tempest to buy time. You don’t need to defeat them. Focus on slowing them down.”

“Got it... Is it enough to just deal with the Champion? What about the enemies interfering with Tamaki and the Legend’s battle?”

“It’ll be fine,” I said. Then, with a wry smile, I added, “The battle between Tamaki and the Legend will probably enter a realm that’s a little too inhuman. I can’t imagine anyone who could intervene. Even if a normal Arachne were to interfere, it might end up hindering the Legend.”

“Ah, yes,” Mia said. “Well, an Arachne’s inhuman to begin with.”

No need for that kind of retort!

Anyway, it seemed like our plan was pretty much set.

“After we defeat the Champion, we’ll retreat as fast as we can. Use Gravity to hold them back... and we’ll be flexible with the rest. Oh, by then, someone might have leveled up again.”

Since I had no idea how many enemies we’d actually defeated with that explosion, I couldn’t predict when the next level-up would happen.

“At least Rushia-chan’s Dread Fire can scatter the enemies,” I added.

Dread Fire, a Rank 6 fire spell, creates illusory flames to instill fear in an opponent. It intimidates anyone who sees the flames and, in some cases, even forces them to flee.

It’s a difficult spell to use because it affects both enemies and allies. However, we had Clear Mind cast upon us. As long as we used it in the heart of the enemy forces this time, there shouldn’t have been any problems.

“That’s the plan—to go on the offensive,” I concluded. “When I give the signal during the battle, we’ll start retreating. Agreed?”

Everyone nodded.

We continued with the necessary leveling process and returned to our original positions.

| KAZU | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| LEVEL: 27 | SUPPORT MAGIC: 5 |
| SUMMONING MAGIC: 8 | SKILL POINTS: 3 |

| ARISU | |
|------------------|------------------------|
| LEVEL: 22 | SPEARMANSHIP: 7 |
| | |

| | |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| HEALING MAGIC: 5 | SKILL POINTS: 1 |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|

| | |
|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| TAMAKI | |
| LEVEL: 22 | SWORDSMANSHIP: 8 |
| STRENGTH: 1 | SKILL POINTS: 7 |

| | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| MIA | |
| LEVEL: 22 | EARTH MAGIC: 4 |
| WIND MAGIC: 7 | SKILL POINTS: 6 |

| | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| RUSHIA | |
| LEVEL: 14 | FIRE MAGIC: 7 |
| SKILL POINTS: 0 | |

Chapter 104: Battle in the World Tree Forest, Part 8

We quickly returned to our original positions, where the air was still hot from the explosion. My gaze focused on the Champion Arachne. Arisu saw her, too, twisting her body in the air and diving toward her.

Sensing something abnormal, the Champion quickly turned around, just in time to see Arisu. Her spear grazed the Arachne's side, and the enemy leader's skin ripped open, spilling blue blood.

Almost simultaneously, Tamaki began her battle with the Legend. The red-and-black-skinned Arachne seemed to effortlessly dodge Tamaki's strike, even though she wasn't attacking from the best position. The divine-level monster opened its mouth wide.

Uh-oh, spider threads!

Perhaps realizing this, Tamaki rotated her body with the momentum of her sword swing to change her trajectory and avoid the threads scattered in the air... but she couldn't get away in time. The Legend Arachne's threads spread much further than the Champion's, completely blocking Tamaki's escape route.

What's more, those threads weren't soft and sticky; they were sharp steel threads that pierced the girl's left shoulder, right side, and right thigh like spears. A muffled cry escaped Tamaki's lips.

"Tamaki!"

"It's okay, it's nothing." Tamaki twisted her body, pulling out the steel threads with a grimace, then spun in the air, moving behind the Legend Arachne.

The Legend Arachne was still able to see Tamaki's movements. She turned toward Tamaki as she landed on the ground, facing her with the spear, its black and crimson tip standing out against its silver body.

"Arisu, I'll send the elementals onto her!" I called. "Heal Tamaki!"

"Yes! I'm coming, Tamaki-chan!"

I signaled the Fire and Wind Elementals, directing them toward the Champion Arachne. The Champion, who was engaged in a fierce battle with Arisu, was momentarily distracted as the two elementals attacked.

Arisu used the opening to take a few steps back, putting some distance between herself and the enemy commander.

“Ranged Heal!”

With Arisu’s magic, Tamaki’s wounds began to recover.

“Now I can take you on!” Tamaki cried. As she bravely charged the Legend Arachne, all of the surrounding Arachnes’ eyes turned to us.

The Greater Invisibility must have faded...

The next moment, another explosion rocked the forest behind us. Although it was smaller than before, it was still powerful enough to blow me away.

Ah, that must be Rushia...

As I turned to see if she was all right, I noticed Mia hastily helping a staggering Rushia to her feet. With Rushia in her arms, Mia used her Rank 6 Wind Magic, Tempest, on the surrounding Arachnes. The magical storm blew the spider-humanoids away.

Mia flew through the air in my direction, still holding Rushia. “Hmm, all the mages should be taken care of,” she announced.

“Yeah, well done. Now we just have the Champion and the Legend left...”

I turned my attention to Arisu and Tamaki. Arisu, accompanied by the two elementals, was steadily cornering the Champion, while Tamaki was on the defensive against the Legend. Fortunately, the surrounding Arachnes couldn’t find an opportunity to intervene in such a high-level battle.

However, those Arachnes looked up at us in the sky.

Damn it, they noticed us! Well, it’d be hard not to notice after all the bombing we’ve done.

The spider-humanoids hoisted their bows and nocked arrows.

“Mia!”

“Tempest!”

A gust of wind swept up, causing dozens of arrows to veer off course before reaching us.

But... this is bad. Should we all retreat now?

No, I thought, disrupting the environment is crucial. We should continue with the plan.

“Mia, Rushia.”

“Yes. Poison Smog.”

“Got it. Dread Fire.”

Mia and Rushia cast their spells one after the other. A cloud of poison enveloped the Arachnes, and flickering pale blue flames appeared here and there.

Even I felt a shiver of fear run down my spine when I saw those flames, but they had a tremendous effect on the Arachnes, who dropped their weapons and began to flee in small, panicked groups.

“Looks like it worked well!” I called.

Dread Fire, a Rank 6 fire spell, conjures phantom flames that cause immense terror in anyone who sees them. It’s a powerful spell that proves very effective on a battlefield like this.

With Rushia’s MP, she could cast the spell four more times—and there was no need to hold back in that moment.

“Use it until you faint!” I instructed.

“Understood,” the silver-haired elf said as she cast Dread Fire again and again. After the fifth time, she collapsed.

Mia picked her up. “She’s heavy, Kazu.”

“Got it. I’ll carry her.”

Mia passed Rushia to me, and I held her relaxed body. *The feeling of a girl’s soft body and the scent of sweat.*

“Are you excited?”

“This isn’t the time.”

As I stubbornly gave a nonanswer, I took a moment to survey my surroundings...

We could hear the sound of fanfare and a voice announcing a level-up. It seemed that Mia’s poison smog had defeated several monsters.

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In the White Room, we confirmed each other’s safety.

Tamaki was bleeding all over after narrowly dodging the Legend’s steel thread and sinister spear attacks several times.

Arisu didn’t have many injuries. She had overwhelmed the Champion with the two elementals, but because she’d occasionally used Ranged Heal to support Tamaki, it looked like she hadn’t been able to land a decisive blow on the Champion.

Both she and Rushia were completely exhausted.

Mia and I hadn’t experienced much trouble. However, my MP had decreased significantly.

“For now...” Mia spoke up. “As a reward for Rushia-chan’s hard work, I’ll let you use Kazu’s lap pillow.”

Why are you taking over? Besides, if it were you, Arisu, or Tamaki, it might make sense, but Rushia wouldn’t be happy about something like that.

Or so I thought.

“If that’s a reward, then I’ll gladly accept it.” She surprised me, but she was looking at me with a shy smile on her face.

Well, if she’s happy about it, then it’s okay.

I sat down in a formal position, my legs and feet neatly tucked beneath me with my knees on the ground. Then I put Rushia’s tired head on my lap. She was covered in sweat, and her skin and translucent silver hair were drenched.



Rushia's body shape was even more feminine than Arisu's or Tamaki's. Especially around her waist, there was a certain roundness. To put it simply, she had a somewhat sensual quality. I tried desperately not to think about unnecessary things.

"By the way, how old are you, Rushia?" I asked.

"I'm seventeen by counting."

Counting age was a method where the person was considered one year old the day they were born, and each New Year, their age increased by one. By counting age, I would also be seventeen. In other words, Rushia and I were the same age. When I told her this, the elf girl blushed and smiled shyly.

"That's good. I haven't had many opportunities to talk to people my age."

"What about Leen?"

"The Light Tribe has much longer lifespans than ours."

Ah, so that's it. In other words, they're like...

"Lolibaba!" Mia shouted.

Oh, come on, seriously! Well, I was thinking the same thing, but don't say it out loud...

"But mentally, it's not that different, is it?"

"Leen's received special training as a prophet since childhood, so she's pretty different from ordinary people of her age... I can say the same for myself."

"I see, so everyone here is special."

We all went to regular schools, so we're not that special, right? Well, the definition of "special" might be quite different for the people in this fantasy world compared to the people of our world.

"Well, Rushia, it's a little late, but let's be friends," Mia said, holding out her right index finger.

"If we touch fingers, we'll glow and float in the air," Rushia said excitedly. "Friendship!"

Wait, that's the protocol for aliens. And the last one was the protocol for Neo-Saitama.

Mia looked at Rushia with a puzzled expression, but she linked her index finger with the other girl's in a friendly manner. Of course, no light was emitted, and they didn't float in the air. *Has friendship... been established?* I wondered.

"Do you even need to have a bike to be an extraterrestrial...?" I muttered.

"It seems like the translation didn't go well, but it's a tool in your world, right?" she replied.

"Yeah. If Leen can find our mountain, will you come back with us? There might be some usable bikes left, even if they were damaged by the orcs," I explained.

"Yeah, I'm looking forward to it."

"Good." I nodded. Just because the battle was over didn't mean I was going to let her go.

It's because of her fighting ability, of course. I mean, come on, you know?

I was already addicted to this overwhelming firepower.

Even if Leen asks for it back now, I won't return Rushia. No way.

Mmmm... Oh, I'm drooling. I was practically slurping up my saliva.

Rushia must have read my thoughts, because she chuckled. "No need to worry. I intend to fight alongside all of you until the end," she assured me.

"Ah, am I that easy to read?" I asked.

"In a way, I saw this coming. It was rather necessary for me to become an essential force for all of you," she replied.

Does that mean... it's like Leen putting a bell around a cat's neck? Or is it related to Rushia's own destiny?

The silver-haired girl with the crimson eyes nodded, as if she'd overheard my thoughts again.

"I was created to fight monsters. Even if my home is lost and I have nothing to protect, my feelings remain," she explained.

To me, it still seemed like an impractical and reckless feeling, bordering on suicidal...

Well, fine.

After taking a sufficient break and finishing our discussion, we left the White Room.

| KAZUHISA | |
|-----------------------|---------------------|
| LEVEL: 28 | SUPPORT MAGIC: 5 |
| SUMMONING MAGIC: 8 | SKILL POINTS: 5 |

Anyway, the first priority was to defeat the Champion. If that wasn't possible, we would need to quickly prepare for an escape. My job was to assess the situation and make that decision.

Chapter 105: Battle in the World Tree Forest, Part 9

Once Arisu returned to her starting position, she cast Ranged Heal on Tamaki and then proceeded to attack the Champion Arachne. She persistently targeted the spider's front legs, hoping to disrupt its movement and draw its attention to herself. My familiar took advantage of the distraction, creating openings for attacks.

With Arisu acting as a shield, the two elementals positioned themselves to flank the enemy whenever possible. It was a strategy designed to narrow the power gap by attacking from both sides. The Champion, unable to fully focus on Arisu, began to accumulate wounds. And then...

"Electric Stun!"

Mia unleashed a lightning spell that temporarily immobilized the Champion. Seeing her opening, Arisu unleashed a powerful thrust into the Champion's chest with a burst of determination. A fountain of blue blood gushed from the Arachne's chest, and Arisu and the elementals doggedly continued their attack. Though the Champion struggled and twisted his body in desperation, he was wounded again and again on his shoulder and side.

Just as I was thinking we had a chance to win, the Champion broke free from the temporary immobilization and leaped into the air.

Damn, I forgot Arachnes could jump!

Soaring high above Arisu and the Elementals, the leader of the enemy forces headed for the legendary fighter, locked in a fight with Tamaki; he intended to seek the protection of the stronger Legend.

If the Champion lands like this, it'll be bad.

I quickly shouted, "Mia, crush him!"

It was an improvisation, for sure, but Mia knew exactly what I meant. "Got it. Gravity!"

Gravity was a Rank 7 wind spell that caused gravitational fluctuations to spring up all around the enemy. The giant Arachne's body was crushed under its own weight, losing momentum as it fell to the ground. I heard the sound of breaking bones from the direction of the Arachne, which could no longer stand.

Nevertheless, the Champion continued to spray spider silk at the approaching Arisu and the others.

"Eek! Ahh!" In seconds, Arisu was wrapped in sticky threads from head to toe.

"Do it, Fire Elemental!"

Immediately, Arisu's body burst into flames as the Fire Elemental behind her used magic to burn away the spider silk. Emerging from the crimson flames, Arisu leaped forward. Her spear plunged deep into the immobilized Champion's throat.

The Champion uttered a final cry of agony before his body disintegrated into thin air. Four blue gems rolled to the ground.

That's worth forty tokens... That means he was a pretty formidable enemy, but I don't really feel the impact—maybe because we've become even stronger.

Still, there was no time to pick up the gems. We had to move on to our next action immediately.

"Retreat!" I shouted.

Yes, by defeating the Champion, we had taken away the Arachnes' leader. There was no need to defeat the Legend, and anyway, we couldn't afford to engage in a prolonged battle among the enemy ranks.

Now, in the midst of the chaos, was our chance to retreat.

"Electric Stun!"

Mia cast a spell on the Legend, temporarily halting the Divine-class monster's movements. At the right moment, Tamaki moved out of the Legend's attack range. Arisu and Tamaki soared into the sky, followed by the two elementals.

"All right, we're all together!"

Our escape route was forward, from the enemy's perspective. We had to break through the airspace above where the Light Tribe and the Arachnes were fighting. The arrows from our allies posed little threat to us at our current level. In fact, the chaos of the battlefield was conducive to our escape.

Flying just above the treetops, I led the way. The Arachnes shot arrows at us, but they all missed their targets by a wide margin—our twenty-meter altitude was too much for the crude bows and arrows of this world.

In front of us, the Arachnes were locked in a fierce battle with the World Tree's familiar, the Treant, which swung its limbs—its branches and roots—trampling the Arachnes.

The silk the spider-humanoids spewed was too weak to have any effect. The Legend Arachne was smarter, keeping her distance and shooting flaming arrows at Treant. When the arrows managed to hit Treant's body, they ignited and spread rapidly from there. It was unclear whether that spread was due to the magic or the nature of the arrows.

The Light Tribe's mages used Water Magic, causing a torrential downpour over Treant's entire body. However, this left the mages vulnerable—and they seemed to be the Arachnes' true target. They bombarded the defenseless mages with a barrage of arrows, while the Light Tribe gathered around with large shields, trying to protect them, but...

Their efforts were in vain. Arrows rained down on the mages, making them look like hedgehogs from the way the arrows stuck in their bodies.

In the midst of the intense battle, we charged in.

Both the Arachnes and the Light Tribe were thrown into chaos for a moment, their attacks ceasing.

"All right, this is our chance." We turned to look at each other...

And then we realized something—the Legend had approached from behind.

The monster jumped. With an incredibly high and sharp leap, the Legend caught up to us, staying right behind the Fire Elemental at the back of our group.

“Wait... Hold on!” I managed, but before I could say anything else, the Legend raised her ominous crimson-black spearhead. It was still too far away to hit us, but it thrust forward. The silver handle seemed to lengthen, giving the illusion of sharpness, or perhaps it was the pulsing tip that extended.

Impossibly, the spear pierced the Fire Elemental from behind. My familiar let out a dying scream, and the connection between us was severed.

One blow. A single strike had killed a Rank 8 familiar.

“How *dare* they!” Tamaki grunted.

Her hesitation lasted only a moment.

“Wind Elemental, attack the Legend. Get in her way!”

This was a sacrifice, but we had no choice—we had to buy ourselves some time so we could regain our positions.

“Mia, use your magic to immobilize it.”

“Got it. Gravity.”

The flying Legend was sent plummeting to the ground by Mia’s magic. However, by the time she had fallen twenty meters, she had escaped the gravity field. Just before hitting the ground, the Legend skillfully spat out spider silk toward the ground.

The spider silk spread out like cotton candy, acting as a cushion to support the Legend’s body.

The Legend jumped again, heading straight for us, but the Wind Elemental stood in her path.

Once again, the Legend’s spear extended before unleashing a thrust. The spear pierced through the Wind Elemental’s abdomen, killing it in a single blow. With a scream, its body vanished.

“Thank you,” I whispered. We had bought the minimum amount of time to take refuge among the Light Tribe.

As we did, hundreds of their archers targeted the Legend Arachne. Upon command, they all released their arrows at once. Even the mighty Legend was

helpless against the barrage of arrows raining down—or so it seemed.

When I looked back, the Legend had opened her mouth wide and was releasing a barrage of white threads that expanded like bubbles.

It's a barrier! I realized. *She's blocking all the arrows that are coming toward her.*

From the ground, the Legend let out a roar that shook the earth. The Light Tribe archers froze as their hands pulled back their bowstrings.

Then, cries of desperation echoed through the forest. The proud men, once so confident, now threw down their weapons, turned their backs on the enemy, and ran.

Damn it, that's a war cry!

I had forgotten. I had completely forgotten that this was the overwhelming roar of a powerful enemy.

I hesitated for a moment. *Should I just run away and blend in with the Light Tribe? Or should I stay here and at least try to defeat the Legend?*

I bit my lip hard.

Mia tapped me lightly on the shoulder. "It's all right. Kazu, stick to the plan," she said. Her words and her casual tone made me realize something.

I locked eyes with her.

The petite girl smiled awkwardly. It was as if she wanted to say, "Oh Kazu, you're hopeless."

"Remember the most important thing."

"Yes, you're right."

I nodded and looked at everyone.

"Let's leave this place to the Light Tribe! Let's get out of here!"

We turned our backs on the enemy. Instead of flying, we landed and ran. We would be less noticeable that way.

What's important to me? It's Arisu, Tamaki, and Mia, of course. Oh, and let's not forget Rushia. Yeah, we're all in a sad state. My MP's almost exhausted. Rushia's about to collapse.

In our condition, we couldn't afford to face a monster that rivaled Mekish Grau.

If sacrificing the lives of the Light Tribe could save my comrades, it would be a great thing.

Then I heard screams behind me. Was the Legend wreaking havoc?

I was curious about how the Arachnes were doing after their leader's death, but I didn't need to know. We ran toward the denser part of the forest until the sounds gradually faded.

"That should be enough." I stopped and collapsed to the ground.

I let Rushia, still exhausted, lean against the shade of a tree.

Ah, I'm so tired.

When I looked up, Arisu and Tamaki were looking around anxiously. Mia was sitting there, panting heavily.

"Kazu, did you notice?" she asked.

"What?"

"When we escaped, the Legend spat out a ton of silk to block our way."

I hadn't noticed that. I looked at Mia, startled.

"It's okay. They stopped it from blocking us."

I blinked. "Who did?"

"The soldiers of the Light Tribe. They all interfered with the Legend and told us to run away together."

I shook my head, not yet understanding.

"Kazucchi, they had hope."

"Hope?"

“For you, Kazucchi. For us. They noticed how fiercely we were fighting their enemies, and they understood why we ran away from the Legend and joined the Light Tribe. But it was all for the sake of the next strategy.”

“Are you saying they knew they could be sacrificed...?”

“Yeah,” Mia said with a nod. “Surely they must have seen the explosion Rushia-chan caused. They probably knew we would break into the enemy ranks and fight hard.”

Ah, I see. The magic attack that Rushia unleashed was incredibly powerful. That massive explosion must have stood out even from a distance.

“But... why would they do something like that?”

“Because they’re the same as the lord of this city. They fought back against Mekish Grau and bought time.”

“They did that... for us?”

She nodded. “And what was the result?”

“That...”

I looked at Arisu and Tamaki. The two of them looked as confused as I was.

“That’s right,” Mia said. “Because of them, we were able to defeat Mekish Grau. Back then, we needed time to call Arisu and Tamaki to regroup our forces. They risked their lives to give us the twenty minutes we desperately needed.”

I nodded in recognition. “Hope, huh. For us.”

“Yeah, hope. Feelings they harbored on their own. But it’s all for you, Kazucchi.” Her eyes met mine, and she looked at me with a serious expression before continuing, “What are you going to do? Are you ready to make a decision? Will we be heroes in their eyes?”

The youngest girl in our group had given me a choice—one that weighed the lives of our comrades and the path to becoming heroes.

Chapter 106: Weighing the Lives of Comrades and the Path to Heroism

I closed my eyes and thought about everything. The benefits of helping the Light Tribe and the dangers that might befall my friends—these were the things I had to consider. Mia and I had once used our powers to help the inhabitants of this world. We'd intervened in the battle to save the defenseless civilians of Hesh Resh Nash, whom we'd never even met. As a result, the monster army had unleashed Mekish Grau in a desperate last-ditch effort. If it weren't for the reinforcements from the Lord's Army of Hesh Resh Nash and the timely arrival of Arisu and Tamaki with their magic circle, both Mia and I would undoubtedly have perished.

We had engaged in a battle that shouldn't have been necessary, even if it was to gain information. What *had* we gained by putting ourselves at risk, and what did we want to achieve in the future? When we'd first arrived in this area of the World Tree, the soldiers of the Light Tribe had scorned and belittled us. I'd felt pathetic and frightened in front of them. It was hard to deny that such humiliation might have influenced my later attitude toward the Light Tribe.

No, I think it had quite an effect. If they were willing to accept Rushia's proposed strategy so easily and had little resistance to using the Light Tribe as a stepping stone, I can't deny that possibility.

Taking all this into consideration, I decided to accept Rushia's invitation. However, I wondered if it was the right decision as a leader. In deciding my stance on Shiba and the Advanced Division, I had made a conscious effort not to be swayed by emotion. In the end, my conclusion was that Shiba had to be killed. From every point of view, I believed that Shiba would only continue to be a threat to the Cultural Arts Center group. I didn't regret that decision.

But what about this time?

In the future, we would continue to work with the Light Tribe. They had a vast network, lots of knowledge, and a solid foundation in this world. Moreover, at least their leader, Leen, seemed to be friendly toward us. That was completely different from the situation with Shiba. Trust was the key here. Whether we were looking for a way to return to our original world or whether we chose to live in this one, having trustworthy allies was crucial.

Should we take risks to earn that trust? How much should we do for the Light Tribe? Are the benefits of saving them worth the risks we'll take?

I raised my eyes to look at Mia, wondering what she'd meant by "becoming heroes." Had she calculated all this from the beginning? Of course, when we'd looked down on the city from the hilltop, I'd never expected things to escalate like this. However, her words at that time had become a guiding principle for me to act consistently.

"So, Mia, what you strive for as a hero is a win-win situation, right?"

"I love happy endings," she answered. "I think everyone can be happy."

I nodded in agreement and ruffled Mia's hair a bit roughly. She groaned and struggled, looking up at me.

"Hmm, trying to hide your embarrassment, huh?"

"Yeah, that's right. I'm a little shy."

I sighed and stood up. I could tell from the distant screams that the massacre of the Light Tribe was still going on. Every minute and every second we spent there, more Light Tribe soldiers sacrificed themselves to protect us.

The reason was that they firmly believed that we, having reorganized our forces, would defeat the Legend for them. Well, maybe we couldn't fight unless we believed that, too... Anyway, they were asking for our help. If we responded to their request, that would be the moment when we extended our hands and shook theirs. That was how trust was built.

"We pretty much understand the Legend's abilities, right?" I asked the group.

"The silk it spits out of its mouth has several patterns," Arisu said. "Its jumping ability is terrifying, too. Even if we use weapons, it's still stronger than Tamaki."

But any ability can be dealt with.”

So, the enemy was as strong as Mekish Grau. However, we’d defeated Mekish Grau. If everyone was in perfect condition and we planned carefully, I believed we could fight well enough to win this time, too.

“Let’s do it.” I nodded. “Just a little more. After a short rest, we’ll go back to the battlefield and defeat the Legend. We won’t let her have her way any longer.”

I looked down at the silver-haired girl resting in the shade with her eyes closed.

“All right, listen, Rushia.”

Rushia opened her eyes and looked up at me.

“Did you notice...? Did you see what I was looking at?”

“Sort of, just from your breathing.”

I didn’t mention how I’d been surreptitiously looking at her breasts moving up and down—but Arisu and Tamaki might have, judging by their skeptical expressions.

Dang, my cool explanation got messed up. Same old story; I’m pathetic.

“So, are you okay with this? You’ll have to rely on your power as well. You might suffer, lose consciousness, or even die.”

“I was well aware of that from the start,” Rushia replied with a natural smile.

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Now, even though the Legend was said to be as strong as Mekish Grau, it was clear that their types of strength were different. First of all, there was the size difference. The Legend Arachne was only about twice the size of a regular Arachne and didn’t have the same physical strength as Mekish Grau.

Tamaki had mentioned that she hadn’t lost to it in a direct contest of strength. In fact, if it came down to a simple test of strength, she would win.

This was probably due to Tamaki's Strength skill tree. Although that skill's rank was only 1, that single rank made a big difference.

However, that advantage could easily be overturned by their differences in swordsmanship.

The Legend's spear technique was superior to Tamaki's. I guessed it was around Rank 9. In addition, the silver-handled spear with the red-and-black tip was probably a magical weapon, similar to the white sword Tamaki possessed. Right then, even with my bestowed magic, Tamaki could only do her best to focus on defense.

On the other hand, if it were just about defense, Tamaki alone could manage it somehow. If Arisu and I attacked together with Mia's support, we would probably win... eventually.

The problem was the time it would take to set up that formation. There were likely many other Arachnes around the Legend, and if we hesitated, we'd be surrounded by them. It would be a bit challenging to fight the Legend while dealing with the small fry at the same time.

Up until then, our strategy had been to defeat the bosses by isolating them from their minions and focusing solely on the bosses themselves. This approach worked even with Mekish Grau, since it was a single entity. This time, it was clear that a decisive short-term battle was crucial.

"Rushia, I'll have to rely on you again," I told her. "Can you handle it?"

"I'll fight with all my strength." Her words exuded a sense of dependability.

That was reassuring. The release of her magical power had put a significant strain on her body. However, in our current situation, there was no time to hesitate or talk things over.

"All right, I will now explain the plan. Please remain seated and listen attentively. If you have any questions or suggestions for improvement, please don't hesitate to speak up."

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About twenty minutes later, we were ready to go. If we strained our ears, we could hear that distinctive sound—a blend of distant screams and angry shouts. The fact that the battle was still raging meant that the Light Tribe was still resisting the Legend. Perhaps their efforts were only buying time for the escape of ordinary people, but they were aware of our existence. They knew that the ones who had defeated the enemy's mages and Champions were still alive.

If the soldiers of the Light Tribe still held even a glimmer of hope in their hearts, our return to the battlefield would undoubtedly carry significant meaning for the future relationship between both sides. And we would emerge victorious against the Legend...

Well, that sounded confident, but it wouldn't mean anything if we didn't actually win. We would have to survive, or else there would be nothing left.

"Let's go, everyone!" I said, standing up.

Mia cast Fly on everyone. To conserve my MP, I decided not to use the Deflection spell and instead had each member receive magic individually. Sadly, I could no longer summon familiars; my MP was far too depleted. It was a bitter regret that all three familiars, including the Invisible Scout, had been defeated by the Legend. Nonetheless, we could only work with the forces we had.

One by one, starting with Arisu, we soared into the air, flying a few meters above the trees back toward the battlefield.

The view opened up before us, along with the stench of blood and death.

We saw the figure of the Legend leading the enemy army. Or rather, the Legend stood out as the lone entity, mercilessly trampling the soldiers of the Light Tribe.

The Legend Arachne now wielded countless steel threads in her hands, swinging them like whips. Within a radius of about ten meters, 360 degrees, wherever the Light Tribe soldiers were, they were being sliced by the steel threads.

The Light Tribe also counterattacked. Archers from the treetops released their arrows. But the steel threads, moving like living creatures, knocked them down.

Magicians launched arrows of flame. Upon contact with flames, the steel threads caught fire.

Even as the steel threads did their work, new threads appeared from the creature's mouth. They stretched out toward the tree crowns, and archers and magicians were pierced through their faces and chests, falling and gasping their last breaths.

It was a senseless massacre.

And it was into this chaos that we intruded.

"Rushia, go!"

"Fire Ball!"

Rushia's Rank 5 Fire Ball flew toward the Legend. The steel threads struck it down, but at the moment of impact, the crimson sphere exploded into flame.

Chapter 107: Legend Arachne

We already knew that the threads spewed by the Arachnes were weak against flames. That meant the key to this battle lay in Rushia's MP—which had somewhat recovered and was now probably around 40. Well, she'd used 5 points for Fire Ball, so now it was probably 35.

We needed to utilize this MP efficiently and push Rushia's body to its limits. I cast Haste after the Deflection spell, and all of our bodies glowed red.

"Let's go, Kazu-san!" Tamaki called out as she dove into the flames. Ordinarily, this would have been an extremely dangerous move, but in a battle against the Legend, inside the flames was likely the safest place. Of course, that assumed Tamaki had been given fire resistance.

Rushia's body trembled, and I embraced the silver-haired girl, supporting her as she seemed on the verge of collapsing.

"I'm... sorry," Rushia breathed. Sweat poured off her body like a waterfall. Despite the short break, just one spell had taken a big toll on her. Perhaps her body was considerably weaker than ours; maybe it was because she was still at Level 14, or because her level increased rapidly, or because she was from another world.

In any case, I disliked relying solely on willpower. If Rushia was weakened, we needed to adjust our strategy accordingly. And then we needed to push beyond her limits. It was the only way we could win this battle.

"Kazu-san, I'll support Tamaki-chan."

"No, Arisu, you stay here and be on standby. Mia!"

"Yeah, I'm going."

Mia followed Tamaki into the swirling dust cloud, aiming to hinder the movements of the Legend as much as possible.

The lesser Arachnes noticed us in the sky and immediately began shooting arrows toward us. Arisu stood in front of me, sweeping away the incoming arrows with the shaft of her spear.

Just like a warrior from a Three Kingdoms manga, I thought. I wonder about her dynamic visual acuity. Well, it's probably explained by skills and such.

"Rushia, can you see what's around us?" I asked. "Don't let the lesser Arachnes approach the Legend. Follow the direction I'm pointing..."

"Yeah, I can do it... Flame Gazer!"

A wall of flames erupted from the ground, blocking the space between the advancing Legend and the lesser Arachnes. It was a Rank 6 fire spell, and with Rushia's current abilities, she could sustain this wall for at least three and a half minutes. With that alone, regardless of victory or defeat, the battle against the Legend would come to a conclusion.

The Legend must have noticed our strategy of separating it from the other Arachnes. She tried to distance herself from Tamaki, who relentlessly clung to her, and attempted to jump over the wall of flames so she could join the lesser Arachnes engaged in combat with the Light Tribe.

But Mia wasn't going to allow that. "Gravity!"

The Legend Arachne was slammed to the ground. As she landed awkwardly, Tamaki unleashed a powerful slash, but the Legend managed to block it with her spear.

Damn it, their weapon handling skills really give them the upper hand.

Tamaki already had a variety of grazes on her body. Normally, Arisu would have rushed to Tamaki's side to heal her, but she was currently guarding me, too far away to use Ranged Heal.

"Kazu-san, please let me..."

"No, stick to the plan."

Arisu glared at me and bit her lip. I couldn't look at her like that, so I focused on the enemy's movements.



Timing was everything. Among the abilities possessed by the Legend, its agile jumps and the hindrance caused by its various spider threads were the most troublesome.

Taking down the defensive Legend isn't gonna be easy. If Mekish Grau was a super-type robot, then the Legend Arachne is a real-type robot. At least that's how it feels, you know, like in Super Robot Wars...

Anyway, that mobility was incredibly troublesome. We had to find a way to divert its attention and catch it off guard. The opportunity would surely only come once.

“Rushia, next is over there.”

“Yep. Flame Gazer!”

We had Rushia use that spell twice more. She grew weaker with each use, but thanks to her dedication, we managed to trap the Legend inside a ring of flames. Inside the fire circle, Tamaki and the Legend fiercely clashed blades. Mia intervened multiple times, barely preventing the Legend from landing a decisive blow on Tamaki.

We wouldn't be able to endure this much longer, but thankfully, we didn't intend to stay there for long.

I lent my shoulder to Rushia and landed on the ground outside the wall of flames with Arisu.

Rushia used fire magic to ignite some nearby dry vegetation. The grass and trees in front of us turned into campfire-like flames. Embers scattered and gently brushed our cheeks. Thanks to our resistance, the heat didn't bother us much.

Mia was still inside the wall of flames. “Mia, are you ready?!” I shouted to her. She responded with a loud “Ready!”

And a few seconds later...

“Now!” Mia's voice rang out.

I held Arisu's left hand tightly. Rushia mustered her last bit of strength and called, “Flame Teleport!”

That was Rank 7 fire magic, a teleportation spell that allowed us to instantly move from one raging flame to another. The distance covered was ten meters per rank.

Our field of view instantly switched. We were now inside the ring of fire. Before us stood the Legend Arachne. The formidable monster had her back turned to us, fully focused on her fierce battle with Tamaki.

The moment we appeared, Tamaki smirked and delivered a powerful blow to the Legend. Their spears clashed and deflected each other, but the force behind Tamaki's attack caused the Legend to stagger backward.

However, the full-force attack also left an opening for her. She was struck directly by the steel threads unleashed by the Legend, impaling her body.

"Ouch, that hurts... But still..."

Even as steel threads sprouted all over her body, the loyal girl laughed fearlessly. "Now, Arisu!"

"Yeah, Tamaki!"

Arisu jumped out from beside me. She delivered a thrust to the vulnerable back of the exposed Legend. Taken by surprise, the Legend turned quickly to try to twist her body away from Arisu's spear.

The shaft of the spear it wielded extended rapidly, its bottom rapidly approaching Arisu.

So, the spear has that kind of special ability too!

Arisu saw what the Arachne was trying to do and reacted instantly. She precisely moved the spear she was holding, striking the rear end of the Legend's spear.

A high-pitched sound resonated. Both spears were dislodged from their respective owners' hands and danced in midair.

"Not yet!" I called.

Arisu had planned for this moment. She reached out her hand to catch the Legend's dark reddish-black spear, attempting to recreate what Tamaki did in

the first battle against General Orc. However, the Legend quickly noticed Arisu's intention and opened its mouth wide.

Oh no, here come the steel threads!

Arisu was defenseless at that moment, and the thought of her body being impaled like Tamaki's sent a wave of concern through me.

"Arisu!" I called. Reacting quickly, I threw Rushia's body out of the way and shielded Arisu with my own. As the Legend spat out its steel silk, it felt like time slowed down. With Arisu's surprised expression in my peripheral vision, I extended my right hand and activated my Reflection barrier. Countless steel threads bounced off, bending softly just before they touched the Legend's body.

Damn it, that didn't work! I'd taken a gamble by going all out to protect Arisu, but at least I'd managed to shield her back, even if only for a moment.

Stepping back unsteadily and trying to catch my breath, I looked behind me at Rushia.

"Fire Bomb!" Despite her weakened state, she unleashed a Rank 3 spell. The explosion engulfed the head of the Legend, setting ablaze the freshly expelled spider threads. Flames soon engulfed the Arachne's entire body, and a scream pierced the air.

In that critical moment, Arisu fearlessly charged forward, wielding the dark reddish-black spearhead. She thrust the pulsating spear into the gaping mouth of the Legend, causing the strongest Arachne to writhe in agony, its limbs thrashing in protest. Sensing the danger, Arisu took a step back.

"Tamaki-chan! Ranged Heal!" I urgently called out.

As the Legend closed the distance with Arisu, Mia interrupted her approach with an Electric Stun. Although Tamaki hadn't fully recovered, she launched attacks primarily targeting the Legend's legs, aiming to sandwich the Arachne between herself and Arisu.

The Legend screamed repeatedly, counterattacking with a desperate resolve even while writhing in agony. She haphazardly released steel threads, forcing

Arisu and Tamaki into a defensive position. Giving them no time and taking advantage of that momentary opening, she leaped away.

The Legend's aggressive onslaught was a setup for its escape. But someone had already anticipated even that move—Mia.

"Gravity."

However, just before Mia cast her magic, the trajectory of the Legend's jump changed.

"Ow!" Mia groaned in pain. I quickly noticed it too.

In a brilliant maneuver, the Legend wrapped the threads she had spat out around nearby trees, quickly pivoting out of the range of Gravity's effect and back toward us.

This is bad! If things keep going like this, the Legend'll land outside the ring of flames. We can't let it get away like this...

Together with Arisu and Tamaki, I soared into the air, scanning the battlefield for a solution.

And then I saw it.

Whoosh!

The moment the Legend landed, a figure descended from above. I soon realized it was a member of the Light Tribe, holding his sword in a reverse grip. With the momentum of his descent, he thrust the sword into the Legend's defenseless torso.

"How's that? Take this!" the man shouted, his face illuminated by the flames.

To my surprise, it was the man who had vehemently berated me in front of everyone a few hours before. He now wore a crazy smirk as he declared victory.

"Vengeance!" His voice crescendoed in triumph. "I've avenged my wife and daughter! I did it, I did it! I..."

But in the next moment, the man's transformation began. Steel threads from the Legend's mouth erupted all over his body. The close-range strike had been fatal, and the man coughed up blood—yet his face still held a satisfied

expression. It was a reckless and desperate attack, yet it had bought precious seconds for Arisu and Tamaki to catch up to the Legend.

“Let’s go, Arisu.”

“Yeah, Tamaki-chan.”

The two girls launched a synchronized assault on the Legend from above. The Arachne, with her battered reddish-black skin, no longer had the strength to dodge their attacks. Arisu’s thrust pierced the Legend’s heart, while Tamaki’s powerful slash severed her head. A spray of fresh blue blood filled the air as the gigantic Arachne collapsed onto the ground, her body sprawled. In a final transformation, she turned into a yellow gemstone.

We won.

As the battle concluded, we found ourselves transported to the White Room. It seemed that everyone except me had leveled up, their powers strengthened by the victory.

Chapter 108: Rank 9

We celebrated our safety and victory upon arriving in the White Room, rejoicing in each other's presence. Arisu and Tamaki embraced the exhausted Rushia, while Mia eagerly tried to pull her ears. I quickly intervened, separating Mia from Rushia.

"Stop that. You probably made the demihuman child uncomfortable earlier," I scolded.

"Physical intimacy is important!" Mia said defensively.

That may be true, I thought, but you have to get their consent first.

"It's fine, Mia. You can touch my ears," Rushia chimed in, her smile slowly returning. Mia happily tugged on her left ear, and I gently rubbed her right ear.

Oh, they're soft.

"Um... Kazu, what about you asking?" Rushia asked, puzzled.

"Well, you see, I was a bit curious—purely from a scientific viewpoint."

Arisu shot me a disapproving look. "Kazu-san's actions seem indecent."

"I think it's just your imagination."

"Hmph. Kazu-san is speaking in that tone of voice he always uses when he's lying." She saw right through me. I raised both hands in surrender, acknowledging her astute observation.

Arisu let out a sigh, her cheeks slightly blushing, and then looked up at me, hesitating. "Um, um... Please touch my ears too."

"Um, why?" I asked, genuinely puzzled.

"I haven't had my ears touched much."

Really? Well, maybe that's true. It's not like I have a particular fascination with ears or anything.

I fulfilled Arisu's request and gently stroked her earlobe.

She closed her eyes. "Um, could you please stop doing that?" Her voice sounded sultry.

I glanced at Tamaki, Rushia, and Mia; they all wore disapproving expressions.

"Kazu-san, you're naughty," Tamaki said.

"I won't deny that, but this is different!" I insisted.

"If that's everyone's culture, then I'll accept it," Rushia chimed in.

I had to clarify things right away. "Don't misunderstand, Rushia."

"Hmm. Kazucchi, it's okay to touch, but, like, be aware of the time and place, you know?" Mia said.

"Don't you start!" I protested, feeling overwhelmed by their disapproval.

Once the commotion had settled down, we all sat cross-legged on the floor—including Rushia, who seemed to be thinking clearly now. We decided to summarize the lessons learned from this battle and discuss our future plans, particularly regarding Rushia's situation.

"What are you going to do after this battle, Rushia-chan?" Mia asked.

"If it's all right with everyone, I'd like to fight alongside all of you as long as possible," Rushia replied.

"We don't necessarily want to keep fighting indefinitely," I added. "Ideally, we'd like to return to our original world... If that's not possible, we would like to live in a safe place."

"That's probably... not feasible. Above all, like Leen said, there will be a crisis for the world tomorrow," Rushia explained.

Yeah, I already knew that. Since we've been involved to this extent, there's no turning back... We can't just leave things as they are.

"But after we overcome tomorrow's crisis, what happens next?" I asked.

Rushia slowly shook her head. "No, let me make it clearer. This battle is a choice between the annihilation of humanity and defeating the king of monsters—the Demon Lord. There's no middle ground. If you all want a

peaceful life, the Demon Lord has to be defeated. That aligns with my objective.”

“What if we find a way to return to our original world?”

“In that case, I won’t stop you. In fact, I’ll accompany you until you get there. Either way, as long as I stay with all of you, I’ll keep leveling up.”

That much was certainly true. Whether we were returning to our original world or facing the monster army, battles would await us on our journey. What we needed was information, and the only currency we could offer Leen was our combat strength.

“Rushiacchi, that’s not enough,” Mia interjected.

“Do you mean paying the price with our bodies?” Rushia brought her face closer to Mia’s and offered one of her ears. Mia gave a smug nod and began rubbing Rushia’s ear. Mia had a look of pure bliss on her face as she squinted her eyes. Rushia smiled a bit while watching her. They seemed to be getting along well.

No, that’s not quite it. She’s making an effort to fit in with us.

“Kazu, are you going to touch her ears too? Or would you prefer some other part?” Mia asked.

“Oh, it’s fine. Arisu and Tamaki are giving me a glare,” I replied.

“N-No, we weren’t glaring! It’s just that... Well, I don’t have beautiful, long ears like Rushia-san,” Arisu said.

Why’s she trying to compete on ear length? I’d be happy if she at least competed with her in the chest area. Not that I’d say such a thing out loud. But why are Arisu and Tamaki looking at me like that?

“Hey, hey, Kazu-san. Do men really prefer long, slanted ears?” Arisu asked.

“Hold on a moment. I didn’t even know where to begin with that comment,” I said, looking up at the ceiling.

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As we sat there, we discussed many things: our original world, school, and the battles we'd experienced since arriving in this new world. Rushia enlightened us about numerous aspects of this world, including the state of the continent, the different races inhabiting it, and information about various countries—a wealth of everyday knowledge in this realm.

When we grew tired of talking, we summoned a feast and indulged in delicious food until we were full. We also enjoyed a modest amount of alcohol. Arisu and Tamaki, who became slightly tipsy, burst into laughter. Rushia, on the other hand, calmly finished off a bottle of wine. Surprisingly, Mia refrained from drinking any alcohol at all.

"I thought with how curious you are, you would give alcohol a try as well," I said to Mia.

"To fully relish observing other people's embarrassing moments, I prefer to stay sober."

"Well, you always appear somewhat intoxicated anyway."

"Creating brain narcotics at will is child's play for a true otaku."

Impressive, indeed—a true otaku.

Arisu and Tamaki, now sober, blushed and pretended to be asleep, prompting Mia to tease them.

Then I decided to ask Rushia about the exclusive familiar contract. I didn't expect her to know much, but it was worth a shot.

To my surprise, she replied, "I have heard of it. However, I'm not familiar with the specific methods. That lies outside my area of expertise..."

"I suppose it's not that easy," I remarked.

"Leen might know something," Rushia suggested. "The Light Tribe has ancient knowledge."

Despite being referred to as demihumans by humans, the Light Tribe appeared to be far more intellectually inclined.

Anyway, that's good news, I thought. I'll ask her about it when we get back.

“Oh, one more thing,” I said. “The red and blue stones that emerge when we defeat monsters... the Mana Stones you mentioned. Besides summoning monsters, what other purposes do they serve?”

“Originally, they were to help with rituals,” Rushia explained. “They were used as consumables to achieve advanced rituals that ordinary magicians couldn’t perform. Leen should have controlled her familiar through Mana Stones.”

Ah, I see. Well, that’s a shame. If they weren’t needed, I was thinking of taking all of them for ourselves.

That way, we could easily have earned three thousand points. If there was a sufficient supply of Mana Stones, there were things we wanted... or rather, not everything would have been impossible to obtain.

Oh well. We’ll keep gathering them diligently, like before.

Alternatively, I could talk to Leen and hope for a little flexibility on her part...

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After we’d all gotten plenty of rest, it was time to level up our skills.

With this level-up, Tamaki’s skill points had reached 9, and she could finally upgrade her swordsmanship skill to Rank 9.

Mia also had 8 skill points now, which meant she could upgrade her wind magic to Rank 8.

“Finally, Rank 9! It feels quite sentimental,” Tamaki laughed.

Yeah, I feel sentimental, too. You, who used to wet yourself, have come so far in just a little over a day.

“Ha ha, I bet Kazu-san’s thinking something rude!” Tamaki laughed.

“I can sense it,” Arisu agreed.

“It’s probably about wetting myself!” Tamaki pointed her index finger sharply at me. “But it’s fine. It’s the truth. It’s not like I’m suddenly embarrassed in front of this group...”

Tamaki’s gaze started to float around and then fixated on Rushia.

"I don't know the exact circumstances, but I've heard that it's common for soldiers to make mistakes in their first battle," Rushia said.

"I don't need that kind of consolation!" Tamaki's face turned bright red. She darted to her feet and dashed off... but in this classroom-sized room, there was nowhere to escape. She crouched in a corner, hugging her knees.

What should I do? I wondered.

"It's fine. I'm used to wetting myself anyway..." Tamaki mumbled, barely audible to us.

"Um, I'll go apologize," Rushia said awkwardly.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "It's self-destructive behavior. Knowing Tamaki, she'll forget about it soon and be her carefree self in ten minutes."

"I can hear you, you know!" Tamaki shouted, tears welling up in her eyes as she turned back toward us.

"Oh, sorry... Well then, Rushia?" I said, turning to her.

"Yeah?"

"You were also in your first battle, right? So, it's okay to say you wet yourself."

Rushia tilted her head slightly, looking a bit confused.

Yeah, I wasn't entirely sure what I was saying myself.

"Um... Is it better to wet myself?"

"Mm. The princess wetting herself is very exciting," Mia said, her breath heavy.

Shut up, Mia.

"Don't worry, I don't have that kind of fetish..." I said. "Anyway, Tamaki, let's go back soon."

"Ugh," she grunted.

"It's cute when you pout like that, but there are things we need to do from now on. I want to coordinate our timing."

“Things we need to do? Like what?”

“Oh, it’s like a bonus rescue mission, I guess.”

I began to explain our next tasks to a bewildered Tamaki.

She laughed and gave a thumbs-up. “That sounds great,” she said. It seemed her mood had improved.

| ARISU | |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| LEVEL: 23 | SPEARMANSHIP: 7 |
| HEALING MAGIC: 5 | SKILL POINTS: 3 |

| TAMAKI | |
|----------------|-------------------------|
| LEVEL: 23 | SWORDSMANSHIP: 8 → 9 |
| STRENGTH: 1 | SKILL POINTS: 9 → 0 |

| MIA | |
|----------------------|------------------------|
| LEVEL: 23 | EARTH MAGIC: 4 |
| WIND MAGIC: 7 → 8 | SKILL POINTS: 8 → 0 |

| RUSHIA | |
|---------------|------------------|
| LEVEL: 15 | FIRE MAGIC: 7 |
| SKILL POINTS: | |



As soon as we returned to the battlefield, Arisu rushed to a critically injured man. It was the guy who had recklessly attacked the Legend earlier, creating a brief opening for us.

“Sustenance,” Arisu murmured as her hand touched the man’s chest.

Sustenance, a Rank 5 healing spell, could preserve the life of a subject with fatal injuries for a short period of time. It prevented instant death and bought time for immediate healing magic.

The man, who had been on the brink of death, now had a completely unharmed body, thanks to Sustenance and Arisu’s subsequent healing magic—although his leather armor was tattered and covered in blood.

I extended my hand to the bewildered man and helped him stand up.

“Wh-Why am I alive?” he stammered, his voice filled with confusion.

I decided to go for a lighthearted explanation. “Well, when I thought about it, you went through all that trouble and looked cool when you were about to die... That seemed unfair.”

I could tell by his expression that my reasoning had left him even more perplexed.

“Aside from that, thanks to you, we were able to defeat the Legend. I want to express my gratitude,” Arisu added.

“D-Don’t be foolish! I just hate monsters! But I didn’t have the power to defeat them. All I could do was this,” the man replied, his voice filled with a mix of humility and self-deprecation.

“But thanks to that moment you bought us, Arisu and Tamaki caught up,” I added, acknowledging the man’s contribution.

To be honest, I didn’t hold any grudges against him. I just didn’t like the idea of people being consumed by revenge and dying satisfied. It bothered me.

“Also, your tsundere act is tough to handle,” I remarked, trying to inject a lighter tone into the conversation.

“Tsundere?” The soldier looked puzzled.

Oh, slang doesn't translate well.

The man chuckled and shook his head, as if to dismiss the confusion.

“Well, thank you for helping me. I apologize for my earlier behavior... I was wrong. You're a brave and valiant warrior,” he said sincerely, but then his face darkened and his shoulders slumped as he let out a sigh. “But even if I'm alive, I'm already...” he trailed off, his voice filled with resignation.

“That's not true!” I shook my head vigorously. He had already lost something precious. Even if he were to achieve his revenge, his family would never come back. He probably thought it would have been better if he had died then...

Still, I was determined to offer him some solace. “My comrade—waiting for us in the mountains, not here—she has the same look in her eyes as you do. They say if she can kill a lot of monsters, that's enough, and she wouldn't mind dying. But I want her to live. It's not just me. Everyone feels the same way. But... I don't know how to convey my feelings to her.”

“So, that's why you used me as a guinea pig,” he said, a small smile appearing on his face as he understood the purpose behind our actions.

“Is it a lost cause?”

The man laughed, a genuine laugh that held a glimmer of hope. “I'm not so rotten as to repay your kindness with betrayal. I'm a proud warrior of the noble Hazar clan.” His voice was strong, filled with determination and loyalty.

As I looked around, I witnessed the Arachnes, who had seen the defeat of the Legend, fleeing in panic. Forest animals like bears and wolves, as well as a pack of Treants, had started attacking them. The mop-up battle had begun.

“Hey, aren't you fighting for your own sake?” he asked, curious.

“Of course, for our own sake. And also...” I glanced at Arisu and the others, a sense of camaraderie swelling within me, before returning my gaze to the man.

“For the sake of my comrades,” I declared. “I weighed the path of living alone against living with comrades... and I chose my comrades. So, I won’t waver anymore.” A smile spread across my face, a reflection of my unwavering determination.

Chapter 109: The Birth of the Holy Maiden

The forest was ablaze. Fallen trees lay in charred heaps, obstructing our view. In the distance, a cacophony of cheers and screams resounded.

Unlike before, however, it was the soldiers of the Light Tribe who were raising jubilant cheers, while most of the pained screams came from the spider-human monsters.

The battle in this area had come to an end. The Arachne had turned their backs and fled, and the surviving soldiers of the Light Tribe faced the task of mopping up the remaining monsters.

As for us, we were merely reinforcements. Besides, we still had a lot to learn about this world. While I'd gleaned most of the information I needed from Rushia, there were plenty of things she didn't know either.

In particular, the fact that this world was supposed to be destroyed tomorrow. That was a situation I definitely needed to ask Leen about.

But before I could even suggest taking the teleportation gate back there, I turned to see Arisu, who was surrounded by a handful of soldiers. This wasn't out of hostility, though. On the contrary, the soldiers were kneeling before Arisu, their heads bowed in solemn reverence.

"Holy Maiden, please, we implore you. Aid our brethren," one of the soldiers said in a reverent manner.

"Um, um, well..." Arisu turned to me with a perplexed expression.

What are you looking at me for? I know as much as you do!

"We've just seen a dead person come back to life. It's no wonder you look a little shell shocked," Rushia said from beside me.

Ah, right. It's only natural to be amazed when miracles are happening right before our eyes.

To be precise, the soldier Arisu had helped earlier had merely been *on the verge of* death. Reviving a body that's experienced actual death is impossible, as we were taught in the Q&A session after defeating the orc and entering the White Room.

However, in a world that didn't rely on the skill system—and where gods truly did exist—recent events must have appeared nothing short of divine. As I listened, I heard more soldiers murmuring things like “the Apostle of God” and “Holy Maiden”, referring, of course, to Arisu.

“Many soldiers were injured in this battle,” Rushia added. “The Light Folk do have healers who can use healing magic, but Arisu's magic is truly powerful.”

“But she's only Rank 5, right?” I asked, still confused.

“Well, just look at what's plainly in front of you. Clearly, it's enough.”

Come to think of it, I had heard that the magical abilities of the Light Tribe's spellcasters reached a maximum of Rank 3.

Let's shift our perspective for a moment, I thought. Showcasing our dedication here wouldn't hurt.

“Arisu, can I entrust the wounded to you?”

“Yes, of course! Thank you, Kazu-san!”

Why is she thanking me? Ah, I understand. She's kind. She wants to help the injured. But she was waiting for us to ask her, since our MP is a shared resource. Not like that's an issue now. The battle's already over.

Hmm... That being said, while Arisu is healing all these people, we'll have some free time, won't we?

Rushia must have been reading my thoughts, because she spoke up just then. “Kazu, why don't we head back to Leen's place, just the two of us? There are things we need to ask about.”

“Oh, right! Let's do that.”

Rushia could actually heal people present with her Rank 5 fire spell, Flame Heal. However, compared to true healing magic like Heal, the fire spell was significantly less efficient.

Plus, if we were going to listen to Leen's story, I definitely wanted Rushia to be present. As a resident of this world, she could be a voice of reason and an explainer.

But that means we'll be leaving Arisu behind...

"Tamaki, can I rely on you to guard Arisu?"

"Huh, is that okay? But Kazu, if you do that, you'll be left in the rear guard."

"I don't *think* there's any danger for us at this point... I mean, the battle's over."

"Yeah, you're right. But this place is still a battlefield. It's probably more dangerous for us to stay here."

"Exactly. Tamaki, make sure to protect Arisu."

Her eyes sparkled as she proudly declared, "Leave it to me! I'm capable when I put my mind to it!"

"Hmm, I'm worried..." I muttered.

"Why?" Rushia asked.

"When Tamaki-chan is overly confident, it feels like something is bound to go wrong..."

"That's mean!" Tamaki exclaimed.

"Come on, calm down," Rushia chided us. "This time, it should be fine."

Exactly what I was thinking.

In reality, Tamaki probably wouldn't actually need to guard Arisu. It was mainly to prevent Arisu from using healing magic endlessly.

Since we had already defeated all the boss-level monsters among the enemy forces, the monsters in this area were no longer our enemies... At least, they weren't supposed to be.

"All right, Arisu. We're counting on you."

"Yes, Kazu-san!"

With a cheerful nod, Arisu rushed after the soldiers, toward the injured.

Even though it's after the battle, she's so full of energy. I wonder if it's because she's Level 23. It must be that. Even though I've been in intense battles since morning, I don't feel that tired either.

A soldier stepped up to me and Rushia. "I'll guide you guys. The teleportation gate is this way."

Oh look, it's the guy Arisu revived earlier. Well, having a guide is helpful, I suppose.

"By the way, we haven't met yet. I'm Haganlan Nagaragaa from the Hazar clan. Just call me Hagan."

"Nice to meet you, Hagan-san," I said, reaching out my hand. Hagan stared at it in confusion.

Ah, they don't have the custom of shaking hands, I guess. Come to think of it, Rushia looks surprised too.

"In our tribe, we shake hands as a sign of friendship and trust," I explained.

"I see," Hagan said, nodding. "So, it's a gesture of entrusting your hand instead of a weapon. That's a nice custom."

He shook my hand, and I could feel how rough and strong his hand was.

He was a rugged guy, but he smiled cheerfully; I figured he was probably a good person. We weren't meeting in good circumstances, but he seemed nice. Like a macho guy who had lived in a male-dominated society. The stereotypical jock, so to speak.

"Well then, Hagan-san, please lead the way."

Hagan nodded vigorously. "Yes, follow me!"

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Mia cast Fly on everyone, and we soared into the sky. Soon, Hagan was skillfully balancing himself in midair. His flying skills were clearly superior to mine.

“Kazu, let’s stay strong,” he called to me cheerfully. “It’s okay if you’re not good at flying. After all, you’re the rear guard.”

Shit, he must have noticed me staring.

“Joking about comforting me actually hurts, you know!” I called back.

We headed straight for the teleportation gate. On the way, Rushia’s stomach made a cute rumbling sound.

Oh, right. After we had a hearty meal, we teleported to Leen’s place, but it seemed Rushia didn’t eat much.

“Do you want this?” Mia took a chocolate bar out of her backpack, opened the wrapper, and handed it to Rushia.

The scent of chocolate wafted through the air, and Rushia studied the bar in surprise. Ahead of us, Hagan’s ears twitched.

Ah, well, the pull of chocolate. I pulled out a bar from my backpack and handed it to Hagan. “Try it. Consider it a taste test for Rushia.”

“All right. I guess there’s no harm in it if it’s a taste test.” Hagan took one bite of the chocolate bar, then another, and another. Bits of chocolate stuck to his scruffy beard as he enthusiastically devoured the bar.

Seeing this, Rushia hesitantly took a bite of the snack in her hand. “It’s... sweet.”

“They’re nice and filling,” I said. “I thought they would make good portable rations.”

“I see. Your world has amazing preserved food.”

Never thought I’d be praised for a cheap snack like this, but...

Within a minute, Rushia’s chocolate bar was gone, and her cheeks were smeared with chocolate.

Well, this is nice, I thought.

When Rushia noticed that both Mia and I were staring at her, her cheeks turned red, and she looked down with her mouth full of chocolate. Her long ears twitched up and down.

“I apologize for my indecent behavior.”

“Don’t worry, Rushia,” I said. “This is a battlefield, and right now, you’re a soldier like any of us.”

“Oh?”

I pointed meaningfully ahead at Hagan. The poster boy of battle-hardened soldiers licked the chocolate off the wrapper and his fingertips, twitching his dog ears with great satisfaction.

“It was delicious!” he called out. “Hey, do you have another one?”

“See? It’s okay to be a little greedy.” I smiled at Rushia before handing the second chocolate bar to Hagan.

Mia grinned. “My hands are sticky. Kazu, can you get some water? Wet the handkerchief and I’ll wash them.”

“Sure.”

Then she added, “Kazu, you should lick the chocolate off Rushia’s cheek.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Rushia said, shaking her head.

I handed the damp cloth to Mia and allowed her to wipe the crumbs from Rushia’s mouth. Just then, we finally reached the tree with the teleportation gate.

It was a large tree with no camouflage, wooden planks, or ladders. However, the surrounding ground was hardened and trampled. The undergrowth was crushed, and the soil was exposed. It wasn’t the best disguise, but it would have to do.

Hagan had told us that usually, if you gave a signal, a rope ladder would descend from the treetop. But since we were flying, we didn’t need a ladder; we descended directly onto the edge of the hollow tree.

There were a few soldiers on guard duty, and they pointed their spears at us in surprise, then cautiously stepped toward us.

“Wait a minute!” Hagan called. “We’re not Peace Advocates. The mage behind us is an approved ally of Leen-sama.”

“Hey, Rushia,” I whispered. “What are Peace Advocates?”

“Peace Advocates are traitors to humanity,” she responded, her eyes turning dark. “They claim to seek coexistence with monsters and carry out acts of terrorism.”

Mia and I exchanged serious looks.

Hmm, coexistence with monsters...

“I don’t really understand,” I said. “Some of them seem to understand human language, but can they genuinely have calm conversations? Or is it some sort of religious belief?”

“Coexistence faction, fifth generation...” Mia began muttering. *Let’s just ignore her for now*, I thought.

“Well, in any case, there might be people like that, so I guess our enemies aren’t just monsters.”

“That’s right,” Hagan said, nodding.

“If they want us to be completely unguarded, it’d have been better to inform us in advance,” Rushia remarked.

“There are Peace Advocates in every country,” Hagan replied. “I’m ashamed to say I’ve heard they exist in my own country as well. For us, the existence of Peace Advocates was common sense...”

Ah, I see. We, who came from the outside, couldn’t imagine such people since we didn’t know about them. It’s like someone living in Hokkaido coming to Tokyo and not thinking about mosquitoes or cockroaches at all, I guess.

Well, that analogy’s a bit off. Do mosquitoes and cockroaches even exist in Hokkaido now? Anyway, whatever. It’s unlikely that we’ll be in much danger here.

Finally, the four of us entered the magic circle. One of the soldiers, a mage, began to sing. The song reminded me of “Kimigayo,” the Japanese national anthem.

With a quick flash of vertigo, we appeared in another tree hollow, and the air was filled with a different song—the barrier magic sung by the World Tree.

As the bell-like music resounded through the air, we walked across the bridge and into another teleportation gate.

The next place we arrived at was a familiar location. When we stepped out of the tree hollow, the view of Leen's treetop town stretched out before us.

"Are you able to make it the rest of the way on your own?" Hagan asked.

"Yes, thank you, Hagan-san," I said sincerely.

"No, thank *you* for doing this for someone like me."

We shook hands before the bridge, both smiling. Hagan turned and started walking toward another bridge.

He made it only a few steps before spears pierced through his body. With a barely audible gasp, he fell lifeless to the wooden planks of the bridge.

"Huh... What?!" I quickly turned to the direction from which the spears had come flying.

On the other side of Hagan's body stood a man with eerie cat ears and a twisted smile filled with madness. Dozens and dozens of spears were floating around him.

What... What is this...?

For a brief moment, my thoughts froze.

"We are the Peace Advocates!" the man called triumphantly.

Rushia kicked off the ground and charged toward the man, unleashing her Bone Whip from her waist. The staff-like weapon bent and twisted just as the eerie man released at least ten spears toward Rushia.

Rushia stopped in her tracks. Mia and I both stared at her, dumbfounded. What was she thinking?!

"Bright Shield!"

A shield of pure flame appeared in front of Rushia. Half a second later, the spears collided with it and melted away.

No, wait... Were all of that guy's spears made of magic in the first place?

A second later, Rushia's fiery shield disappeared as its effect wore off.

The mysterious man opened his eyes wide in astonishment.

Before Mia and I could move, Rushia leaped toward the man, swinging her Bone Whip. With a single deft motion, she wrapped it around the man's neck and pulled forcefully.

The man staggered and fell, instantly releasing most of the remaining spears... toward his own body.

"Rushia, watch out!"

Several spears were also heading for her, as she was not far from him. She discarded her Bone Whip and hastily distanced herself.

Perhaps she hadn't used magic to kill the man because she wanted him alive, but it wasn't meant to be. Impaled by at least forty of his own spears, the man met instant death. Blood gushed from his body like a waterfall as he collapsed on the ground.

I looked again at Hagan's body. Without Arisu, there was no way we could save him. That magic could only be used within ten seconds of receiving a fatal injury.

"What the... What the hell was that? What the hell was that?!" I exclaimed in frustration and disbelief.

"That was a Peace Advocate," Rushia calmly responded.

Chapter 110: Peace Advocates

Before long, two Light Tribe soldiers had arrived to collect the body of the Peace Advocate who had attacked us. They also took Hagan's body, which they would transport to his remaining family members—if he had any. I couldn't believe how quickly his life had ended...

Was Arisu's act in vain after all? I wondered in frustration.

Mia tugged at the hem of my clothes, shaking her head. "People will keep dying from now on," she said somberly.

"I won't dwell on it. But thank you." I mustered the best smile I could.

Mia nodded solemnly. She wasn't making her usual jokes... Perhaps she, too, was feeling overwhelmed.

I ruffled her hair, trying to infuse some strength into the gesture. She gave me a slightly annoyed look from under her eyelashes.

"Kazu, you should give her a nice, big hug," Rushia suggested.

I shook my head. "Sorry, too shy."

I turned to Rushia, who nodded and said, "Let's go."

She was right; we couldn't linger in sentimentality forever. Hagan had wanted us to defeat as many monsters as possible. To fulfill that wish, we had to talk to Leen.

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We reunited with Leen in the same tree hollow as before. This time, there was a curtain behind her from the start. Perhaps it was to show that she wasn't hiding the presence of her guards, signifying that we had earned her trust. Still, the level of vigilance in the stronghold seemed heightened, and the soldiers were on edge.

“First of all, please forgive us for our negligence in allowing that attack by the Peace Advocates,” Leen began, her voice lacking its usual energy. It seemed the terrorist attack had been as much of a shock to her as it was to us.

“What exactly are these Peace Advocates? Can we even negotiate with monsters in the first place?” I began to bombard her with questions, but before she could answer, I blurted out the main question that was on my mind. “The man who attacked us was creating and manipulating spears with some sort of mana or power. What was that?”

“We received reports, but it’s likely the power of assimilated monsters,” Leen answered tiredly. “We’ll have to wait for the results of the autopsy and analysis to know for sure.”

“Like Devilman?” Mia cut in. “You know, fusing with demons using Tibetan Buddhist power?”

“I doubt it has anything to do with enlightenment,” I interjected. Both Leen and Rushia looked puzzled. I apologized and steered the conversation back on track. “What is that, a special ability of monsters?”

“The man who attacked you was one of our skilled soldiers entrusted with guarding this land. However, he didn’t possess any special powers.”

Wait—our soldier? We knew who this guy was?

“It seems there are parasitic monsters,” Leen said gravely.

Oh, that kind of thing... Terrifying.

Judging by her attitude, this might have been a common method used by the Peace Advocates.

“So, the man was being controlled by a parasitic monster, or something like that?” I asked.

Leen nodded. “Of course, that’s a possibility. He hasn’t been on the front lines in recent years. We can assume that someone approached him recently and planted a Wicked Seed.”

So, we didn’t know whether the man had attacked us against his will or acted willingly. Either way, it meant that the Light Tribe harbored unsettling elements

within its ranks. And to make matters worse, the incident had occurred in the vicinity of Leen.

This wouldn't be excused as mere carelessness. It was an incredibly serious issue, so it was only natural for Leen to look so serious.

"At present, we've detained the man's wife and daughter and are questioning them to gather information," she continued. "If we learn something through interrogation..."

"Interrogation?" Mia reacted with a flicker of excitement.

"Hey," I said, nudging her, "why are you getting so thrilled about that? Seriously, you're a bundle of indiscretion... Or maybe you're just too disappointing..."

"We have a method that involves using magic to extract the truth," Leen explained.

I see, that sounds convenient and nice. Well, I guess we'll have to wait for further updates on the information.

"Now then, Leen-san, moving on to the next topic..." I adjusted myself and sat up straight on the cushion, meeting the woman's gaze. "Can you tell us more about this end of the world that's coming and how we can prevent it?"

"Yes, let me explain." She nodded earnestly, as if she'd been waiting for this very question. "To begin with, this world—or rather, this continent—is supported by five temples and floats in the sea."

And so she began to narrate the story of the land we sat upon.

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Once upon a time, the only land in this world was a group of islands. Each of the ancient gods created their own tribes and settled them on the islands they ruled. The humans, the elves, and the Light Tribe—also known as the beastmen—were all said to bear a resemblance to the ancient gods who gave birth to them. However, the legends regarding which ancient god created which race

were lost over time. This was because those gods departed from this world long, long ago.

Despite being abandoned by the ancient gods, humans, elves, and beastmen continued to not only survive but to flourish and grow in number. Eventually, land became scarce, and each tribe began to compete for limited resources.

Around that time, another group of gods descended on the world. These came to be called the New Gods. One of them, Lugor, the God of Magic, took pity on the people living in this land with limited territory.

“I shall grant you the land,” Lugor declared, and he caused the land that lay dormant beneath the sea to rise. That land is the very continent we stand on today. To ensure that the land wouldn’t sink again, five wedges were driven into various parts of the continent.

The people rejoiced, but Lugor gave them a warning.

“If three of the five wedges fall, this land will sink back into the sea. In the aftermath, the surrounding islands will also perish. All the land-dwelling life in this world will face destruction.”

The people revered the five wedges as the Five Great Temples. Naturally, no tribe would dare to defile these holy places.

Soon, the mana emanating from the five wedges caused the land surrounding them to become unusually fertile. People quickly gathered around these areas, and they became the centers of civilization, flourishing for millennia.

However, monsters appeared a hundred years ago, changing everything. You see, the Five Great Temples were also crucial facilities for the monsters.

The monster army invaded the Five Great Temples, and fierce battles ensued...

Among the Five Great Temples, the Underground Temple of Rown and the Storm Temple of Gal Yass have already fallen into the hands of the monsters. The remaining ones are the Holy City Akasha, the Spire of Haluran, and...

Leen closed her mouth for a moment and lowered her gaze.

She murmured something softly and reverently.

Then she lifted her head and looked at us.

“As all of you have seen, the World Tree here is also one of the Five Great Temples.”

Ah, I see. That’s why a force of twenty thousand monsters is attacking. Well, it could also be because there aren’t many other human strongholds. Humans have already lost two of the temples. After the monsters take the third temple, who knows what they’ll do with it or what will become of the world...

Considering the prophecy, however, it was clear that something catastrophic would happen. If any of the three remaining strongholds fell, it would mean the defeat of humanity.

This world is truly in dire straits. I wouldn’t be surprised if everyone’s already given up hope.

“Leen, the people aren’t aware of how dire things are, are they?” Rushia spoke in a serious tone.

Well, it’s understandable that a gag order would be place. It’s the right decision.

“No, they’re not. We’ve only recently gathered this information and come to the realization that these legends are indeed true, following the divine prophecy,” Leen replied.

“Oh, so the information you just shared...”

“We don’t know the intentions of the monsters after they capture the Five Great Temples. However, one thing is certain: it won’t be good. And... we’ve calculated that just continuing to resist will not be enough to protect the remaining three temples.”

“That’s why, like I said earlier, it’s a counteroffensive strategy,” I explained. “It has its disadvantages, but we need to make a bold move and aim for a comeback.”

The problem lies in the details of the strategy...

“The plan’s divided into two stages,” Leen began. “First, we’ll gather forces from the surviving human strongholds and reclaim the Underground Temple of

Rown and the Storm Temple of Gal Yass. At the same time, we'll intentionally surrender the Spire of Haluran and the Holy City Akasha to the monsters. Then, when the monsters gather around these two locations, which are rich in mana, we'll detonate explosives and destroy those two temples. According to our calculations, the explosion will turn a vast area into ashes, reaching beyond the horizon. Even if there are numerous monster forces, including Legend monsters, we'll be able to annihilate them."

So they plan to lure the enemy into the castle and set up bombs there. It's a desperate measure, but it doesn't seem like a bad plan. However, just doing that would lead to the destruction of the continent, so they also need to reclaim the two strongholds they lost before...

"The two lost strongholds... The Underground Temple and the Storm Temple, right? Is there a possibility that the temples there are no longer functional?" I asked.

"According to the divine prophecy, we've received an answer that there are no abnormalities in the function of the temples at the moment."

Ah, they asked the gods. How convenient.

"Since the World Tree in this land is the most well-defended stronghold, we, the Light Tribe, will focus on its defense," Leen went on. "I'd like all of you to join the team that will reclaim the two temples."

"Can we use teleportation gates or something to get there?" I asked.

"Yes, the preparations have already been made. We've established a secret fortress near the destination."

Wow, they moved quickly, I thought. They must have been utilizing familiars or something, as they demonstrated when they called us earlier. Magic is handy, isn't it?

"Do we need to make a decision right away?" I asked.

Leen shook her head. "This concerns everyone's future. I'll discuss it with the others and the people who remain in the mountains, and I would appreciate it if you could give me your answer tomorrow morning."

She seemed quite composed in her response. Well, I suppose it meant she understood as well. This strategy was the only path left for us to take...

Wait a minute! Leen had just mentioned something I couldn't let slide.

"Are you saying our mountain's been found?"

"Yes, just a moment ago," Leen replied with a gentle smile.

Depending on the outcome of this meeting, it seemed they were considering it as a bargaining chip. How devious.

"After everyone's gathered, we'll open the teleportation gate."

The fact that she had addressed this matter so promptly... Did it mean she trusted us now? I wasn't entirely sure.

Chapter 111: Return to the Cultural Arts Center

We continued our discussion for another thirty minutes. I was particularly curious about the exclusive contract with familiars.

“Yes, I’ve formed such things with 128 hawks,” Leen casually mentioned. She went on to explain that the hawks had been passed down through her family.

Ah, so that’s why they seem smarter than my raven and can establish convenient links.

“Kazu, I can lend you a ritual book that’s been passed down in my family as well. But it’s written in special characters known only to our lineage...”

“I should be able to decipher them with Read Language!”

“Very well.” Leen clapped her hands, and her cat-eared attendant brought a set of worn wooden tablets. They were connected like the beads of a rosary, and they were densely engraved with unfamiliar symbols.

Those must be the characters. Maybe the reason they’re carved onto wooden tablets is that they last longer. I wonder if the “book” itself is enchanted with magic, too...

After getting Leen’s permission, I touched the wooden tablets and used Read Language. Sure enough, I could read the characters.

“Um... It says, ‘Not to be disclosed to outsiders.’”

“Even on the brink of the world’s destruction, I believe our family secrets should remain hidden.”

Ah, I see. That’s probably a good thing.

“Then I’ll read this in the White Room.”

Time was limited, and I wanted to make the most of it. If I went back to the Cultural Arts Center, I wondered if I should form a party with some low-level members and go kill some random orcs.

Oh, but I've already exterminated most of them, haven't I?

Leen interrupted my thoughts, handing me another wooden scroll. "In that case, please take this as well. I couldn't form a contract with this extremely high-level familiar myself. If you feel you're capable of handling it, please consider forming a contract."

I gratefully accepted the new scroll. It seemed I had been given a substantial reward in advance.

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As we were talking, Arisu and Tamaki came through the doors into Leen's room. Both appeared to be uninjured, so I assumed they hadn't been attacked. However, both of their faces turned sorrowful upon hearing of Hagan's death.

"If only I'd been there..." Arisu muttered.

"But you healed a lot of people's injuries and saved lots of lives," I said, gently patting her head. "You did well. You should be proud."

No one can do everything alone, I thought. We can only do what we can.

Suddenly, I realized that the sun was still quite high. I glanced at my watch and saw that it was only just before 5 p.m.

Huh? I tilted my head in confusion. According to my sense of time from yesterday, it should have been around sunset.

"Kazu-chan, Kazu-chan. I think this place is much farther west than the mountain near the school, right?" Tamaki prompted.

Ah, that's it; the sun will be setting at the school in less than an hour, so there's probably about a one-hour time difference here.

"By the way, where would be a suitable place to open the portal?" Leen asked.

I wasn't sure how to answer. If we were going to teleport, a room in the Cultural Arts Center would have been the safest. However, describing which

building, and which specific part of it, would be quite difficult to do with words. There seemed to be a significant cultural difference between me and Leen.

“Shall we synchronize with the visual perception of my familiar?” she suggested.

“You mean, with me connecting to your familiar? Is that even possible?” I asked.

“It is possible. Come over here.”

When I walked up to her, she gently took my hand... and our lips met. I immediately took in the soft sensations, Leen’s warm breath, and her sweet scent.

Behind us, Tamaki let out a “kyaa!” sound.

“Whaaa— Whaaa— Wh-Wh...!” Arisu exclaimed.

“Mm. Mm-hmm.” Mia’s voice sounded.

In the next moment, my field of vision turned red.

No, that’s not it. It’s the sky dyed in the colors of the sunset.

I was seeing through the eyes of Leen’s familiar.

Oh... so this is how we share our field of vision.

Leen’s soft lips parted from mine. Involuntarily, I let out a gasping sound.

For some reason, I sensed an intimidating aura from behind. Why was it that I felt like Arisu, Tamaki, and Mia were glaring at me?

Yes, now I’m a bird. Focus... Don’t think unnecessary thoughts.

“I’ve established the connection. Go ahead and start issuing instructions,” Leen calmly whispered in my ear. As her warm breath tickled my earlobe, the bird began to descend rapidly.

Against the backdrop of the crimson sky, I could see a lush green forest. I would know that forest anywhere; it was the familiar mountain of our school.

“A little more to the left, Leen. Yes, straight ahead, just like that.” As I gave the instructions, Leen moved her familiar. It was like being in a flight simulator.

Our field of view rotated sharply to the left, then swiftly descended.

I could see the middle school building and the surrounding structures. To the left, in the foreground, at a slight distance from the other buildings, a three-story building stood alone.

It was the Cultural Arts Center.

Although it had only been about ten hours since we had left this place, it already felt like we'd been away from home for so long.

In the plaza in front of the Cultural Arts Center, a crowd of fifty students had gathered, all upper-division boys. Most of them were gripping rusty axes and swords, likely taken from orcs.

A tense atmosphere seemed to surround the place. As Leen's familiar flew closer, I caught sight of a woman sticking her head out from a second-floor window, gesturing wildly and shouting something.

It was Shiki—the girl entrusted with taking care of things in my absence. She stood confidently, staring down the male students who had gathered in the plaza with a resolute attitude...

So, that's what's going on.

"Kazu," Leen whispered in my ear. Her breath tickled my earlobe gently, but her voice carried an undertone of tension. "Are you all divided among yourselves?"

"Well, yes, unfortunately. That girl on the second floor is our leader."

"What about the boys in the plaza?"

How should I say this? After hesitating for a moment, I decided to tell her the truth—to provoke her disgust as much as possible.

"They're probably the survivors from the upper division... a group that treated the girls like slaves. We couldn't get along with them, and so... we ended up killing their leader. They may hold a grudge against us."

Arisu and Tamaki gasped in surprise.

Wait a minute, I thought. Don't worry yet. Maybe we can resolve things.

“We need to help them,” I told Leen. “Dive inside and open the portal.”

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About ten minutes later, Leen had opened the portal for us, and the five of us warped into a room with a broken window on the second floor of the Cultural Arts Center. I recognized it as the same room the Giant Wasp had flown into that morning.

Arisu, Tamaki, Mia, and I exchanged glances, while Rushia looked around with curiosity.

Leen’s hawk familiar lightly flapped its wings and perched on Rushia’s head.

This place had been our base only two days ago, and I felt immensely relieved to be back here.

However, there was no time to indulge in sentimental feelings. Through the broken window, we could hear the furious shouts of the boys, along with vulgar insults that made me want to cover my ears.

Shiki’s voice could be heard as she countered their arguments.

We opened the door and stepped out into the corridor, where we came face-to-face with a girl passing by.

It was Sumire Suginomiya, a slightly chubby girl who was good friends with Arisu and Tamaki.

“Arisu, Tamaki-chan! Uh, what’s going on?” she greeted us. “When did you come back?”

“Sumire-chan, we’re back!” Tamaki exclaimed. “That hawk over there flew us back!”

Hey, Tamaki. That’s just going to confuse people.

“We’re back, um, well...” Arisu looked at me with a troubled expression.

“Oh, wait, who’s that over there? The silver-haired foreigner... Um, *guten tag?*” Sumire asked.

“Why, German... Hmm, this is the power of a natural moe character,” Mia commented.

Rushia gave a gentle smile, but it looked forced, clearly betraying her lack of experience in human social situations.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Rushia, honored to be friends with Arisu and Tamaki,” Rushia introduced herself. Despite wearing armor made of the same leather as the soldiers, she looked as if she were wearing a dress. She truly did look like a princess.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I don’t understand German...” Sumire was still flustered.

That’s because she’s not German... I thought, perplexed. *Ah, right, Sumire can’t understand Rushia anyway. Well, that makes sense.*

I used Many Tongues on Rushia, and she repeated the same greeting to Sumire.

“Oh, thank you very much. I’m Sumire Suginomiya,” the chubby girl said, bowing repeatedly. “Um, well, you’re very fluent in Japanese. And your silver hair is so beautiful... Oh, your ears...” she remarked.

“They’re a characteristic of my race,” Rushia explained.

“Race?” Sumire asked, tilting her head.

“Yeah, Rushia’s an elf,” Mia said helpfully.

Hey, hey, this is not the time for idle chitchat. Especially you, Mia, don’t say unnecessary things.

“Anyway, could you please tell us what’s happening here?” I intervened.

“Oh, right! Kazu-san, it’s terrible. The upperclassmen, well, they came here, wanting to be part of our group...” Sumire explained.

We could still hear the shouts from outside, including a variety of vulgar jokes about women. Sumire blushed.

“Wanting to be part of our group”... That’s one way to put it, I thought with disgust.

“Sumire-chan... Um, I think it’s very noble of you to not speak ill of others, but in times like these...” Arisu said.

That hit hard, coming from the endlessly kind Arisu.

“Hey, Sumire-chan. So, in other words, the upperclassmen outside want to take advantage of the girls’ bodies?” Tamaki rolled up her already short sleeves.

Wow, she’s all fired up. Well, I don’t think you’ll need to get involved this time, though...



“Oh, come on, that’s so rude!” Sumire exclaimed. “Like surrendering to them and becoming their sex slaves?”

“S-S-Sex... Well, uh...” Rushia stammered.

“I get it. I’ll go and knock ’em down!” Tamaki declared.

“Wait a minute!” I grabbed Tamaki’s hand as she tried to leave.

“Kazu-san, stay out of this!” Tamaki told me. She was fuming.

“You don’t know how much stronger they are now,” I explained. “Sure, you might be unbeatable against one of them, but if ten of them use magic at the same time...”

“Oh, right. Magic... Mmm,” Tamaki pondered.

In terms of close combat, Tamaki, whose swordsmanship was Rank 9, was invincible. The older boys outside were probably at most Level 10, meaning their swordsmanship skills would have been around Rank 3 at best.

However, when it came to magic attacks, it would be a different story. Tamaki, despite being a brawler, understood firsthand the terrifying power of multiple mages coordinating their spells, thanks to her many battles.

“Also, if you go out there and beat them up... there’s a chance you might end up killing fellow human beings, fellow students from our school,” I added.

“I-I don’t mind that! You killed Shiba. If that’s the case, then I...”

“That’s different. I just don’t want you to kill anyone. Of course, if it really comes down to it, I can order you to do it,” I said, recalling Shiki’s words.

It was when a hundred orcs had stormed the Cultural Arts Center. She’d told me, “Consider everything as my command, as the orders of your commander. Send your comrades to the brink of death without hesitation.”

“When you kill someone, it’s because I ordered you to,” I told Tamaki firmly. “The responsibility and the right to do that belong entirely to me... Got it?”

Tension was visible on Tamaki’s face as she listened to my words, then swallowed.

“But, Kazu-san, if that’s the case, it’s tough for you alone...” Arisu began.

“I’d be happier if I could share the pain with you and Tamaki,” I said, smiling—and I meant it.

Chapter 112: The State of the Cultural Arts Center

Having put on a show, I needed to determine what to do about the people outside. First, I thought, I should discuss it with Shiki rather than make the decision on my own. With that in mind, I headed to the second-floor conference room and peeked inside.

A small group of anxious girls were clustered around Shiki, and when they noticed us, their expressions turned to great surprise. I put my index finger against my lips in a mischievous gesture for them to be quiet, then gently called out to Shiki. The diligent student council president, who was standing near the window, glanced at me and gave a slight nod before turning her attention back outside.

I guessed Shiki had already known we were back. If there was one thing I knew about her, it was that she had extraordinary courage.

“We understand your demands. Please give us some time to discuss. It’s only fair that we have time to prepare ourselves,” Shiki called out the window in a humble tone before closing it. Then, with firm footsteps, she approached us near the entrance.

Why is she glaring at me?! I wondered.

“How did you come back? When did this happen? And what about that person over there? Could you even communicate with each other?” Shiki’s questions came in rapid-fire succession.

“We warped here using the teleportation gate. The girl over there is Rushia. We resolved the language issue with magic. Now, let’s talk about the situation here. Why are they causing trouble all of a sudden?”

After glancing briefly at Rushia, Shiki slumped her shoulders. “Well, never mind.” She sighed.

Indeed, what mattered now was how we approached this situation. Should we resort to force, engage in a dialogue, or perhaps explore other options? To do that effectively, we needed a precise understanding of the circumstances.

“It’s absurd. All morning, there was a significant reorganization within the high school division.” Shiki turned to Mia. “Your older brother, Senior Yuuki Tagamiya, took charge.” She continued to tell us that Yuuki had formed an organization comprising approximately fifty members. Those who had previously been considered weaker among the surviving high school students became the nucleus of this group.

However, there were also dissenting individuals who had opposed these developments. Many had hoped to join the organization but were denied the opportunity. In essence, those who’d opposed and those rejected by Yuuki found themselves freely operating under Shiba’s influence.

Until the previous night, Yuuki had been covertly investigating the actions of the surviving students. He meticulously examined their ideologies and behaviors amid this apocalyptic situation. As a result, even among those seemingly aligned with Shiba’s organization, Yuuki was able to discern those who complied and those who didn’t.

Yuuki had personally decided whom to abandon. However, it was not about forsaking the weak. On the contrary, it was a deliberate decision to sever ties with those who had abandoned and oppressed the weak until now.

Yuuki’s words had garnered substantial support. It seemed everyone else had recognized his modest and thorough actions, leading to this. Although he hadn’t sought leadership, everyone recognized him as the most suitable candidate for the role.

Hence, the ninjas could no longer remain hidden in the shadows. They’d been forced to take the stage, however reluctantly.

This must have been immensely frustrating for them.

However, Yuuki understood the necessity of these actions. With his exceptional intelligence, he couldn’t help but exert maximum effort for the sake of everyone, including himself and his younger sister in the middle school division.

And indeed, his efforts had proved successful.

Shiki suggested that perhaps things had gone too smoothly. She speculated that Yuuki had calculated that by allowing some disruptions to occur before the organization fully solidified, he could significantly diminish the influence of the “former strong ones” he had discarded.

“But doesn’t that mean... eliminating the former members of the Shiba faction within the high school division?” I asked.

“Yes, exactly. Otherwise, the roots of evil would persist. I believe he intended for everyone to unite, cooperate, and, in a sense, make it a rite of passage,” Shiki calmly explained.

“I get why that’s practical, but it still makes me nervous to hear you talk so casually about decisive actions. Isn’t it exactly because they can make such resolute decisions that you and Yuuki are well suited to be leaders?”

“Well, it’s only natural. Like how everyone grows closer from working together as a class to prepare for a cultural festival.”

“True...” I said, even more nervous now.

Damn, she’s comparing a festival to taking lives... Didn’t expect that. Well, I suppose that’s just how she perceives things during times of peace.

I must have had a disgusted expression on my face, because Shiki looked smug.

She really enjoys teasing me!

“Sorry. You were always a loner, so you never experienced that sense of unity with your classmates, did you?” she taunted.

Oh, she’s really getting a kick out of this, isn’t she?

By the way, the girls around Shiki looked bewildered. I wondered why she felt the need to say these things around them. Perhaps she would brush it off later with some excuse.

Everything felt so familiar as I stood there in the Cultural Arts Center. It brought me to the verge of tears. Seriously, I thought I might cry.

“Well, let’s stop teasing Kazu-kun for now. Seriously, we don’t have the luxury of choosing our methods, do we?” Shiki said.

Ah, I understood that well. I had information that she didn’t have, which made it even more obvious. There were certain shocking details that I couldn’t share openly here, where others might overhear. If things went wrong, this continent, this world could come to an end tomorrow. It was too dangerous to casually discuss such alarming information.

“Yes, if things go wrong, the world could end tomorrow,” Tamaki said.

Oops, I thought with a sigh. She said it so casually. But I should have expected that. She’s just the type to say something like that without thinking. I have to make sure she keeps her mouth shut. Otherwise, we might get into trouble.

Mia and Rushia held their foreheads in grimaces, Arisu looked confused, and Shiki looked at me with a face as if she had swallowed something bitter. Yes, this was my fault as a leader.

“Sorry about that, Shiki-san,” I said sheepishly.

“Oh, should I not have said that?” Tamaki asked.

“Well... we’ll have to tell everyone eventually.” Shiki glanced around. She instructed the few girls who were listening to keep it a secret. They nodded, clearly understanding at least the seriousness of the situation, if not the situation itself. It was a wise decision, as unfounded speculations could spread quickly.

“It sounds like you’ve gathered several pieces of information, but do I need to hear it all now?” she asked.

“It can wait. Let’s focus on resolving the issues at hand,” I said.

Ultimately, our hesitation stemmed from the fact that we still considered the high school boys to be our comrades; we didn’t want to resort to violence.

While I could fight monsters all day, I felt a strong sense of unease when it came to killing fellow humans. Of course, there were those who had prepared themselves for it, and I had already taken a life myself.

Now that I thought about it, there were others who seemed ready for it too. I wondered how she was doing now.

“What about Sakura-san... Sakura Nagatsuki?” I asked.

“She’s currently tied up and locked in a room on the third floor,” Shiki casually remarked.

Wait a minute.

“What happened?”

“When the senior boys gathered, she tried charging at them with a spear. We tried to reason with her, but she wouldn’t listen. As a temporary measure, we had Shion use Flame Bind on her, and then we tied her up and left her there.”

Oh... I see...



Flame Bind was a Rank 5 fire spell that summoned a ring of flames around the target and used it like a rope to bind them. Shion was a fire magic practitioner from the remaining group at the Cultural Arts Center. She was in her second year of middle school and was one of us who had barricaded ourselves in on the first day of the academy. In the beginning, she'd used both fire magic and a spear, but I'd heard that she only used fire magic now.

"Sakura-chan is in a state of despair. I don't want to push her further into her self-destructive tendencies," Shiki explained.

"How kind of you," I replied.

"Oh, I'm always kind. But I guess you wouldn't understand." She smirked, crossing her arms confidently.

I understood, though. She didn't want to burden others with the unpleasant tasks. That's why I'd instinctively stopped Sakura before when she'd tried to shoulder a whole burden herself.

"You're being nice to everyone else, but you're bullying me."

"We're not bullying you. We're just teasing you." Shiki shrugged defiantly, as if to emphasize her point.

"But when it comes down to it... Oh, Shiki-san, can we talk privately, just the two of us?"

"Oh, a secret meeting between the two of us? What would you like to do?" She flashed a knowing grin.

"A sinister plot."

Honestly, from now on, this is a story I'd rather not share with Arisu and the others.

Oh, wait a minute.

"Rushia, you can come too," I offered.

"Okay, but... is it okay for me to be there?" Rushia raised an eyebrow.

"It's even better because it's you, Rushia. I want you and Shiki-san to unleash your inner villains together."

Rushia threw me a confused expression, while Shiki looked at me with half-closed eyes. And I must mention that Arisu also gave me a stern look, her cheeks puckered.

“No, really, I have high expectations for Rushia.”

“Kazu-kun...” Shiki muttered. “Well, fine. Nice to meet you, Rushia-san.”

“Yes, nice to meet you too, Shiki... san?”

Ah, Rushia’s unsure about the degree of familiarity.

Shiki smiled warmly. “Just call me Shiki.”

“All right, Shiki.” Rushia smiled back happily.

So, even devious people are attracted to other devious people, huh?

“Kazu-kun, you’re smiling lecherously.”

“I-I think... y-you’re imagining things,” I stuttered defensively.

“Why do you sound funny all of a sudden?” Shiki gave me another sharp look.

Chapter 113: Useless Pawns

Despite what I'd mentioned to Tamaki, the truth was that it would be easy to eliminate the fifty people loitering in front of the Cultural Arts Center. We wouldn't even need to rely on Arisu's or Tamaki's powers.

With my summoning magic, I could just summon a suitable familiar and command it to carry out the slaughter. Alternatively, Rushia could incinerate them with her fire magic. There might be a few leaks, but they would be within an acceptable range.

After all, those boys had used the girls as an outlet for their desires; they had oppressed the weak and become Shiba's pawns. Their actions were more than enough to deserve our hatred as members of the Cultural Arts Center.

Most of the Cultural Arts Center group would approve of our actions. They would probably even congratulate us.

But not everyone. For example, Sumire Sugimiya, who's friends with Arisu and Tamaki.

She had been hesitant before, but if we could convince her properly, she might understand that it was an unavoidable measure.

However, there was still a possibility of lingering resentment, and we wanted to maintain the unity of our group.

On the other hand, what if we took a more lenient approach?

That might jeopardize the unity of the Cultural Arts Center group itself. *Wouldn't a commander who pardoned those despicable guys deserve to be condemned?*

It was precisely because Shiki was weighing these factors that she remained undecided.

On top of that, there was the other faction in the senior department, led by Senior Yuuki. What would they think about our actions?

And so, the three of us—Shiki, Rushia, and I—locked ourselves in a private room and began to discuss.

Rushia was the first to speak. “You haven’t attacked yet. Is it because of your world’s sense of decency?”

“Too lenient, is that what you mean?” Shiki crossed her arms, twisting her mouth as if she’d just swallowed a bitter pill. “I won’t deny it. We grew up in a world where there was hardly any violence, let alone war, until three days ago. We feel strong hesitation when it comes to killing our own kind... But Kazu-kun, despite everything I’ve said, I’ve relied on you.”

It’s not that I have a problem with her relying on me, but...

She and I exchanged a glance. Her two-colored eyes flickered as if searching for something. “It seems like there are other reasons as well,” I ventured.

“Well, earlier, you know, I sent a raven to the upper division with a letter. It was to inform them about what’s going on at the Cultural Arts Center.”

It was true; there were others at the Cultural Arts Center who had chosen to use summoning magic. Summoning Water and Summoning Bread alone were useful, and summoning can come in handy when you need a messenger, like now.

“In my letter, I asked how Yuuki-senpai wanted us to deal with the students he had banished... but I haven’t gotten an answer yet.”

“What kind of answer do you expect?”

“Maybe Yuuki-senpai will come himself.”

I nodded in agreement. He was a responsible person with principles.

But that would only complicate things...

“If all the boys outside attack Yuuki-senpai, it would give us a perfect excuse to destroy them all,” Shiki added, a sinister grin spreading across her face.

“Yes, that’s right,” I replied. She was a real villain, that one. She was looking for something that would break the barrier that everyone still unconsciously held, the one that said, “*Thou shalt not kill.*”

“If you guys don’t want to be murderers, then I don’t mind doing it myself,” Rushia interjected.

“This is our problem. We need to break out of our shells. It might be a little inconvenient, but please watch quietly for now,” Shiki said.

Rushia and Shiki locked eyes with each other, and it looked like two monsters staring each other down. They both had smiles on their faces, but their eyes showed no trace of kindness.

This is scary. Arisu, help!

“Kazu-kun, don’t look away like it’s someone else’s problem,” Shiki chastised.

“Ah, it’s because Shiki-san has big breasts, and it’s embarrassing. I mean, I’m a healthy boy going through puberty too, you know.”

“Fine, fine, I’ll tell Arisu-chan about it. But I want your opinion.”

After hesitating for a moment, I decided to bring up the familiar topic. “Tamaki let it slip earlier, but I met someone from this world. She claims to be the leader of a group called the Light Tribe... There’s this person named Leen, a summoner who controls over a hundred hawks. According to her, the continent will be destroyed tomorrow.”

Shiki looked at Rushia. The elf princess nodded clearly. Then Shiki crossed her arms and looked back at me.

“So, it’s true.”

“I know it sounds weird, but it is true. And to prevent that, I think we’ll have to cooperate with the Light Tribe tomorrow.”

“And then?”

“It’ll be an all-out war. Depending on the situation, not only our top team, but the second team from the Cultural Arts Center and the people from Yuuki-senpai’s group will join the battle too. And if that happens...”

Shiki nodded in understanding. “The defense of the CAC will be weakened, right?”

“If we take away all our forces, it will. It’ll leave a gap for those outside to take advantage of.”

“So, we should take care of them now, right? Ignore all the clever tricks and plans and just go for it?”

“Without any discussion, huh? I agree that Rushia shouldn’t do it. Her position as a newcomer is already challenging. But if I take care of it on my own, I think most of them will accept it.”

“Not everyone may approve.”

“Well, that’s fine too.” I shrugged. “Let’s think about our priorities. The most important thing is for us to survive tomorrow and the next day.”

Shiki pondered for a moment, then let out a sigh. “If that’s the case... then even this time we’re spending talking about it is a waste.”

She suddenly glared at me, placing her hands on her hips and standing tall. “However, Kazu-kun, doing things on your own is *not* allowed. You will only kill people under my orders. Understood?”

Well, I expected as much from Shiki-san. She’s stubborn like that.

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After deciding to launch the attack from the rooftop, we left the room and headed toward the staircase. Arisu and Tamaki silently followed behind.

There were several girls in front of the staircase, all of them magic users.

One of them spoke up. “Let us fight too!” The girl had shoulder-length, dyed brown hair and frameless glasses. It was Shion, the second-year fire magic specialist.

“While Kazu-senpai has been away, my fire magic’s reached Rank 5. I think I can be of help.”

I looked at Shiki, who shrugged and grinned sarcastically. “Well, aren’t you adored?”

Damn it.

“Fine,” I agreed. “If we can attack from the roof, I don’t think we’ll be in much danger. Just in case, have some people wait at the entrance on the first floor... Arisu-chan, Tamaki-chan, I’ll leave the command of the entrance team to you. In case of emergency... you know what to do.”

Arisu and Tamaki agreed cheerfully and ran downstairs, while Rushia, Shiki, and I, together with the four new girls, climbed up to the roof.

There was a possibility that when we attacked the boys from the rooftop, they would get desperate and try to break into the building. If that happened, Arisu and Tamaki would be responsible for dealing with them. I didn’t want the two of them to have to get their hands dirty, but maybe there wouldn’t be time to argue about such things.

There was also the matter of the Peace Advocates’ attack near the World Tree—specifically, the fact that humans and half-humans were siding with monsters. If there was a possibility of facing such people in the future... this could serve as a good rehearsal, so to speak.

I was frustrated, but it wouldn’t help to be overly protective if the world might end tomorrow. We couldn’t afford to get our priorities wrong.

It wasn’t out of charity that I was protecting the CAC students. It was because I judged that increasing our strength was useful for me and the few precious people around me to survive this week.

As we opened the rooftop door, we were met by a strong evening wind. We couldn’t see the senior boys yet, but we could hear them shouting insults below.

If they saw me, I could only imagine what insults they might throw my way. Suddenly, I didn’t feel like stepping out onto the roof.

But... yes. At the very least, I want to see the faces of the people I’m about to kill.

I stepped over to the railing...

“Wait,” Shiki said. “As long as you call your familiars, it’ll be enough.”

“But...”

“You’re our trump card, our hero. At least for now.” She glanced at the confused girls. “For the future, we’ll see; as for today... not yet.”

Ah, I see. She doesn’t want any unnecessary questions. This isn’t about my feelings, but about maintaining my charisma.

“Summon Greater Elemental: Wind. Summon Greater Elemental: Fire,” I said, summoning two high-level spirits. It might have been unnecessary, but I still gave them the usual buffs.

Sharp Weapon, Physical Up, Mighty Arm.

Next, I cast Clear Mind and Smart Operation on Rushia, Mia, and Saito Umimoto, one of the other girls. Once again, Shiki resisted my casting Clear Mind on her. This person truly was a masochist!

“Well then, shall we go?” Shiki walked slowly toward the railing.

The boys in the square began to murmur, but their voices gave me a bad feeling... Something was wrong.

Driven by curiosity, I peeked furtively into the square from behind the water tower. The senior boys weren’t looking at us at all, but toward the top of the mountain.

What’s going on there?

I followed their gaze to the mountaintop, but I didn’t see anything. It was only when I looked even higher that I saw it.

It was an island. A small island floating in the air, crossing over the mountain.

“Laputa?” Mia’s voice sounded weak and stunned.

No, more importantly...

I looked at Rushia, who was trembling next to me, and took her hand. She suddenly turned to me with a startled expression. Her beautiful face had turned pale.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s said that the Demon King has four top executives,” Rushia said. “They’re called the Four Celestial Kings. And that floating fortress—it’s the stronghold of

one of them, Demon General Azagralith.”

After a moment, she continued in a soft voice... “That floating fortress destroyed my land.”

Chapter 114: The Floating Fortress

Demon General Azagralith.

It was the first time I'd heard of a monster having anything resembling a personal name, and I shuddered to think what that might mean.

"They say the Demon King summoned his four leaders through exclusive contracts," Rushia explained.

Ah, I see. So that's where the exclusive contracts come into play.

"That means... they must be strong, right?" I asked.

"Even stronger than divine weapons. According to the records available so far, no one's ever survived after witnessing General Azagralith's own battles. However, the records themselves are scarce, as he rarely enters the battlefield..."

"I mean, it makes sense if he's a general leading an army..."

I'd thought it was only in stories that generals appeared on the front lines. But in this world, individual combat skills could greatly affect the course of a battle, so I couldn't categorically say that. Besides, if their strength exceeded that of a Divine-grade monster like Mekish Grau or the legendary Arachne... But was that even possible? Were there ranks higher than Rank 9 for monsters?

"They say there are about two thousand ogres in this floating fortress," Rushia went on. "They jumped over the front lines and attacked our royal capital. The day the people in the capital looked up at the floating fortress spelled the end for our country."

Okay, so their greatest weapon is mobility. They move freely through the unreachable skies, posing a threat that can appear anywhere. This is incredibly annoying.

Two thousand monsters and a boss stronger than Mekish Grau had come to our mountain. How much did our enemies, the Demon Lord's army, know about

us?

“Will we be able to get through this if all the students from the middle and high schools remain hidden?” I wondered aloud, then shook my head, knowing it would be impossible.

Even if their objective wasn't this mountain...

The concrete school building bore the marks of a fierce battle. It was incredibly suspicious. For the inhabitants of this world, there could hardly be a more peculiar sight. For starters, I couldn't imagine those high school students gathering in the plaza and obediently listening to us. It was laughable; despite the fact that our enemy has deployed forces capable of easily destroying the capital of an entire kingdom, here we were, falling into disarray amongst ourselves.

But complaining wouldn't help. First, we would need to consider how to approach the floating fortress. The situation had changed. At this point, we should completely ignore those boys in the plaza. Our priority now was to deal with this new threat of the monster army.

But... would it be reckless to engage in combat at all?

“Rushia, can we still use the teleportation magic with Leen-san's hawk as the starting point?”

“Yes. If we ask her through this hawk, it's possible.”

The hawk, which had landed on Rushia's outstretched hand, had been perched atop the water tower without our realizing. Leen's familiar nodded, tilting its head up and down.

“We're prepared to evacuate everyone to the land of the Light Tribe,” the hawk said.

Shiki and the others looked bewildered.

Ah, right, another language issue.

I cast Many Tongues on the hawk. Leen seemed to understand and repeated her words. Shiki stared at me, taking in the message.

“If we’re going to evacuate, it should only be those who are inside the Cultural Arts Center,” I said.

“Of course, we won’t take those who are outside.”

If we brought those troublemakers with us, it seemed inevitable that they would cause trouble with the Light Tribe. It would be better to leave them here as monster food. I doubted Shiki would object to that.

Most people would hesitate to strangle someone to death with their own hands. But letting people starve and die out of sight? That wasn’t nearly so hard to do.

Moreover, when it came to those boys who had engaged in savage and cruel acts, devoid of any trace of morality, the choice became even more clear.

But the boys in the plaza weren’t the people I was worried about leaving behind...

I glanced at Mia. As usual, she showed little expression, but was I just imagining it, or was she on the verge of tears?

Yes, this would also mean abandoning Mia’s older brother and the others in the high school.

Nonetheless, Shiki and I needed to make a quick decision. The enemy was closing in rapidly. Every minute, and every second, was precious.

I tightened my fist and turned to Shiki.

“Kazu-kun, if the five of you flew to the high school, how long do you think it would take?” she asked.

Huh? Oh, right.

“No more than five minutes... I think. And if we used Greater Invisibility and flew, we might not attract attention.”

“Understood. Well then, that’ll work.”

There was no other choice. Shiki gave instructions to the nearby girls and urgently told the CAC group to gather in the hall. Then she turned to us.

“A teleportation gate can be opened anywhere as long as that hawk familiar’s there, right? It’ll still take a while before that flying island arrives above the CAC. That group will have the chance to escape through the gate. After that, you should fly to the high school with the hawk.”

She nodded decisively and continued, “I’ll write a memo now. Kazu-kun, summon a raven and have it fly to the rooftop of the main building at the middle school. The relay staff from the high school will be waiting there. Let’s gather the high school group in one place.”

She took out a pen and notebook, jotted something on the page, then tore it out and swiftly tied the folded paper to the leg of the raven that I had summoned.

Following my instructions, the raven took off into the sky.

While Shiki and the others started downstairs, I dismissed the two familiars I’d summoned, and took one last look up at the sky.

As the massive island continued its slow, inexorable approach, it was dropping something here and there. It was too far to see clearly, but those *somethings* must have been monsters.

Phew, good thing the CAC didn’t send out a reconnaissance team or anything.

“Thanks, Kazucchi,” Mia said in a soft voice, tugging at the hem of my clothes.

I smiled. “It was Shiki-san’s idea, though.”

“But you quickly gave the okay too, Kazucchi.”

“Well, if there’s a chance of success, of course. When we think about tomorrow, the high school group’s fighting power is valuable.”

Mia nodded in agreement. “Still, I’m happy.”

“If it boosts your motivation, all the better,” I said.

With that, we turned our heels and left the rooftop.

In the plaza, the high school students were still causing a commotion. It seemed like the enemy would reach its target—the Cultural Arts Center—in no time.

I hoped to transport as many things as possible through the teleportation gate, but... there didn't seem to be time for that. We would need to hurry.

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About five minutes later, a disk-shaped pale blue light about three meters across appeared in the dimly lit entrance room on the first floor. It was a teleportation gate.

The high school boys outside were being just as noisy and unruly as ever. However, they neither fled nor prepared a coordinated counterattack. They were too disorganized.

One by one, the girls stepped into the light and vanished. Among them was Sakura Nagatsuki, who had been released from captivity. They all wore heavy backpacks.

"We'd made preparations so we could abandon the Cultural Arts Center if necessary," Shiki explained. It was reassuring to see that the necessary survival equipment, probably enough to last a few days, had been distributed among several backpacks.

At the last moment, I remembered that it would be troublesome if we couldn't communicate in the Light Tribe's world, so I cast Many Tongues on Shiki and a few others.

Once Shiki had made it through, the hawk closed the teleportation gate and flew over to perch on Rushia's head.

"Is that its designated position?" Mia asked.

"Rushia doesn't mistreat familiars," came Leen's voice through the hawk's beak. Its avian eyes glared at Mia with intensity.

Ah, looks like someone's holding a grudge.

Mia turned away and whistled nonchalantly.

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With Greater Invisibility and Fly cast on the five of us, we took off from the window on the second floor of the Cultural Arts Center. I could see everyone else thanks to See Invisibility, but the others couldn't even see their own companions—which was why we were holding hands.

Rushia held Leen's familiar hawk to her chest with one hand. To prevent only the hawk from being visible, I had also cast Greater Invisibility on us.

As we flew over the heads of the boys still running chaotically around the square, I could hear their voices.

"Shiba-san... went..."

"Hey, I said Shiba-san..."

Huh? Do these guys still not understand that Shiba's dead? Is that why they were able to do something so absurd?

As I pondered this, we flew out of the square...

And a flash of light shone on the floating fortress. A chill ran down my spine.

"Into the forest!" I shouted, lowering my altitude and diving into the trees.

Immediately, a beam of light released from the floating fortress pierced through the Cultural Arts Center.

A deafening explosion rang out, and the shockwave flung us farther into the forest. Instinctively, we grabbed each other's hands.

The five of us huddled together, spun in the air, and landed hard on a carpet of fallen leaves, the air squeezed out of our lungs.

Groans of pain escaped from all of us.

"A-Are you okay? Kazu-san, are you okay?"

"I... I'm okay, kind of."

As I tried to stand up, a sharp pain shot through my shoulder. I groaned softly.

Arisu began trying to use magic to heal me. "Um, um, Kazu-san, where are you hurt? Here?"

"Eeek! Arisu-san, that's me!" Rushia screeched.

Arisu was poking Rushia's bottom, and I couldn't help but grin at the sight. Mia tugged at my cheek.

Hey, hey, how did she see me?!

"I felt I had to punish Kazucchi," Mia explained.

"What are you doing, you brat?!"

"Well, the fact that you're protesting like that means that you must have seen something," Mia said, looking at me with narrowed eyes.

Damn it.

On the verge of protesting even more, I winced from the pain in my shoulder.

Ugh, this is no time for casual chit-chat anyway.

When I lifted my head and looked at the Cultural Arts Center...

That magnificent building was no longer there.

Amid the rising dust, the place we had just been using as our base had been reduced to rubble in one fell swoop.

Chapter 115: Legion of Demons

Not long ago, there had been a three-story building called the Cultural Arts Center. Now, it had been reduced to a pitiful pile of rubble, with thick clouds of dust billowing into the air around it.

The plaza had turned into a chaotic scene of hellish proportions. Some students lay on the ground, groaning in pain, while others screamed and fled in panic.

From the woods, we watched in stunned silence.

Then Rushia grabbed my hand. “We have to hurry,” she urged me.

Damn, she’s right. What am I waiting for?

Every second counted now.

If only I could cast See Invisibility on all of them...

For now, I reached out and took the hand of Arisu, who was stumbling around like a zombie, calling, “Uh, ah, where are you, Kazu-san?” I let her cast a healing spell, and the pain in my shoulder disappeared.

“Everyone, stay still,” I said. “I’ll take your hands and rearrange our formation.”

“Mmm. Can we use this as an opportunity for some naughty mischief?” Mia asked.

“Stop saying that!”

Sexual harassment was something I openly did to Arisu and Tamaki only. Well, it was consensual, so it wasn’t actually harassment.

After giving Mia’s head a light pat, I had everyone hold hands while I once again gave them Greater Invisibility and Fly from the Diversion spells.

We soared into the sky, glancing down at the remains of the Cultural Arts Center. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of the graveyard behind it.

We had created that grave. It was the tomb of Akane Shimoyamada, who had died due to my lack of strength and mistakes in an operation I had commanded.

In my heart, I whispered a goodbye.

As we flew toward the east, where the high school division was located, I directed my gaze to the north side of the mountain. The floating island was still attempting to rise above its summit, continuously dropping monsters.

“Hey, won’t those falling monsters die?”

“Take a closer look, Kazu-san,” Tamaki told me. “They’re falling slowly, like fluffy leaves.”

I see, so that’s how it is. They must be under the effects of magic.

Wait a minute, does that mean...?

“Soft Landing?”

“Mm, seems like it.”

Soft Landing was a Rank 1 wind spell. As the name suggested, it allowed for a slow and safe landing from high places. It was a simple spell, but depending on how you used it, you could create a formidable airborne assault.

In other words, that floating fortress island was a flying amphibious assault ship.

As I looked closer, I could see that it even had a High-Mega Particle Cannon. It was a perfect blend of mobility and striking power.

“But still, to use Soft Landing on that many monsters... they must have mages, right?” I wondered aloud.

“It’s probably the work of Mage Ogres,” Rushia said. “Mage Ogres use sleep magic and cold magic. They can also use Fly. There are rumors that they can transform into various forms.”

Wow, sounds even more troublesome than Arachne mages.

“By the way, what are ogres like?” I asked.

“They’re ugly, savage giants with a single horn on their forehead. I mean, they’re called giants, but they’re only about twice as tall as an orc.”

The Giant that Mia and I had fought during the day was about four meters tall. So these Mage Ogres must have been a third their size. But what they lacked in height, they made up for in numbers.

“But their physical strength is supposed to be equivalent to three or four orcs,” Rushia went on. “They wear leather armor, and they look really menacing. Their arms are long, and they have swords and shields. You can expect them to have considerable reach.”

“So they’re literally like demons,” I mused.

The translation of my conversation with Rushia was going smoothly. It seemed the ogres weren’t as smart as hobgoblins, but in return, they had more power.

“What about their intelligence?”

“Ogres don’t operate solely on instinct like orcs do, but they don’t have the coordination and discipline to move as a well-organized group, like hobgoblins. However, if there’s a commanding tower in the form of a Mage Ogre, they can engage in organized tactical maneuvers.”

So, Mage Ogres were smart. Orcs were also intelligent when it came to their mages. Maybe in this world, anything that used magic tended to be intelligent.

By the way, the person in our group who can’t use magic...

I glanced briefly at Tamaki.

“I feel like Kazu-san is staring at me intently.”

She’s sharp, this one.

“Stop, Kazu-san! You’re embarrassing me.”

“Um, Tamaki-chan,” Arisu began. “Maybe Kazu-san is... Um, never mind.”

Arisu seemed to have noticed something, but she smiled wryly and shook her head. She was so considerate of her friends.

“Rushia, do you know of any other forces in the floating fortress? We should know that now.”

“Unfortunately, that’s the extent of my knowledge. When it was confirmed that the capital had been invaded, I was able to escape through the teleportation gate.”

I see. Well, that makes sense. It is the capital city after all; there should be magic users capable of creating teleportation gates. But what about the other royal family members? Didn’t they escape? Or did they share the fate of the country?

“Normally, teleportation magic consumes quite a bit of mana,” Rushia said, sensing my question. “No one can do it alone; multiple high-level mages have to participate in a ritual together. Leen’s a special case; even with the protection of the World Tree, she has exceptional abilities.”

This meant Rushia would have had to escape alone. The destroyed kingdom had gambled on ensuring the survival of Rushia, a future force, more than anyone else, including their king. Despite how hard it was to create teleportation gates, Leen had managed it so easily. In a way, was she “cheating” almost as much as we were? But as she was the first and only Light Tribe magician we’d met, we didn’t have any point of comparison.

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We arrived at the high school division to find several people scurrying busily around the building. They were likely gathering people, as Shiki had requested in her letter. Just as we soared over the main building and descended onto the rooftop, the Greater Invisibility wore off.

Two male students, second-years judging by their red gym clothes, seemed to be on lookout duty. One of them was holding a bow. Had he taken it from the Archer Orc? If so, did that mean he became Level 1 today?

When they saw me, the guards looked a bit awkward. They knew, of course, about the bullying I’d endured, but Shiba’s control had been absolute up until recently. So even if they were now aware of it, it was too late to act differently.

“What’s the situation with evacuation?” I asked, making my voice as businesslike as possible.

The archer was the first to reply. “We’re currently gathering everyone from where they’ve scattered.”

They must have had to send a team to explore every corner of the high school division. I wondered if it would be possible to find everyone in time.

I turned to Rushia. “How long does it take for the ogre units to deploy?”

“Depends on their reconnaissance capabilities. If they find out that people have gathered here, they’ll probably send a unit using the mage’s flight magic right away,” she replied.

“And how strong do you think they’ll be?” I asked.

“Based on previous reports, I’d estimate there will be around twenty to thirty of them. Think of it as a ratio of ten ogres to one Mage Ogre. The captain will lead this group. Overall, it’s a force that can take on five to ten times the number of soldiers. While this advance team keeps us occupied, the main force will arrive, and that’ll be ten times as big.”

So there was a Captain Ogre as well. In terms of strength, would it be comparable to an Elite Orc?

I didn’t think Tamaki would lose in a one-on-one battle, but the sheer number of enemies was concerning.

“Rushia, do you think we can hold them off?” I asked.

“If we launch a preemptive attack and give it our all, we should be able to do it without problem,” she replied.

“So... what are the disadvantages?”

“There is a possibility that Azagralith will know how many forces we have,” she answered.

Right, there were high-ranking members of the Demon King’s army on that floating island. Revealing our hand to an opponent that likely surpassed Divine Soldiers would be... a bad move for sure. I pondered the situation. The risks and

benefits of abandoning a few helpless but cooperative students in the high school division, to prevent Azagralith from realizing our true strength...

No... that's not right. I shook my head. That wasn't something I should've been deciding alone.

I turned to the two senior high schoolers. "Where's Yuuki-senpai?" I asked.

"The principal's office on the first floor," one of them responded. "It was closed off, so the orcs never got to ransack it. We're using it as our base."

"Thank you... Let's go, everyone," I said, bowing to the two seniors before the rest of us descended to the first floor using Fly. We entered the corridor through a broken window. The door to the principal's office was wide open, and students in jerseys were busy coming in and out.

When they saw us, a female student wearing a green-lined jersey, the mark of a third-year student, exclaimed, "Ah, it's Mia-chan!"

"Oh, hey there, Kei-chan," Mia greeted her.

"Yuu-kun, Mia-chan's arrived! Your little sister is here!"

"W-Wait! Please don't shout things like that so loudly!" Mia cried.

There was a clattering noise as a flustered Yuuki jumped out. He was wearing his ninja attire, as usual. After confirming he was okay, I glanced at the girl Mia had called Kei-chan.

Her waist-length hair was tied back, and she exuded a motherly aura from her demeanor and her calm, gentle, drooping eyes. She appeared somehow more mature than a third-year student.



“Hmm. Kei-chan, why are you here?” Mia asked.

“I needed some documents, so I thought I’d come over,” the girl responded. “It’s been really troublesome with everything that’s been happening.”

“Um... Mia, who is she?” I inquired.

“Kazucchi, this is Keiko Isogaki.” Mia introduced the older girl. “She’s a college student and a former member of the Ninja Club.”

Wait a minute. Wasn’t the Ninja Club something Yuuki-senpai created on his own?

“And she’s also my brother’s fiancée,” Mia added.

Wait, seriously?

Chapter 116: The Greater Ninja

Keiko Isogaki, currently a first-year university student, was one year older than Yuuki and the former president of the Ninja Club. It was true that he had started the Ninja Club—not that the school officially recognized it—but two years ago, Keiko had joined out of nowhere. She and Yuuki had dueled, and Keiko’s victory earned her the title of the club’s first president. From then on, she’d been known as the “Greater Ninja.” Since then, the two of them had become engaged, with plans to marry after graduating from university.

“I have so many questions, I don’t know where to start,” I said after Mia finished telling this story.

“Oh, really?” Keiko tilted her head to the side.

Such as, what’s with this “Greater Ninja” title? And a duel for the presidency with Yuuki-senpai? What’s going on? I thought, but I didn’t voice my questions aloud.

“Two days ago, I happened to have some business at the school, so I thought I’d see Yuuki-kun’s face...” Keiko said. “But then there was an earthquake...”

Keiko had been traveling on the northern road, which had collapsed in a landslide. She had a rope with a hook at the end, which she’d quickly attached to a nearby tree, narrowly escaping. But with the road cut off, she’d had no way to get to the high school. She reluctantly climbed up the mountain, where she encountered an orc, which she dispatched with her knife, leveling up and reaching the White Room. In fact, she defeated enough orcs to reach Level 6 on her first day. Then she got completely lost. Somehow, she ended up going around to the back of the mountain.

“Keiko is phenomenally directionally challenged, you see,” Yuuki said, pausing in the middle of giving instructions to a student who had just entered the room. His voice sounded tired.

“So, anyway, I had no choice but to camp on top of a tree for the night,” Keiko continued. “Then, I spent the entire day yesterday wandering around... Finally, I managed to make my way back here this morning. It was really tough, you know?”

On the second day, Keiko said, she’d tried to go somewhere where there wouldn’t be any orcs. Instead, she’d fought and defeated a pair of bears. They had attacked her simultaneously, so if she hadn’t already gained some skills, she might have been done for. On the third day, while defeating Archer Orcs, she’d had a fateful reunion with Yuuki, who was hunting archers and bees. Since then, she’d been serving as his right hand. However, if she went outside, something could happen to her and she might not come back, so she couldn’t be sent on errands without caution.

By the way, this conversation took about three minutes. For once, the whole time she was speaking, everything made sense—I couldn’t think of any questions to ask.

Seriously, if I had more time, there’s a lot more I’d be asking.

“Mia... is she always like this?” I asked.

“Isn’t Keiko amazing?” Yuuki gushed.

“The more I hear, the more... Well, she’s your fiancée, after all.” Mia remained unperturbed.

That’s right, I thought. I guess she’s a good match for someone like Yuuki-senpai.

“By the way, Keiko-san, what level are you now?” Mia asked.

“Level 18!” She flashed a victory sign and a wide smile.

Wow, that’s high! And she hadn’t even ventured outside like us...

“This morning, when I defeated some bees and archers, my level shot up! After that, I was asked to thin the monsters out.”

“Um... You did that solo, right?” I asked.

“Yep, but I joined a party around noon.”

Her skills included Rank 5 Reconnaissance, Rank 4 Support Magic, Rank 2 Movement, and Rank 3 Strength.

“Wait, hold on a second. You don’t have any attack-type skills?”

“I was just strangling them to death and stuff like that in the beginning.”

“Keiko is seriously strong in fights...” Yuuki said resignedly, his shoulders visibly slumping.

Well, at this point, it’s beyond just being strong in fights... But I guess that’s why they called her the Greater Ninja.

“Halfway through, I started using the weapons I took from the orcs. I also have some experience with practical swordsmanship, you know, so...” Keiko explained.

Wow, she completely defied the skill system.

I had also heard that Keiko was a master of full-contact karate and aikido. Regarding aikido, her Chinese master had supposedly said he had nothing more to teach her. She must have learned swordsmanship from that master.

What kind of first-year university student is she? And why was her aikido master Chinese? Why was she learning swordsmanship in aikido? And what’s with the master in the first place... Ah, forget it. Too many questions.

“How did you defeat the bees?” I asked instead.

“I reflected their stingers.”

Ah, I see. If you had the visual acuity and reaction speed to do that reliably, it wouldn’t be a problem. That would be impossible for me.

She was like a stealth operation specialist unit in the forest, in a strategy game sense. And she was also good at cleaning up trash mobs. But against bosses, she wouldn’t be able to do much with just the bit of swordsmanship she’d learned... Especially against something like Mekish Grau.

It was inevitable, though. She’d been wandering around the forest for over two days, cut off from information. And this had been on the other side of the mountain. There couldn’t have been many orcs there, not to mention elites or generals.

It would have been better for her to focus on stealth and only kill opponents she could handle rather than work so hard to level up her weapon skills. Using support magic to enhance her physical abilities was also a big help.

But if she specializes in reconnaissance, why did Yuuki-senpai say she was directionally challenged? That's a shame.

"By the way," Yuuki interrupted, "a team that went far on a recon mission hasn't come back yet. I'll go and check it out. Rushia, would you ask Leen to open the teleportation gate as soon as possible? I want to evacuate those who can escape first."

"The enemy's first wave is coming soon," Rushia added.

"If you think it's dangerous, feel free to retreat. Everyone's safety is our top priority-Ouch!" Mia had swiftly closed in on her brother and pinched the back of his hand. Her expression was passive, but her anger was palpable.

"Brother, cherish your life," she said.

"B-But..." Yuuki stammered.

"I'll go," Mia declared. "I can use Fly and Wind Search. You stay here and command."

Wind Search was a Rank 6 spell that sent out ultrasonic waves to scan the surroundings based on their reflections. It could be useful for locating people.

"Th-That's dangerous!" Yuuki protested.

"Would it be okay for *me* to be in danger?" Mia glared at her brother, who was five years older than her, and he visibly recoiled. I remembered hearing that Mia was his weak point.

"Brother, you're the commander. Stay here and oversee the retreat. Okay?"

"Understood..." Yuuki dejectedly lowered his shoulders.

Mia looked up at me and said, "Well then, I'll be going for a bit."

"Wait, Mia. It's too dangerous for you alone. Take Tamaki with you," I suggested.

“Yeah, that’s a great idea. If I’m with her, everything will be fine!” Tamaki proudly asserted.

Ah, wait, I’m starting to feel a bit anxious... N-No, but we should keep Arisu, who can use healing magic, with us, right?

“Understood. I’ll be useful to Tamaki-chan,” Mia said.

“You can count on me, Mia,” Tamaki chirped.

After casting Greater Invisibility on themselves, Mia and Tamaki grabbed hands and took off northeast using Fly. I could tell by the way Tamaki tilted her head quizzically even as they ascended into the sky that she was still confused, but as long as Mia was with her, I figured she would be fine.

“Then, Leen-san, would you please set up the teleportation gate now? Arisu, Rushia, and I...” I looked up at the sky. Dozens of ogres were flying through the treetops, approaching fast. They must have been the vanguard Yuuki had mentioned.

Even from this distance, they were towering giants, about three meters tall with reddish-brown skin and clad in shabby leather armor. Each had a single horn protruding from its forehead. Sharp, wolf-like fangs were visible in their partially open mouths. With crushed noses and ugly faces, their eyes shone fiercely in a red hue. They were unmistakably Red Ogres. They wielded long spears and round shields, and they gave off the vibe that they could form a phalanx with around three hundred of them.

If they did that, things would get tough for us. Arisu’s spear wouldn’t be long enough to stand a chance against them, so it seemed that Rushia’s magic was our only means of counterattack.

“Isn’t it unfair for monsters with exceptional physical abilities to use group tactics?” I remarked.

“Indeed, but it’s highly effective,” Rushia responded. “I’ve heard that it left our elven armies with almost no means of defense. If they were the Light Tribe, they might have had guerrilla tactics specialized for forest warfare, but...”

I nodded in understanding. Engaging in direct combat with such beings would be suicidal for weaker humans.

“How did your military counter them?” I asked.

“All I know is what we’ve heard from those who managed to escape with their lives... but they mainly fought from a distance, bows and arrows; magic was also effective. They strictly avoided hand-to-hand combat and engaged in attrition warfare from within fortified strongholds. However, even that strategy was useless when the floating islands attacked from the air...”

I see... Any fortress would be no different than a sandcastle against an attack from the sky. Well, in this world, there might be countermeasures against flying units, but... I’ll ask about that some other time. Right now, we need to focus on the enemies in front of us.

I counted about thirty ogres heading our way, but it was hard to tell which ones were mages.

Ah, there’s one wearing a robe and holding a staff. Could that be one? If so, there are four mages. That’s more than what Rushia predicted. There’s also one bigger ogre with blue skin.

“Is that blue one the captain?” I asked.

“Looks like it,” Rushia said.

A teleportation gate had opened in the vacant classroom behind us, and students were being swallowed one after another. They were all carrying overstuffed backpacks and heavy luggage, as instructed by Yuuki. A total of fifty-seven students from the senior division had gathered under his leadership, excluding Keiko, and there were about forty going through the portal. The five we already knew were somewhere else—three students had been sent to bring them back—and Mia and Tamaki should have been with the six people they had gone to find in the northeast.

Now, we just needed to buy time until Mia and the others returned.

Keiko stepped forward. “I’ll help fight too!”

Ah, the support of the Greater Ninja would be appreciated. Honestly, I had some concerns about facing ogres with their physiques.

Keiko held the shoulders of a girl beside her. By the color of her tracksuit, she must have been a second-year student. She had twin braids and round glasses, and something about her looked suspicious to me.

“And this girl can use fire magic, so let’s bring her along.”

“Well, um...” the girl muttered.

“This is Yukino-chan!”

“H-Hello, nice to meet you.” Yukino gave a timid bow.

Ah, even though she’s older than us. Well, that’s fine. We’ll remove Tamaki and Mia from the party and add Keiko-san and Yukino-san instead. Mia and Tamaki will realize right away that we disbanded the party and reorganize on their end. That way, we’ll still have a party of five.

We left the main school building and headed toward a clearing. We would be the ones to make the first move.

Since the ogres in the sky were dispersed, it wouldn’t be possible to eliminate them all at once. It would be better to intercept them a little further away from the school building, in a corner of the grounds.

“Rushia,” I requested, “for the opening move, use Fire Storm. Release your magic power at triple the usual intensity.”

“Understood.”

Chapter 117: Ogre Phalanx - Part 1

The five of us grouped up in a corner of the high school's grounds. Behind us was a fence, and to our right was a soccer goal. The day before, the grounds had been littered with corpses, but there was no trace of that now. It was the perfect place for the ogres to launch a group attack.

But that was exactly why we'd chosen to wait there.

The enemy outnumbered us, but we had a secret weapon: Rushia. We judged that an open area would be better to make use of her ranged attacks.

And there was another thing—we were wary of the fortress cannon that had destroyed the Cultural Arts Center building with a single blow. It had probably been fired to eliminate the people gathered in front, and the building itself had ended up as collateral damage.

Therefore, if we were to go on a rampage, it would be better to do it in a place where the damage wouldn't reach the main school building. We couldn't afford to have the teleportation gate that opened to that building destroyed.

The problem was how to avoid that fortress cannon if it was aimed at us...

Keiko came up with a suggestion: "Let's synchronize our timing and use Deflection. It should work, right?"

I thought that would make things easier. And when I asked further about a plan, Keiko said she could counter Elite Orcs' strikes and even bee stingers with ease. I couldn't imagine her lying. Yuuki seemed to have full trust in her... He told us that both her eyesight and foresight were exceptional.

As a fellow magic user, I found my lacking skills a little disheartening, but I figured it was pointless to compare myself to a ninja like her.

"Well then, if it looks like the cannon will fire, let's try to escape," I suggested, "and if that's not possible, we'll fall back on Deflection."

“Leave it to me!” Keiko proclaimed proudly. “Just imagine we’re on a huge ship!” She brandished the white sword she was holding—the one from the General we’d defeated the night before. Although we’d left it behind at the high school, Yuuki had taken care of retrieving it.

“It’s best for Keiko to use this,” he explained to us, and we had no objections.

Now, we could see the airborne squad of around thirty ogres flying above the forest, steadily approaching us.

They were about twenty meters above the ground. As the distance between us and them approached two hundred meters...

“Rushia, fire!” I called.

“Fire Storm!”

That was a Rank 6 fire spell. Rushia used her special ability to release three times the normal magic power, consuming three times the usual MP. Her targets were the ogres descending from the sky.

There were at least thirty of them, and they were flying in loose formation about five meters apart. Clearly, they were cautious of magical attacks, and they hadn’t come to this mountain for a sightseeing trip; they’d come for us.

Fighting an enemy like this would no doubt be a test of our strength.

Fire Storm landed in the center of the group of ogres. Along with a fierce explosion, a swirling cloud of flames enveloped the sky around them.

“How many did we hit?”

My words were nothing more than a wish for us to have taken out a ton; I wasn’t particularly asking anyone to confirm.

However, even I thought we must have defeated around ten of them...

“Hmm, looks like only two,” Keiko said in disappointment before the smoke of the explosion cleared.

Wh-What? That’s way too few, by any standard.

“They put up their shields just in time. They’re also flying lower, trying to reach the forest.”

Could they really have defended against fire magic with shields? No, let's be sensible about this. We totally expected them to retreat into the forest. And it's all right, because we want to buy as much time as possible.

"Rushia and Yukino, you'll attack the ogres once they come out of the forest," I said. "That should thin them out and buy us time."

Yukino was at Level 8; her fire magic was at Rank 5 and her water magic at Rank 1. Apparently, she'd leveled up fast while dealing with the bees that had appeared that morning. Fire Magic was especially effective against them.

Now, it turned out that Yukino was a junior member of the track and field club, which Keiko had also joined, balancing it with the unofficial ninja club.

Strange, as the round glasses and braided hair definitely gave off a literary girl vibe. *Well, maybe that's just a manga trope.*

Our eyes met. Yukino awkwardly averted her gaze. Everyone from the high school treated me like this. Likely because they had either seen or heard about my being bullied by Shiba.

It's fine, I thought. It'd be too much trouble to go around telling them not to worry.

I summoned two Greater Wind Elementals and cast the standard buffs on them. When the enemy attacked from the sky, these familiars would have to serve as my guards.

With Mia gone, no one else could fly. Our ranged attacks—specifically, Rushia and Yukino's ranged attacks—were all we could rely on now. If the enemy came flying in, we could let loose fire magic without worrying about collateral damage or friendly fire.

"They're coming out of the forest!" Keiko warned.

A couple of seconds after her alert, we too could see the ogres. They marched in regular formation, six rows deep, shields at the ready.

"Isn't that tight formation called a phalanx?" I asked Keiko.

"Yeah. Looks like they managed to block our magic with those shields earlier."

I see. With those round shields, they can cover their upper bodies completely. The leather armor that covers their lower halves also kinda protects them from fire.

Oh, and... right, if they have a mage...

“Could they have cast Fire Resist?” I asked Rushia.

She nodded. “It’s well known that Ogre Mages can use protective magic against a lot of different attributes.”

Of course. Since they had a mage, we should have expected at least that. From Rushia’s perspective, she must have wanted to take down as many as possible with the first attack. Still, it would have been troublesome if she’d collapsed after casting a Fire Storm with ten times the normal mana cost right there and then.

Above all, I didn’t want to show the enemy too much of what I was capable of. I had a feeling that someday soon I would have to battle the boss of those monsters in the floating fortress.

“For now, try blasting them normally,” I told Rushia.

As she released Fire Storm, Yukino unleashed a Fireball.

The ogres stopped moving almost simultaneously, hiding behind their shields. I wasn’t sure whether they’d gotten a command from behind or not, but in any case, it was a beautifully coordinated action.

Then, a violent explosion shook the ground.

When the smoke cleared, not a single ogre had fallen. The three-meter-tall giants, still in an orderly formation, resumed their advance as one body.

“Hmm, no good. Rushia, try Dread Fire.”

“Got it!”

Dread Fire, a Rank 6 fire spell, created a special flame that instilled fear in those who saw it. We were all under the effect of Clear Mind, so we would be fine.

To my delight, the ogres' movements became terribly erratic the moment they glimpsed the ominously flickering flame.

"It worked!" I shouted. "I wonder if the Ogre Mage doesn't have a way to counteract mental magic."

On closer inspection, however, we saw that only a few ogres had been affected by the Dread Fire; some stepped out of line while others froze in place.

Still, the chaos caused by those few was enough to disrupt their organized behavior. Their orderly march became impossible, and their ranks were severely disrupted.

"Now's our chance!" Rushia exclaimed.

"All right. Rushia, Yukino-san, fire off three shots each for now," I quickly instructed. "Arisu and Keiko-san, charge in from the left and right. Strike immediately after the third shot."

We'll use the Wind Elemental for our defense.

"We're off!"

"All right, we're going!"

Arisu and Keiko darted off to the left and right, respectively. At the same time, Rushia and Yukino began casting fire spells in succession.

Unlike before, the ogres were unable to coordinate with each other. Despite their hurried attempts to raise their shields, they couldn't line up shoulder to shoulder with each other, leaving gaps. Two ogres took the brunt of the blast, and they fell to the ground.

At this point, Yukino announced, "I've leveled up."

We found ourselves in the familiar White Room.

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The cast in the White Room was quite different from usual. Apart from myself, Arisu, and Rushia, there were also Keiko and Yukino.

Yukino was looking at the Mia Vendor with curiosity.

“Oh, right. Yukino-san, you’re not Level 10 yet, are you?” I asked.

“N-No. I have just managed to reach... Level 9.”

For some reason, she was acting very formal toward me, her junior. On top of that, she was blatantly avoiding eye contact. Considering our history, I understood why things would be awkward, but it seemed like it was up to me to bridge the gap.

“I don’t mind, you know.” As I said this, I wrapped an arm around Arisu’s shoulder from behind. Arisu let out an “Eh-heh-hya” in a voice that was somehow both surprised and deflated.

“I want to focus more on what’s to come than what happened the other day,” I continued. “More than anything, I want to protect the people I care about. If you’re willing to help me with that, then I’ll fight for you too, Yukino-san.”

“Uh, um...” She blushed slightly, bringing a hand to her mouth. “S-So, you and Arisu... Are you two a couple?” Her eyes flitted between the two of us.

“Ah, yeah, we are,” I said with a nod.

She scrutinized us closely. “Um, you two have... already been intimate, right?”

Why is she asking that now? I wondered, but I kept a poker face as Arisu blushed fiercely and looked down.

This girl can’t lie, I thought. Well, it’s not like we’re trying to hide it anyway, so it’s fine.

“Well, it’s not anything bad!” I insisted. “It’s just that... after risking our lives together, the adrenaline rush and then spending a long time in the White Room together... we naturally became closer, I guess! Even in the senior class, there are so many couples. It’s amazing!”

“Ah, yeah, I suppose it is...”

It’s a common theme in war stories that emotions run high after battle. Maybe the need to become close with your comrades is a natural one in the circumstances.

Ah, speaking of which, I remember hearing about a military unit in ancient Greece or somewhere that was comprised solely of gay couples... Apparently,

they were incredibly strong. Which makes sense if they're all desperate to protect their lovers fighting beside them...

Bring it back, Kazu. Let's not get into the topic of homosexuality.

In our battles using the skill system, we didn't feel much of a gender gap. It might be quite acceptable to form a team with your lover, or rather, to find a lover within your team.

Yep, that's why it's okay for me to be in a relationship with both Arisu and Tamaki. I can't help it, can I? At this point, both Arisu and Tamaki are important to me. And Mia too, in a slightly different sense, is a very important person to me.

So, I've done nothing wrong. Self-justification complete.

Well, with that out of the way...

"For now, could we take a break?" Without waiting for anyone to answer, I took out the two bundles of wooden scrolls I'd received from Leen.

These were the scrolls that had information about the exclusive contract ceremony and another that supposedly had information about a high-ranking familiar that even Leen couldn't contract.

The White Room really is convenient for reading, isn't it?

Chapter 118: Exclusive Contract

It was a good thing I could read the characters on the wooden scrolls with Read Language. First, this is what it said about the exclusive contract:

- *An exclusive contract is a summoning contract that is made with a specific phantom beast that lives in a conceptual world called the Spirit World. There was no explanation about the Spirit World or phantom beasts. When I asked Rushia, she said she didn't know either.*
- *The magic to summon a contracted beast is the same as conventional summoning magic. You only need to change the species part to the corresponding individual. This was... a bit of a concern for me. The summoning magic I used didn't have any incantations. So, I immediately asked my laptop, and I found out that when casting the spell, I should add the name of the corresponding individual at the end and focus my thoughts on it. That part seemed to be especially important...*
- *An exclusive contract can be made with one summoner per phantom beast. One contractor can make contracts with multiple phantom beasts. If another summoner wants to contract with the same individual, the contract with the previous summoner needs to be terminated. Moreover, the death of the contractor is considered a termination of the contract.*
- *The death of a phantom beast that has made an exclusive contract is considered a contract termination, and the summoner can never summon this individual again. Re-contracting is also impossible. This meant that, like ordinary familiars, phantom beasts are still alive and well in the Spirit World even if they die in this world.*
- *If a phantom beast were to be killed, it might grow angry and express its discontent, saying, "I won't listen to you anymore since you used me in a way that led to my demise." It's crucial to note that they should not be employed as bait or sacrificial pawns.*

- *Depending on the summoner's skill level, they may not be capable of establishing an exclusive contract. Even if they are able to do so, the summoned individual's abilities may be downgraded. For instance, if the summoner holds a rank of 5, summoning a phantom beast with a rank of 7 would result in the beast's abilities being reduced to an equivalent of Rank 5.*

I put down the scroll, feeling I had grasped the concept for the most part. Regarding the contract ceremony, it sounded like one needed to inscribe ancient characters on the floor or the ground, and the contractor's blood was an important factor as well. Rushia seemed to know something about these ancient characters—as one would expect of a well-educated princess.

"I wonder if we can perform the exclusive contract ceremony in this classroom?" I pondered aloud.

"We should try a Q&A session," Rushia promptly responded.

Wow, seems like she knows even more about this White Room system than we do. Nonetheless, her idea was solid, and we decided to do just that.

Unfortunately, we soon found out that everything that happens within the White Room was reset once you returned to your original location. That included exclusive contracts.

"As expected, it's impossible," Keiko chuckled.

"So, Kazu-san," said Arisu, "about the phantom beast you borrowed from Leen-san..."

"Ah, you mean the wolf, right? It has a name—Phantom Wolf King Sha Lau."

Rushia's eyes widened. "I've heard of it," she said. "According to ancient legends, it's a big wolf that lives in the depths of the forest. They say it's either a thousand or ten thousand years old, and it's bigger than a horse."

"Tell me more!" I entreated her, eyes wide.

The tale Rushia shared sounded like a familiar fairy tale in our world, akin to stories like Kintaro or Momotaro.

The forest's ruler, Phantom Wolf King Sha Lau, nurtured and raised a human child who was abandoned in the forest. Sha Lau generously imparted his knowledge and wisdom to the young child, who, with the great wolf's guidance, eventually grew up, left the forest, and used the knowledge he'd gained to become the king of a country.

"So, he's like a wise guardian of the forest?" Arisu asked.

"Sounds like something you'd find in European mythology," Yukino said with a nod.

Rushia continued with her story, mentioning that Sha Lau appeared in another tale as well. This particular story revolved around a prolonged battle between a dragon and the great wolf, spanning years, decades, and even centuries. Amid this conflict, Sha Lau formed a bond of friendship with the dragon king, and the two joined forces to safeguard the world's peace.

"A friendship blossoming between a wolf and a dragon after a fierce battle..." Arisu said.

"It's quite romantic, and for a wolf to be on par with a dragon is truly remarkable," Yukino said admiringly.

"Do dragons actually exist in this world?" I asked.

"They're in all kinds of legends, usually as the beings at the pinnacle of creatures. In all those legends, they're also known as formidable monsters," said Rushia.

Ah, dragon monsters... I hope I never have to face one of them in combat.

"There's also a tale about a human hero who challenges Sha Lau," Rushia went on. "The legendary great wolf turns away even the most invincible heroes."

However, Sha Lau recognized the hero's noble spirit and presented him with a cherished holy sword. The hero went on to use the power of the holy sword to defeat an evil witch and restore peace to the kingdom.

"That's the version of the story of Phantom Wolf King Sha Lau that I'm familiar with."

“It sounds like he’s incredibly powerful,” I said. I couldn’t help wanting to summon him...

“But depending on the strength of my summoning magic, he might be downgraded. No, even before that, there’s also a possibility that I won’t be able to form a contract with him at all.”

Now that I thought about it, Leen had mentioned that she couldn’t establish a contract with Sha Lau. That was why she’d entrusted him to me. Even objectively speaking, Leen was quite skilled. My summoning magic was at Rank 8, which I believed was higher than hers, so hopefully I could manage it.

“For now, if we’re going to form a contract, it’ll have to be after we finish this battle. It looks like it takes about an hour to prepare for the ceremony. If we go back to Leen’s place, she might be able to assist us.”

“That’s right. Drawing the diagram may take some time,” Rushia said. “With Leen’s experience and guidance, our chances of success will be much higher.”

It seems like the diagram doesn’t need to be perfectly precise, but Rushia’s unfamiliar with this type of work. While I can read characters using Read Language, I can’t accurately reproduce them in writing. I wonder if there’s a spell called Write Language? Nah, that would be far too convenient.

I figured I’d gathered all the information I could about exclusive contracts for the moment. All that remained was to eliminate the enemies at the original location. However, I told the group I wanted to rest a little longer first.

“You can indulge in some flirtation with Arisu-chan to your heart’s content,” Keiko said with a chuckle. “If you’re planning on taking it further than flirting, should I draw the curtains for you?”

“Oh, come on, don’t make it weird, please,” I groaned.

“Or perhaps you can do naughty stuff if both Tamaki-chan and Arisu-chan are involved?”

Ah, she dropped quite the bombshell!

By the delighted expression Keiko wore, I could tell she knew exactly what she was doing. It reminded me of the Tagamiya siblings.

“Huh? Um, I thought... Aren’t you dating Arisu-chan...?” Yukino cut in, her cheeks bright red as she looked for my reaction.

Uh... Ugh.

“Yuu-kun told me,” Keiko said. “Kazu-kun is dating Arisu-chan, Tamaki-chan, and Mia-chan—all three of them.”

“Mia’s different...” I surrendered with a sigh.

Well, since it’s come to this, I may as well lay everything out on the table. Better than leaving room for suspicious assumptions, especially for the sake of my mental state, and to prevent Arisu and Tamaki from facing undue suspicion later on. I haven’t explained the details to Rushia yet.

“First of all,” I began, “the reason I was able to level up immediately after the earthquake was because I intended to kill Shiba.”

Now that I’d personally killed Shiba, the question of whether I had murderous intent probably wasn’t a big issue. After all, I couldn’t imagine Yukino and Keiko sympathizing with someone who did as he pleased within the high school division.

So, I decided to disclose everything.

Digging a pitfall. Accidentally becoming Level 1. Meeting Arisu and working together toward liberating the Cultural Arts Center. Barely defeating the elites.

On the second day, I’d led the middle school students and liberated the girls’ dormitory and middle school building. There had been casualties in the process.

My heart had gradually worn down amid the brutal battles. All of that had reached a boiling point when I’d witnessed Shiba and Arisu having a secret meeting. Tamaki had come to my aid and saved me when I was on the brink of self-destruction.

Afterward, I’d headed to the high school division with Tamaki, met Yuuki, and charged into the orc unit to rescue Arisu.

I’d killed the General, then Shiba.

“Sounds like quite the adventure...” Yukino said admiringly once I’d finished recounting the events leading up to the second day. “It’s like you’re the hero of

a story. But I don't think even the protagonist of a typical story would be as busy as you."

I winced and forced a smile. Yes, I thought, *it was a time of intense focus. The moments shared between me, Arisu, Tamaki, and Mia... They were like months or even years condensed into a few days.*

Keiko *really* stirred the pot then. "So, today, on the third day, you and Mia-chan got closer?"

Wow, this lady is way too perceptive! Well, maybe she's just teasing me like this because she understands the situation.

"My relationship with Mia... It's like... It's hard to define, just like how you make jokes about important things and make it difficult to pin down how you feel," I said, smiling again. "I was just thinking, don't you act like this and ruin the mood when alone with Yuuki-senpai?"

"Uh-huh..."

Oh, Keiko-san seems upset.

Those words must have felt like a direct hit. Keiko moved to a corner of the room and sat down, resembling a student in PE class. She started to cry softly.

Hmm, looks like the Greater Ninja has a fragile spirit after all.

"That's not true. I want to have that kind of relationship too," she said through her tears. "But Yuu-kun is a gentleman, and I'm the older sister, so I feel like I have to take the lead... but I just end up getting embarrassed. After all, Yuu-kun is..."

"Um, I think you're a very attractive woman, Keiko-san!" Arisu said, rushing over in a panic to comfort Keiko.

As kind as ever, I thought.



“And besides, I’ve only been with Kazu-san in the White Room, so... so actually, we haven’t done anything yet!” Arisu added.

“Arisu, you don’t need to say that!” I cried.

She always does this when she gets flustered! This girl!

Realizing what she’d blurted out, Arisu let out a deflated yelp and started to dance around in a flurry.

Even so, she’s like a demon in battle... We’re all quite awkward individuals, aren’t we? Well... I guess I can’t speak for anyone else.

Just then, I noticed Rushia gazing at me intently. “What is it?” I asked.

“It’s interesting to see how people interpret things differently because of their cultural differences.”

“Just so you know, both Arisu and Keiko-san have their own unique and rather extreme ways of expressing themselves.”

Rushia gave a nod as she gently put a hand to her mouth. Then she turned to Yukino, who weakly wore a grin beside her. “In your general understanding, what does the concept of chastity mean?”

Agh! This conversation’s really veered off course!

Wishing I could be anywhere else in that moment, I pretended not to understand.

Chapter 119: Ogre Phalanx - Part 2

When Keiko had finally recovered, she tilted her head and said, “By the way, the Shiba kid from the earlier story... I don’t think I ever crossed paths with him... He’s the son of a board member, right?”

“Yeah, Saso Shiba. He was a first-year student, just like me,” I said. *But Shiba’s not here anymore*, I added silently. *I killed him.*

“That’s strange,” Keiko said, frowning. “There’s a rumor going around that Shiba’s alive. ‘Today, I saw Shiba,’ ‘I met Shiba...’ and so on.”

No way. No, that’s impossible, I thought as I vigorously shook my head.

After all, my familiar should have killed him properly. I’d even confirmed the corpse when I’d taken his gun. The face was crushed beyond recognition, but it was definitely his body.

It was his body... right?

Suddenly overwhelmed by dizziness, I grabbed my head and staggered. Startled, Arisu reached out a hand to keep me from falling.

“Wait a minute... I don’t feel too good... But no, that’s ridiculous...”

“Um, I also think Shiba is dead,” Keiko said nonchalantly. “But even so, the rumor has spread that Shiba’s alive. And because of that, it sounds like the old Shiba faction members have gained more momentum than I expected... In the end, I caused trouble for you in the middle school. I apologize.”

No, well, it’s fine now, I thought. *But what she’s saying is that someone’s spread a rumor that Shiba is alive? Why would they do that?*

Who knew why our opponents did what they did? It was times like this that I wished Shiki was here.

“Rushia, any insights?”

“I don’t fully understand the situation, but it may not be wise to be distracted by every piece of gossip.”

Ah, yes. You’re right. It’s better to dismiss such a ridiculous rumor and consider it meaningless.

A shot from the fortress cannon had scattered those who’d gathered in front of the Cultural Arts Center, and the orcs would attack those survivors soon. Only those who’d gathered at the CAC and those associated with Yuuki would seek refuge with the Light Tribe.

They had no means of escape—no way to survive. Regardless of the intentions behind the rumor, it didn’t matter.

What was more important was the ongoing battle, so we wrapped up our discussion about Shiba and reviewed our strategy once more.

“Thanks to Yukino-san, we have the ability to level up intermittently,” I said. “We can use that in our strategy.”

After a few more minutes of intense discussion, we left the White Room.

| YUKINO | |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| LEVEL: 9 | FIRE MAGIC: 5 |
| WATER MAGIC: 1 | SKILL POINTS: 2 |

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The battle was back in full swing—although for the ogres, it had never stopped. The monsters were still in chaos from the effects of the Dread Fire, while their front lines had suffered severe injuries from Rushia and Yukino’s fire magic.

Immediately, the ogres were thrown into even more chaos as Arisu attacked from the left and Keiko from the right.

The beasts had a greater reach with their swords due to their large bodies and long arms. However, Arisu wielded a silver spear, a magical weapon once used by the Legend Arachne. Similar to a magic staff, the spear could extend either its handle or its pulsating red-and-black spearhead.

We had conducted some experiments in the White Room earlier, and we'd found out that changing the reach of the spear consumed MP. Whether it was extending the silver handle or the red and black spearhead, each extension consumed 5 MP. Arisu was now at Level 23, which meant she had 230 MP. Even if she used healing magic, she could unleash multiple extended attacks in a row.

With a powerful shout, Arisu thrust her spear. The spearhead glowed an ominous red as the blade extended sharply through a gap in the ogre's shield, piercing its throat. The extension was brief, and the spearhead quickly retracted to its original length.

But in the meantime, Arisu had already closed in on the next ogre. The second monster, realizing that its companion in the front row had fallen, hastily raised its shield.

Too late. Arisu had already stepped inside the giant's reach.

Her next attack targeted its feet, where the raised shield couldn't reach. It was a surprise attack from a blind spot for a three-meter-tall monster.

The ogre, barefoot, sustained a severe injury on the top of its furry foot as the magic spear struck it. Blue blood splattered.

Suppressing a cry, the ogre attempted to retreat, further throwing the formation into chaos.

Arisu immediately delivered the next blow to the adjacent ogre, causing it to stagger as well. The confusion intensified. Taking advantage of this, Arisu moved and attacked with the agility of a dancer, targeting the lower body of one ogre after another.

Yeah, that's enough, I thought. There's no need to exert yourself further. Arisu only needed to create chaos. As for Keiko, well...

"What the hell is she doing?" I was totally dumbfounded.

“Well, um... She’s always been like this,” Yukino said, lowering her gaze apologetically.

Keiko’s fighting style was neither the forceful and reckless approach of Tamaki nor the calculated and technical style of Arisu. She cast Haste on herself and closed in on the enemy without any weapon in hand. Two ogres swung their swords, aiming to strike her simultaneously. Keiko, glowing red with the effects of Haste, skillfully sidestepped to evade their slashes.

As for the sword strikes...

“Deflection.”

She utilized the same reflective magic that I often employed to deflect the attack. The ogre whose strike she’d avoided stumbled forward, while the one whose attack was repelled by Deflection was pushed back. Both lost their balance, and their formation was disrupted.

Taking advantage of the opening, Keiko leaped gracefully. Using her body like a spring, she effortlessly sliced through the ogre’s shield arm with her white sword.

Blue blood flew around her, and the round shield danced through the air with the monster’s severed left arm still gripping it tightly.

In a fluid motion, Keiko drove her white sword into her opponent’s throat as it leaned forward. Its head sailed a meter or two from its body and rolled along the ground.

Not wasting a moment, Keiko pressed even deeper into enemy lines. Utilizing her smaller stature to her advantage, she weaved between the ogres and threw their formation into chaos.

No longer able to maintain control as a group, the ogres individually attempted to strike at Keiko, but their attacks only resulted in friendly fire.

Keiko delivered the finishing blow to another wounded ogre with her white sword. With each swing of it, blue blood sprayed, and the uttered death cries echoed in quick succession.

“Are you sure she doesn’t have any Swordsmanship skills?” I asked Yukino in awe.

“Yeah, she’s just practiced aikido,” Yukino answered.

“Aikido...?”

“That’s what Senpai says...” Yukino averted her gaze.

Ah, she doesn’t seem to believe it at all.

“Level-up,” Rushia stated as soon as Arisu and the fourth Ogre were defeated. Immediately after, we found ourselves in the White Room.

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“Keiko, your swordsmanship isn’t just a touch, right?” I asked her. “And besides, aikido is...”

“Aikido, yeah. That’s what my master said, so it’s aikido.”

Uh, no. I shook my head. *I mean, it’s thanks to you we were saved, but...*

“But the fact that the sword feels so light must be thanks to the Rank 3 Strength,” Keiko went on. “That’s why I can behead them so smoothly and efficiently.”

This girl always says such terrifying things! I wimpered to myself, watching Arisu and Yukino laugh with strained smiles. As always, it was hard to know exactly what Rushia was thinking, but she seemed genuinely impressed.

“But, Keiko, be careful, please?” Rushia pleaded. “The ogres are all confused now, but there should still be an uninjured mage and a captain in their rear.”

The lighthearted mood in the room was instantly dampened.

Of course, I thought. After all, this is just a preliminary battle.

| RUSHIA | |
|------------------|----------------------|
| LEVEL: 16 | FIRE MAGIC: 7 |
| | |

| |
|---------------------------------------|
| <div>SKILL POINTS:</div> <div>4</div> |
|---------------------------------------|

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A minute later, we were back on the battlefield. That moment—immediately after leaving the White Room—is the perfect time for a coordinated attack that utterly surprises the enemy. Rushia and Yukino unleashed successive attack spells, while Arisu and Keiko took cover behind the ogres.

Explosions erupted one after another. Arisu and the others used the ogres’ large bodies as shields against their own attack spells. The monsters’ fire resistance meant that a small blast would be no concern at all if one stood safely behind one of them.

Meanwhile, the already weak enemy formation crumbled under the relentless barrage of attacks.

Perfect timing.

Three ogres had fallen—nope, the fourth one had also collapsed. Immediately after, we found ourselves back in the White Room.

“That’s a level up for me,” Yukino announced. “The Ogres seem to be acting like they’re Level 6.”

Yukino had already leveled up twice in this battle, so her calculations were clearly accurate. After a brief discussion, we exited the White Room.

| YUKINO | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <div>LEVEL:</div> <div>10</div> | <div>FIRE MAGIC:</div> <div>5</div> |
| <div>WATER MAGIC:</div> <div>1</div> | <div>SKILL POINTS:</div> <div>4</div> |

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Once again, we launched a simultaneous attack with fire magic right after returning from the White Room. Keiko and Arisu adeptly utilized the ogres as shields. Despite their resistance, the intense fire was too much for them, and they fell one by one.

Keiko leveled up after toppling another two of them. She planned to invest her four Skill Points into enhancing her support magic, so she kept them saved. We coordinated our timing once more and left the White Room.

| KEIKO | |
|---------------------|----------------------|
| LEVEL: 19 | RECONNAISSANCE: 5 |
| SUPPORT MAGIC: 4 | MOVEMENT: 2 |
| STRENGTH: 3 | SKILL POINTS: 4 |

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So far, things had been going smoothly. However, that was only because the enemy’s top-tier creatures hadn’t been actively involved. I remained vigilant and signaled Rushia and Yukino, who were casting attack spells...

“Up there! Here it comes!” Rushia’s voice rang out sharply. We all looked up to see an ogre with blue skin rising into the sky.

The captain had entered the fray.

Chapter 120: Ogre Phalanx - Part 3

The Ogre Captain loomed before us, significantly larger in size than the others. Adorned in gleaming golden armor that caught the light of the setting sun, he wielded a massive silver hammer in both hands. Even a graze from that weapon would likely turn us into mincemeat.

To make matters worse, four more ogres had taken to the sky, all of them wielding staves—more Mage Ogres.

From behind the captain, the mages simultaneously swung their staves. Four streaks of white light surged toward us. Then, accompanied by a bone-chilling blast of wind, a hail of ice bullets the size of grains of rice rained down upon us.

We'd known the enemy would employ water magic for their attacks, so we had already applied Water Resistance to ourselves. Still, anticipating the timing to activate Deflection was difficult, so I instinctively shielded my eyes with my arms.

Moments later, ice shards bombarded my entire body. I felt a dull pain and the sensation of my skin being lacerated by the frigid air. Yet, it wasn't unbearable. Not even close to the flames of the Hellhound.

At least, that was the case for me. Rushia endured the assault as well.

Not everyone took it so well.

"No—aaagh! Help!" Yukino's high-pitched scream pierced the air. She collapsed to the ground, writhing in pain. Her body was covered in wounds.

It was only then that I realized my miscalculation. Her level was a mere 10, just over a third of mine at Level 28. If hit points increased with each level-up, then the impact I perceived would be only a third of what she experienced. No wonder my "slightly painful" was excruciating for her.

However, her intense screaming caught me off guard. I bit my lip tightly. Was there another way? Could I have done something differently?

“The captain’s closing in!” Rushia shouted.

That’s right. Now’s not the time for regrets.

“Elementals, intercept the captain with a double team!” I commanded the two Greater Wind Elementals that remained as our rear guard. The semi-transparent, female-shaped familiars rose in an arc, clashing fiercely with the imposing ogre—but even they seemed to struggle against the captain. As expected, this wouldn’t be an easy fight. The captain’s close-combat skills were probably equivalent to Rank 7. I realized it was highly likely that strength adjustments were also at play.

However, the elementals could buy us time. As long as we were able to stall, Arisu and the others could handle the minor ogres. *In that case, our next move should be...*

“Rushia, we need to stall,” I said.

“Right. Flame Bind.”

Rings of flame wrapped around the entire body of the Ogre Captain, momentarily restricting its movements. But before long, the mages behind the captain unleashed their magic in unison.

Four streaks of bluish-white light flew toward the captain. As the light beams made contact, the flaming ropes that bound the blue-skinned ogre vanished without a trace.

“Dispel... and it seems like some kind of combined magic!” I exclaimed in surprise.

I had expected a Dispel, but I hadn’t anticipated them stacking it for a power-up. Given that Flame Bind was a Rank 5 binding spell, I’d thought it would pose more of a challenge for them...

This might be bad.

The Ogre Captain and four Mage Ogres still hovered in the sky, looking just as imposing as ever. On our side, we had two Greater Wind Elementals, Rushia, and myself; Arisu and Keiko were still locked in melee combat with about

fifteen Ogre Phalanx soldiers, and it would've been difficult for them to shift their focus to our defense.

In fact, it was thanks to Arisu and Keiko's efforts to attract the horde of ogres that we'd managed to hold on thus far.

The mages had assumed we were primarily ground fighters and uncomfortable in the sky, so they'd launched their attacks from above. However, they'd underestimated the capabilities of my Greater Wind Elementals, which excelled in aerial combat. There was no way they could win in a dogfight against my familiars.

But our goal was to buy time. With my maximum MP of 280 and three Rank 8 familiars already summoned, each reducing my maximum MP by 64, I had reached my limit in terms of summoning. I'd also consumed a significant amount of MP by casting buffs.

Now it was Rushia's turn to unveil her trump card.

"Flame Bind." Rushia cast the spell once again. The ropes of fire surged toward the Ogre Captain, entwining his entire body.

The captain struggled violently, emitting a deafening roar that caused half of the flame ropes to vanish. However, the remaining flames still bound the captain, and the mages were now too preoccupied to come to his aid.

Seizing the opportunity, the two Wind Elementals charged forward. They struck the Ogre Captain with lightning and slashed him with blades of wind, gradually inflicting wounds on him.

The captain groaned and roared even louder, attempting to break free from the Flame Bind spell, but Rushia remained calm and cast the spell again.

"Flame Bind!"

Once again, the ropes of fire ensnared the captain, trapping him in a cycle of binding.

If we could keep wearing him down from here...

Just as I pondered this, the sound of leveling up echoed in my head. It seemed that Arisu and the others had succeeded in defeating the remaining Ogres.

In the White Room, Arisu hurried over to Yukino, who was in a disheveled state, and cast a succession of healing spells on her. Yukino was sobbing uncontrollably, well past caring about her appearance.

“I can’t take it anymore. I don’t want to do this; please help me,” she begged, collapsing to the ground. No matter how much she wiped her tears with her hands, they kept flowing. Her spirit had been completely shattered.

“To be honest, I underestimated what it would be like to fight alongside someone at Level 9. I didn’t fully consider our differences,” I admitted. It was my mistake. Rushia had remained relatively unscathed until she’d leveled up—which I’d expected from her as I knew elves had much higher pain tolerance than us.

I glanced at that princess of the fallen elf kingdom. She noticed and slowly shook her head. The expression said that she had no words for those who’d been suddenly thrust into this battle without proper preparation or resolve.

I knew how she felt. Rushia had been fully prepared from the beginning, while Yukino and Keiko had been caught off guard. Keiko embraced Yukino, who continued to cry with her head down, gently patting her back in an attempt to provide comfort.

“I’m sorry for dragging you into this reckless plan,” Keiko apologized sincerely. Yukino, still sobbing like a child, received her comforting embrace.

“Senpai, I’m sorry. I couldn’t meet your expectations, I...” Yukino’s voice trailed off.

“No, you did well. That’s more than enough,” Arisu assured her, meeting her gaze with a gentle expression. We exchanged a look, Arisu and I, feeling lost in this chaotic situation.

“Considering the confusion you’re experiencing, it’s clear this is your first time facing a situation like this,” Rushia murmured comfortingly. “Shiki must be a very competent commander.”

I nodded in agreement. Shiki’s competence had become even more apparent in this intense battle.

The realization hit me that not all the students at the Cultural Arts Center had the same level of resilience and mental strength. I hadn't anticipated that some would crumble under the pressure of battle. If this was part of Shiki's clever manipulation, then I couldn't help but admire her strategy even now. At the same time, it became clear that Yuuki hadn't quite unified the high school division, which had been in disarray until recently.

The high morale and preparedness exhibited by the CAC group stood in stark contrast. Why had things gone so differently with our group?

"But, from what I saw..." Rushia continued, "Kazu-san, it seems that many rely on you as a pillar of strength."

"That's also one of Shiki-san's strategies."

"I see. She truly is an excellent general."

A general, huh? But, yeah... If I think about it, I'm the field commander, and Shiki-san's acting as the general. Officially, I hold the leadership position, but in reality, the CAC group is a joint effort between the two of us. Orders flow from the top, and actions are carried out swiftly and decisively.

Still, the high school division remained in a state of utter chaos. Yukino may not have had a strong pillar of support to lean on mentally. Yuuki had taken charge that morning, establishing a minimal level of organization. However, the bond within their group might not have been as strong as ours in the CAC group. While this was understandable, it meant we couldn't rely on them as much as I would have liked to in the future.

Yeah, Shiki-san's abilities truly are exceptional. If she were here, maybe she could find a way to console Yukino-san. I, on the other hand, have no idea how to help a girl who's crying like this.

As I questioned my leadership qualifications, I realized that my current position felt like nothing more than a promotion granted by Shiki.

Once the situation stabilizes, I should focus on improving the organization and operation of the CAC group...

I let out a sigh. There was still a lot I needed to work on and improve.

Chapter 121: Ogre Phalanx - Part 4

“After we leave the White Room, I think it’ll be best if Yukino-san goes back to the main school building,” I said. “She has to get in touch with the others. Arisu, do you think you can handle the small ogres?”

“Yes, no problem! Also, Keiko-san was amazing...” Arisu marveled. “Even when there were a ton of ogres around her, it was like she had eyes in the back of her head, the way she was dodging and reflecting their attacks. All I could do was run away and try not to be surrounded.”

“No, your reaction was normal. There was no need to overdo it, especially since the ogres were starting to recover from their confusion. Besides, Keiko-san’s tactics would only work against the captain. They were powerless against the Divine-grade soldiers. They just had different specialties.”

Keiko nodded in agreement. “That’s right. I’m just a woman who can only play with small fish.”

She really did things at her own pace—it was just that it was a fast pace.

“I understand...” Arisu said, but I could tell she was still confused. And no wonder—with her incredible skills, Keiko should have fared much better against Divine-grade monsters. But I knew if we all kept fighting together, Arisu would eventually understand.

“So, without overdoing it, keep the ogres distracted,” I said.

I wouldn’t tell her to defeat them. If we could take out the captain, that would turn the tide. And we had to win this battle, no matter what...

Keiko spent a while longer comforting Yukino. No one mentioned the faint smell of ammonia in the air. I was really glad that Mia wasn’t there—she would undoubtedly have failed to read the room.

I would have Yukino leave the party as soon as we left the White Room and returned to the main school building. The ogres would be too busy dealing with

us to have time to chase after her.

After a few minutes, she tried to speak up. “I’m sorry, um... I...”

“Enough, it’s okay. This was a tough battle, and you’ve already done a lot for us in the early stages, Yukino-san,” I clumsily reassured her. She managed to stop crying but still looked apologetic, head down. She may have been my upperclassman, but this just went to show that combat experience mattered much more than age at this point.

| KAZUHISA | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| LEVEL: 29 | SUPPORT MAGIC: 5 |
| SUMMONING MAGIC: 8 | SKILL POINTS: 7 |

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We left the White Room and went straight back into the battle. Yukino got to her feet and, though stumbling, rushed toward the main school building. When I saw that the ogres were completely ignoring her, a sense of relief washed over me.

Now, all that was left was to take care of the captain and the mages... The four mages were still at the mercy of the Wind Elementals, but two of them suddenly began a quick descent.

Tch, they noticed.

The mages had apparently devised a plan to distract the Wind Elementals with two of their own while the remaining two targeted our rear guard—in other words, me and Rushia. Frankly, I was glad we’d managed to get Yukino out of harm’s way, because from then on, we were going to take a whole lot of attack magic.

Sure enough, the two mages who’d landed on the ground launched a nonstop barrage of icy projectiles at us.

“Deflection!”

“Bright Shield!”

We got our defenses up just in time. Rushia and I each conjured a translucent shield and reflected one of the enemy’s ice attacks back at them. However, we had to brace ourselves for the next hail of frozen projectiles.

Still, we could endure this level of attack. In fact, it seemed like the mage who’d had its own ice shards reflected back at it was the one screaming in agony. Despite the ogres’ imposing size, they were quite sloppy.

I stole a quick look at Rushia, who had taken countless ice fragments alongside me. With blood trickling down her forehead, Rushia remained expressionless as she cast binding magic at the captain.

“Wow, Rushia, nothing shakes you,” I told her.

“Thanks, Kazu-san, that means a lot to me.”

Next, Rushia unleashed a Flame Javelin at the mages. The spear, wrapped in crimson flames, pierced one of the mages. But Rushia’s attack didn’t end there.

“I’ll take care of the front line.” She kicked off the ground, charging at the two mages standing on the land.

Hey, wait a second!

As she ran at them, Rushia drew her Bone Whip from her waist. It was a magical tool, a whip as hard as steel that became just as flexible as a real whip when mana was channeled through it.

Considering Rushia was a member of this world’s royal family, she had received proper training as a sword fighter. By the way, during the simulated battles in the White Room, Arisu and Tamaki had certified her to be around Rank 3 in skill.

Even though they were mages, our opponents were still ogres with muscular bodies standing three meters tall. I didn’t have the courage to charge at them head-on.

However, Rushia fearlessly faced the giants. As the Mage Ogre swung its staff down, she timed her move precisely.

“Bright Shield.”

Rushia’s Rank 7 fire spell created a shield of flames that lasted just for a moment, successfully blocking the Mage Ogre’s attack. Then she cracked her Bone Whip to deliver a cunning strike at the Mage Ogre’s feet. The mage hit by the whip let out a painful groan and sank to its knees.

“Explosion Box, Explosion Box, Explosion Box!”

Three black sphere-like objects about the size of baseballs appeared in front of Rushia, and she rolled them toward the immobilized ogre’s feet.



Explosion Box was a Rank 7 fire spell. Its effect was... well, obvious.

Rushia quickly distanced herself from the scene. The other Mage Ogre, which was kneeling beside the fallen ogre, stopped in its tracks and fired ice bullets at her.

“Fire Bullet.”

She was using a weak Rank 1 fire spell, but when it hit one of the black spheres, the Explosion Box detonated, setting off a chain reaction that shattered the massive monster’s body into pieces.

The Explosion Box was what we call a hand grenade or a landmine in our civilization’s language. Normally, it explodes after a specified countdown from activation or when subjected to a strong impact. However, rolling it on the ground wouldn’t trigger the explosion. That’s why Rushia used the Fire Bullet at the exact moment when the two Mage Ogres stopped moving.

The combined effect had allowed the explosion to break through their fire resistance, and Rushia had managed to eliminate both monsters with a single blow.

But now Rushia was breathing heavily. Her magic was almost exhausted.

Suddenly, we returned to the White Room to see that Arisu and Rushia had leveled up. We left quickly, as there was nothing to discuss.

| ARISU | |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| LEVEL: 24 | SPEARMANSHIP: 7 |
| HEALING MAGIC: 5 | SKILL POINTS: 5 |

| RUSHIA | |
|--------------|------------------|
| LEVEL: 17 | FIRE MAGIC: 7 |
| | |

| |
|----------------------|
| SKILL POINTS: |
| 6 |

※ ※ ※

The tide of the battle was beginning to turn. Even though Rushia’s MP was almost depleted, there were only two enemy mages left. However, this still wouldn’t be enough to match the power of the Greater Wind Elementals. The captain was putting up a good fight against the two Wind Elementals, but it didn’t seem like he could completely overcome them.

Keiko and Arisu steadily brought down the lower-level ogres, which transformed one by one into blue gems. For the Mage Ogres, each one yielded two blue gems. The number of ogres fighting Arisu and the rest was now only about ten. Wait, another one fell... It was at that moment that Keiko leveled up.

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In the White Room, Keiko smiled casually. “I think, hmm, I’ll probably increase my support magic,” she said, raising it to Rank 5. That meant she was now on par with me. This seemed like a wise move to me, as being able to use deflection spells on the front lines would give a significant tactical advantage.

| KEIKO | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| LEVEL: 20 | RECONNAISSANCE: 5 |
| SUPPORT MAGIC: 4 → 5 | MOVEMENT: 2 |
| STRENGTH: 3 | SKILL POINTS: 6 → 1 |

※ ※ ※

We left the White Room to see that the ogres had finally lost their will to fight. One after another, they were turning their backs and fleeing into the forest. Arisu and Keiko struck their defenseless backs, each taking down one. However...

“That’s enough,” I called, shaking my head. “Come back!”

I glanced up at the Ogre Captain, who was descending from the sky as if driven by a Wind Elemental. Now that it had lost the mage’s support, the captain must have realized it no longer held an advantage in the air.

Following their captain, the two mages, who were struggling against the other Wind Elemental, also descended to the ground. In a last-ditch effort, they launched a barrage of icy debris at Rushia and me, but their attack was too late.

“Flame Bind.”

Even as he charged toward me, Rushia’s spell, mustered with the last bit of her strength, immobilized the captain.

“Deflection.”

A thin, rainbow-colored, fan-shaped screen materialized in front of me, reflecting the icy debris.

Almost at the same time, Arisu and Keiko, who had scattered all the lower-grade creatures, attacked the captain. Even in his weakened state, the huge ogre was formidable. He took Arisu’s blow on his shoulder and still launched a counterattack against Keiko, but that was a mistake.

“Deflection.”

Keiko reflected his strike with perfect timing. The Captain Ogre’s silver hammer bounced back, smashing his own head. It was a fatal wound; the captain collapsed onto the ground, helpless.

Almost at the same time, my Deflection inflicted substantial damage on the two mages. As they staggered, my familiars dropped a retaliatory lightning strike.

The two mages cried out in agony as they crumbled to the ground.

Their fall came nearly simultaneously with the demise of their leader, the captain. As his body disappeared, four blue gems were left behind. At the end of the battle, Arisu, Rushia, and I leveled up.

Chapter 122: School Evacuation

“Finally... it’s over,” I muttered in the White Room. Exhaustion washed over me, and I collapsed on the spot. Ugh, I felt even more tired than usual.

“Hmm, Kazu’s comrades are always so competent. It’s nice not to have to worry about the little things,” Keiko said with a teasing grin.

What does she mean by... Ohhh.

“Tamaki and Mia were pretty discouraged at first. Especially during the elite battles,” I admitted. I left out the part about them wetting themselves. I might have said it if they were there, but I don’t like talking smack about people behind their backs.

“But they recovered fast, didn’t they?” Keiko prompted.

“Yeah, they did.” I’d had some trouble with Tamaki, but she’d gotten through it.

“Maybe she’s reached her limit,” Keiko suggested, likely referring to Yukino. I wondered about that too. Although I’d applied Clear Mind, it hadn’t been effective. Especially in situations like this, where the enemy’s mage was relentlessly launching magic attacks... It could wear one’s spirit thin.

“Well, we won, so... all’s well that ends well?” Arisu asked hesitantly. It sounded like something Tamaki might say. I understood she didn’t want me to speak ill of Yukino.

“No, Arisu-chan, this is when we need to figure out what happened and reflect on it so we can do better next time,” Keiko admonished.

“Aren’t those the kind of things upperclassmen think about, though?” Arisu asked.

“That’s exactly it. Yuu-kun is too lenient...” Keiko put a hand to her cheek and tilted her head in mock dismay. This girl, who seemed like she’d undergone

some sort of infernal training, was difficult to critique. It was as if she lived by the creed, “No pain, no gain.”

“By the way, did you notice that a separate ogre unit landed to the northeast of the upperclassmen?”

“I hadn’t,” I admitted. I’d been too focused on the battlefield. But Keiko explained that a unit of about ten ogres had landed in the direction where Tamaki and Mia had gone. There were also multiple units being dispatched to various parts of the mountain from the floating fortress. She was quite observant, even in the midst of battle.

“I noticed that too,” Rushia said, adding that she’d kept silent to avoid disturbing my concentration during the battle.

“Considering their combat abilities, Tamaki and Mia should be fine. They might even have an advantage over us, since we’re so reliant on fire magic,” Rushia analyzed.

I hoped she was right.

Once again, I understood the superb strategy behind Mia’s skill selection. This time, the lower-level ogres were around Level 6; we didn’t know the level of the mages, but the captain should have been under Level 20.

In terms of combat power, that wasn’t too bad. Still, it would’ve been easier if Mia were there.

“When the enemy as a whole has resistance, being able to attack with a different attribute is extremely important,” Rushia said, shaking her head. “Still, I think I should raise my fire magic this time.”

Rushia had leveled up, and her skill points had increased to 8, which meant she could finally upgrade her fire magic to Rank 8.

Incidentally, my skill points had increased to 9. At last, I could maximize my summoning magic to Rank 9.

Arisu’s skill points had also gone up to 7, but it seemed she wanted to prioritize spearmanship over healing magic. There were quite a few effective spells in Rank 6 Healing Magic, though...

“If this continues, I’ll be on par with Kazu-san’s familiars again...” she explained.

Ah, so that’s what she’s thinking about. Well, her exceptional battle senses are something my familiars would find hard to acquire. And Arisu feeling down because she thinks she’s not useful is kind of cute.

“You shouldn’t tease her,” Keiko laughed.

“I’m not!” I cried. *This girl is literally a mind reader.*

After a brief discussion, Arisu decided to save her skill points, aiming to raise her spearmanship to Rank 8 in the near future.

Keiko was a temporary addition to the team; our original party had consisted of three in the rear and only two in the front. It would certainly be reassuring to have Arisu’s melee combat ability improved. However, if there was a need to level up healing magic during battles, she wouldn’t hesitate to do so. We would adapt to the situation as necessary.

| KAZUHISA | |
|---------------------------|------------------------|
| LEVEL: 30 | SUPPORT MAGIC: 5 |
| SUMMONING MAGIC: 8 → 9 | SKILL POINTS: 9 → 0 |

| ARISU | |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| LEVEL: 25 | SPEARMANSHIP: 7 |
| HEALING MAGIC: 5 | SKILL POINTS: 7 |

| RUSHIA | |
|--------|-------------|
| LEVEL: | FIRE MAGIC: |

| | |
|-------------------------------|-------|
| 18 | 7 → 8 |
| SKILL POINTS: 8 → 0 | |

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Back at the schoolyard, now refreshingly free of ogres, I sent my familiars back with a Deportation spell. The pain I had forgotten about while fighting suddenly hit me hard. Both Rushia and I groaned, then looked at each other and shared a pained smile.

“We’re sore all over,” I said. “No wonder Yukino couldn’t handle it.”

“We’re much tougher, and it still hurts this much.”

Rushia was now Level 18, and I was Level 30. I could hardly imagine the kind of pain Yukino, at only around Level 10, had gone through. No wonder she couldn’t take any more.

Arisu rushed over to us and cast Heal. The pain vanished instantly. As always, this ability made us able to calmly expose ourselves to the enemy’s attack spells. Healing magic was truly great.

“You both seem to be okay,” Keiko said with a good-natured laugh.

Well, we’ve been through quite a few rough spots, I thought. Out loud, I said, “When I think about Mia’s arm getting ripped off, a little pain doesn’t seem so bad.”

“You know, something like that really hurts,” Keiko mused. I had to wonder, had she ever experienced having her arm torn away? With her, it was always hard to tell.

“Kazu, look there,” Arisu said, pointing toward the eastern sky. “Tamaki and the others are on their way back.”

I squinted, and sure enough, I could make out the forms of Tamaki and Mia flying toward us, accompanied by six senpai guys—all of them making a beeline for the main school building.

Once we'd healed our wounds, we decided to follow suit and head there as well. Luckily, the floating fortress hadn't sent any additional forces our way. Apparently, it was busy deploying ogre troops elsewhere...

Maybe they hadn't realized their initial forces had been decimated. Even if they had, there should be a brief lull before they launched a second wave.

We had to keep in mind that the enemy was strategizing as well. The fortress's main cannon was a source of concern. Rushia had assured us that it had never been fired in quick succession, but it felt dangerous to assume that it never would be. At least Keiko was keeping an eye on that cannon. She'd alert us if anything looked off.

We reunited with Tamaki and the others just outside the main school building. Tamaki sprinted over, her twin tails bobbing in the wind.

"Kazu! I found something super important."

"Hold that thought, Tamaki. Our priority should be to retreat to the World Tree."

"Oh... okay."

I patted her drooped head as we welcomed her and Mia back into our ranks.

Inside the main school building, the first classroom held an awe-inspiring sight: a pale blue circle of light three meters wide was materializing. Only Yuuki was there to greet us; the rest of the team had already passed through.

Perched in the center of the teleportation gate was one of Leen's hawk familiars, standing rigidly as if on guard.

All of us—including Tamaki, Mia, and the six high schoolers they had with them—entered the classroom with a cacophony of footsteps. The hawk perched in the center nodded in acknowledgment.

"Step into the teleportation gate immediately," the hawk instructed in Leen's voice. The boys Mia had brought looked taken aback.

"So... we just step in here?" one student, brow furrowed in confusion, asked Yuuki. "We're not really sure what's going on..."

“No time. The details can wait... If you’re nervous, I’ll lead the way.” Yuuki strode into the teleportation gate. The second his foot made contact with the magic circle, he vanished in a burst of light.

The students with Tamaki inhaled sharply. “O-Okay,” one of them stammered, cautiously stepping into the teleportation gate...

Just like Yuuki, he disappeared. The other five seemed to steel themselves, each in turn stepping into the teleportation gate and vanishing.

“But... is that hawk casting a spell?” one of the boys wondered aloud.

“Yeah, it’s a familiar serving as a conduit for the caster on the other side,” I clarified.

A third-year student, a hulking young man, nodded in comprehension...

For some inexplicable reason, an icy shiver ran down my spine. However, there was no time to wonder why before the boy unsheathed his sword, pointing its sharp end at the hawk familiar.

The room fell into a hushed silence.

Keiko was the first to spring into action. “No!” she cried, and like a blur, the Greater Ninja lunged at the sword-bearing youth.

Two of the other students barred her way, spears brandished and aimed at Keiko.

Wait, what’s going on? I thought in a panic. *What are these guys up to?*

“Deflection!” Keiko deflected one spear with a transparent shield, narrowly sidestepping another thrust while simultaneously slashing with her silver sword. A student’s arms, along with his spear, were abruptly severed and sent soaring through the air.

Blue blood erupted like a geyser.

Wait, it’s... blue?

That could only mean—

“Monsters! Doppelgangers!” Mia’s cry echoed through the room.

In that moment, all the pieces of the puzzling picture fell into place.

Yes, all the signs had been there, right under my nose.

The baffling existence of the Peace Faction.

The unusually pervasive monsters.

And finally... the persistent rumors of Shiba's continued existence.

It all made sense. The Shiba those students had claimed to see was one of these imposters, the doppelgangers. They'd been lying in wait, biding their time until the moment was ripe.

And that moment was now.

Even as the full scope of their machinations was finally dawning on me, the student who'd first brandished his sword—no, the doppelganger posing as a student—made his lunge for Leen's hawk.

But the familiar, still sustaining the teleportation gate, was immobilized.

We were standing a few paces away from the teleportation gate. Even if we sprinted, we wouldn't make it in time. The only one who could possibly get there was Keiko.

She whirled around, and our eyes locked.

"Go!" I commanded.

Three of the new boys had already crossed through the teleportation gate. They were likely doppelgangers as well. Someone had to sound the alarm.

If it were Yuki, he would've wavered. That fleeting hesitation would've proved fatal.

But Keiko was different. She understood her priorities.

"Yes!" she cried, pivoting to face forward. She'd made her decision. She would handle the situation on the other side of the gate rather than staying with us.

That's the mark of a Greater Ninja, I thought, unable to suppress a proud smile.

Just as Keiko stepped into the soft blue glow, the hawk was cleaved in two.

The second Keiko's form dissolved into the teleportation gate, the soft blue circle evaporated.

"Tamaki, Arisu. Capture one..."

At my orders, the two girls sprang into action... but the doppelgangers were grinning grotesquely at us.

One stepped into the path of Arisu's spear. Another lunged toward Tamaki's sword. They both chose to die, their last breaths expelled in unison.

All that remained were six blue gems, two from each doppelganger, scattered on the ground.

Chapter 123: A New Possibility

The Peace Faction—a pro-monster force among the People of Light that had attacked us. How could monsters and humans collaborate? Here lay the answer:

Doppelgangers.

These creatures were monsters masquerading as humans, infiltrating our ranks. This also explained the unsettling sight of a Peace Faction member living with a monster, or rather, being taken over by one, following Hagan's death.

It went something like this:

Doppelgangers—monsters—would infiltrate human societies, acting as spies or saboteurs. They negotiated, intimidated, or parasitized other monsters, growing their ranks. Occasionally, they engaged in active sabotage, like the assault against us.

They must have hidden their true identity from us humans until now out of extreme caution. They were probably biding their time then, waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike.

Yet, they'd willingly exposed themselves to sabotage the teleportation gate.

Was it fear of us that spurred them to act now?

It was a possibility. I wasn't sure when the doppelgangers had first emerged in this region. However, the rumors of Shiba's survival had begun circulating just that morning...

If they'd had contact with Shiba while he was still alive, could they have replaced some students as early as the day before?

But... I thought, this would've been long before the floating fortress arrived. Were they here from day one, acting independently from the orcs? Or did they arrive only today, teleporting in through the Globster?

Maybe we would never know.

But if the doppelgangers had infiltrated the student population, they would've gleaned information about the level-up mechanism from their unwitting classmates, who would have been in a state of shock. Kids who had just been normal people two days prior were now becoming infinitely more powerful just by defeating orcs.

And Tamaki had said she'd inadvertently disclosed details like our defeat of Mekish Grau to a doppelganger disguised as a student. Not that I could blame her.

Among the otherworlders who had grown at an exponential rate, especially those who had vanquished numerous monsters, there existed a formidable irregular force that had repelled even the divine soldiers, the monster army's trump cards.

They must have decided that it would be unwise to let such individuals align with the Light Tribe. And that's why they had risked exposing their identities in an attempt to restrain us. They had staked their lives and broken their initial strategy; all to eliminate us.

We were lucky to have gotten Keiko to the other side just before the teleportation gate was annihilated. If the three doppelgangers that had crossed over were allowed to run free...

The other students could have been in immense danger.

Or, if that faction had plotted in the shadows to assassinate Leen and even succeeded, both the CAC group and the high school group would be driven into a corner.

More than that, the situation of all the humans in this world would have become desperate.

In that sense, we'd managed to dodge the worst-case scenario. Instead, we found ourselves stranded in the mountainous region of the school, which had transformed into enemy territory.

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As the sun set, the five of us, cut off from Leen and the others, found refuge in the forest. In the enveloping darkness, I cast Night Sight on all of us. With this spell, at least we could navigate the nocturnal paths without the need for light.

A mere ten minutes after our confrontation with the doppelganger, a beam discharged from the floating fortress shattered the high school's main building with a single hit.

"Phew, that was close. If we had faltered, we would've been obliterated," Mia commented nonchalantly, giving her shoulders a slight shrug.

Rushia nodded, her demeanor just as cool as Mia's.

Arisu and Tamaki glanced up at me with apprehension in their eyes. Their response seemed more natural to me. After all, we were indeed in a precarious situation. But I didn't quite know what to say to them.

For now...

"Let's delve deeper into the forest. According to Keiko, there aren't many ogres on the other side of the mountain..."

Yet there was a chance that the floating fortress had dispatched ogre units to the other side of the mountain. We couldn't afford to lower our defenses.

"There's nothing we can do about that Azagralith character at this point," I added.

And that was the main issue, wasn't it? The power that surpassed the two divine-class entities we'd already dealt with that day, one of the executive officers of the Demon Lord's army—General Azagralith.

As long as such a creature was in the floating fortress, our only option was to flee. Thankfully, Azagralith seemed to be stationary in his castle for the time being. But if he took an interest in us...

The thought sent chills down my spine. *Hopefully, he'll remain content and complacent*, I thought.

Vigilant of potential attacks at all times, we began our trek toward the back of the mountain. Through the forest, plowing through the vegetation, we advanced in silence.

Anxiety gnawed at me, but I did my best not to let it show.

“Um, Kazu-san...”

“Hold on, Tamaki,” I whispered. “It’s not safe to talk in the forest. Let’s talk later.”

I didn’t want to take any risks; even the thought of an ogre launching a preemptive attack in a forest with such poor visibility made my heart race.

If it were an orc, we could at least withstand an initial attack. But the raw power of a three-meter-tall ogre, the destructive force it could deliver, was something else entirely.

However, that was only if we were caught off guard. If we spotted the enemy first, it wouldn’t be an issue.

That’s why we needed to move stealthily.

In fact, an ogre unit did happen to cross our path about half an hour later, so we chose to annihilate them. After taking down around seven low-rank ogres, Tamaki and Rushia leveled up simultaneously.

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In the White Room, I discovered that Tamaki had advanced to Level 25 and Mia to Level 24.

They told me they had faced a group of ogres when they’d helped the high school students who’d been replaced by doppelgangers.

Ten low-rank ogres led by one mage. That’s quite a formidable force.

Well, as long as Mia could restrain the mage and Tamaki could take down the underlings, they wouldn’t pose a threat.

Finally, as though she’d been waiting for this moment, Tamaki spoke up. “Kazu-san, this is important! Take a look!”

On the PC screen Tamaki pointed at was a display of her status. When I looked more closely, I saw there was an issue with the skills column. The text “Swordsmanship: 9” was in red, and when she clicked on it...

A sub-window titled “Derived Skills” popped up.

I swallowed hard. “This is...”

“Yeah! It’s amazing, right?”

“Yes, it’s quite remarkable,” I responded, my eyes glued to the screen. I was about to ask Tamaki why she hadn’t brought it up earlier, but I caught myself. The revelation was beyond comprehension, hence her hesitation to mention it until now.

“This could be our next opportunity...” I breathed.

Derived skills.

The new window on the computer screen held our undivided attention as we sought clarification through the FAQ feature.

To begin with, the derived skills sub-window only appeared for those skills at Rank 9 or higher.

As of then, my Summoning Magic skill and Tamaki’s Swordsmanship were at Rank 9—which was why Tamaki had discovered this feature before the rest of us.

In the sub-window next to the now red word Swordsmanship, a single term was written: “Heavy Swordsmanship.” The text was grayed out, however. Hovering over it with the cursor revealed the requirements for this skill: Strength.

On my screen, a similar sub-window opened next to my summoning magic. The term displayed there was “Enhanced Summoning.”

In the FAQ, we learned that derived skills served to further augment Rank 9 skills. By achieving Rank 9 in two skills and investing skill points into the derived skill, one could acquire even greater power.

“So, it’s like advanced skills. Effectively, these would be Rank 10 and above...” I thought over the implications. This was the mechanism designed to tackle threats like Azagralith or even the Demon King himself, beings far superior to Divine-grade monsters like Mekish Grau.

The dilemma now, however, was how to level up from this point forward.

Despite having the highest level among the group, I was only Level 30. To acquire a derived skill, I would need to reach at least Level 45 and possess two skills ranked at 9.

Moreover, the power that this derived skill, “Enhanced Summoning,” might hold was unclear. For all I knew, it would be better to focus on enhancing other skills to increase our overall strength...

“You lucked out, Tamaki,” I said, shaking my head.

“Eh, what? Are you teasing me? Kazu-san, can I get upset?”

“No, I don’t mean it that way! From ‘Heavy Swordsmanship,’ it’s obvious your sword’s power will increase. That’ll definitely be a valuable skill for the battles to come.”

I patted Tamaki’s head as she playfully sulked and smiled. Considering Tamaki’s Strength was only at 1, she might have aimed to increase other skills to unlock different derived skills.

“We’ve almost settled on our two Rank 9 skills...” Arisu commented.

“We need to think carefully about Rushia-san’s second skill,” I said.

“I’ve only got fire magic so far,” Rushia commented.

There were numerous aspects we needed to discuss, not the least of which was our survival strategy for the next day or two.

“About tonight’s plan...” I began. “Let’s find a safe place to rest right now. With Summon Fortress, we can make a safe haven and have familiars on watch. We should be able to rest without concern.”

Summon Fortress was a Rank 9 summoning spell that created a durable fortress. There were various templates for the fortress, and I planned to summon one that was small and camouflaged well with our surroundings. There were even templates that could be joined together to form a larger fortress. With those, we could make ourselves a truly formidable base. However, considering that would consume around 1,000 MP, it wasn’t a viable option at that point.

“We need to sleep as soon as possible, get up early tomorrow, and hunt ogres,” I continued. “If Azagralith comes near, we run. If the Floating Fortress notices us, we run. All while continuing to level up...”

“Wait a sec, Kazu,” Mia interjected. “Even if we were to level up quite a bit, even if we exterminated *all* the Ogres in the fortress, we wouldn’t reach Level 45. Obtaining a derived skill and defeating Azagralith is beyond our reach...”

“Are you rushing things?” Rushia asked. “We don’t even know Azagralith’s strength yet.”

I averted my gaze, biting my lip. Their words hit me like a cold shower. But I knew Rushia and Mia were voicing those concerns out of worry for me, so I didn’t harbor any resentment...

Still, I felt pathetic. I was about to lead everyone into a very reckless gamble.

“Incidentally, Kazu, defeating an ogre gives the experience equivalent to six orcs... For a five-member party to get to Level 45, we need to vanquish 684 Ogres,” Mia said as she calculated on a handheld device that I was surprised to realize she’d been toting around in her backpack. “It’s impossible, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, you’re right... I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking straight,” I said.

“Hmm.” Mia puffed out her chest and extended her hand toward my head. As she was a tad short, I had to lower my head to let her pat it.

She then cradled my head with both hands and pressed it against her chest.



“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Trying to console you with my bosom.”

Regrettably, rubbing a flat board doesn't provide much comfort.

“Um, I appreciate the thought,” I said.

“That hurts my feelings!”

“What do you expect me to do?”

Looking over, I saw Arisu and Tamaki giggling.

So, that's what's happening, I thought. Mia is joking to gloss over my misstep.

When I gazed at Mia, conceding defeat, she cocked her head, an inscrutable look on her face, as she muttered, “That's odd. Kazu should be more smitten with me.”

She really is an oddball.

Chapter 124: The End of the Third Day

Regardless, it was a relief that our spirits were still relatively high, even though we were stuck in hostile territory, unsure of what tomorrow would bring. Granted, it felt like we'd been in such a situation for the past three days... but this was particularly brutal. Just the five of us, without any allies, facing an enemy stronger than ever before.

Above all, if we're unable to take part in tomorrow's battle, which will determine the fate of the world...

"Kazu, we'll find a way!" Tamaki assured me.

"Exactly," Arisu affirmed. "If we put our heads together, we'll for sure come up with a good plan. Come over here and lean on us more."

Tamaki and Arisu took turns patting my shoulders and hugging me tightly. Rushia, for good measure, also gave me a snug embrace.

"Um, you don't have to force yourself..." I said.

"No, I wanted to give it a try," Rushia replied.

The princess of the fallen kingdom patted the back of my head while holding it. Rushia's chest was larger than Tamaki's but smaller than Arisu's.

After that, we held a strategy meeting. Various suggestions were proposed, and a multitude of counterarguments arose.

"I swiped this from my brother. Will it be useful?" Mia pulled out from her backpack a few sheets of notepad paper—a list, I saw, written in meticulous, careful handwriting, of where specific materials were stored.

"Is this... from Yuuki-senpai?"

Mia nodded. "When he went to look for students, he said it might come in handy..."

Did he know that we might need to make use of the resources around us? He's either overly cautious or has utter faith in Mia...

"It'll be a great help," I said gratefully. "We should investigate everything we can, in case it comes in handy."

"It looks like they've done quite a bit of rearranging, so it may be worthwhile to inspect facilities that seem superfluous," said Yuuki.

Rearranging? What's he thinking? He must have some distasteful plot in mind.

As I continued to peruse the notebook sheets, Yuuki's intentions dawned on me.

Ah... I see... But then, to implement this here...

We talked for a while longer, taking several breaks, before we'd solidified a basic plan. I'm unsure how much time passed; though we didn't feel hunger in that space, I do know we used Summon Feast three times to alter our moods.

During each feast, Rushia indulged her sweet tooth. Her cheeks were so packed with cake that she resembled a hamster. One time, our eyes met, and her face turned beet red. She didn't utter a word, but a piece of chocolate clung to her cheek.

"Got a gluttonous side, huh... Cunning..."

"You said it, Kazu-san. I'm just a simple soldier now; there's no need for me to mind dining etiquette!"

The princess of a fallen kingdom puffed out her chest with pride.

Hey, I didn't mean that you should binge on cake and risk gaining weight... I thought.

"Is it... not acceptable?" she asked, uncertain.

"Well, no matter how much you eat in this room, you won't gain weight in reality... so it should be okay."

"Kazu-san, you're a good person," said Rushia. Her expression didn't change much, but her eyes narrowed slightly. She seemed to be content.

Arisu, ever thoughtful, wiped Rushia-chan's mouth with a napkin.

“All right, let’s get out of here,” I suggested.

Everyone nodded readily. We decided to hold onto Tamaki-chan’s Skill Points for the time being. I believed improving her Strength would be a solid choice, but we would reconsider after we’d made some progress the next day.

| TAMAKI | |
|----------------|---------------------|
| LEVEL: 25 | SWORDSMANSHIP: 9 |
| STRENGTH: 1 | SKILL POINTS: 4 |

| RUSHIA | |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| LEVEL: 19 | FIRE MAGIC: 88 |
| SKILL POINTS: 2 | |

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From there, we pressed deeper into the forest, where the orcs and the ogres launched a coordinated attack that proved quite annoying.

But we vanquished four ogres, two bees, two archer orcs, and seven regular orcs. Meanwhile, Mia leveled up to 25.

| MIA | |
|------------------|--------------------|
| LEVEL: 25 | EARTH MAGIC: 4 |
| WIND MAGIC: 8 | SKILL POINTS: 4 |

After about an hour, we finally made it through the monster-infested area and emerged on the opposite side of the mountain—which we thought would be safe, as Keiko had told us there were rarely orcs there.

However, since bears had been sighted and the circumstances had shifted since the day before, we couldn't be certain...

In any case, we began to scout for an appropriate campsite. A location with a precipitous cliff behind and dense foliage around would be perfect, and thanks to our night vision, we found just such a place without much difficulty.

Using Summon Fortress, I erected a camouflaged shelter. At a cursory glance, it was no more than a dense thicket, but once you passed through the entrance, you found yourself in a two-story, wooden cottage with five rooms and a kitchen. There was a fireplace in the living room, but no fire was lit.

We were also pleased to find that no light seeped outside even when the lights were turned on in all the rooms, and we knew that no noise would be audible from the outside. On the downside, there were no windows.

“I'll summon four wolf familiars to keep watch outside,” I said.

So, there we were. In one of the rooms on the second floor, Rushia and I began the ceremony. Rushia drew the magic circle with a specific pattern on the floor, and I began the ritual according to the scroll.

“It feels like black magic! Kazu-san, you're like a villain!” Tamaki-chan appeared thrilled and delighted by this fact.

The ceremony was successful. I formed an exclusive contract with the phantom beast that appeared, and we decided to test out the specifics the next day.

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Next, we relished a lavish dinner courtesy of Summon Feast, and Rushia once again consumed a considerable amount of cake.

“You really like that, don't you?” I asked.

“It feels like a dream to have this many sweets.”

“Didn’t you have stuff like this back in your kingdom, Rushia-chan?”

“We might have, but I never saw any.”

Rushia went on to describe how she’d been brought up, which sounded exceptionally Spartan. Apparently, she’d been undergoing austere living and combat training since her youth. Even as we conversed, Rushia continued to devour her cake like it would be her last.

“By any chance, did you like the chocolate bars too?”

“Yes, they were really wonderful! Are there perhaps... any left?”

“I’m afraid they must have been blown away along with the Cultural Arts Center building.”

Rushia didn’t show much of a reaction, simply saying, “I see.” But I could tell she was genuinely disappointed. I felt like I was getting better at reading her emotions.

“Hmm, it’s unfair,” I muttered. “A quiet, big-eating elf... Too many attributes.”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about anymore.”

Well, to be precise, it seemed more like *I understand, but I don’t want to admit it.*

That girl...

“Mia-chan, can you tell me what you’re feeling uncomfortable about?” I asked, turning my attention to her.

“I can, but before that, I want to rub your ears...”

I landed a playful punch on Mia-chan’s head to calm her down.

“You can touch my ears as much as you want,” Rushia said.

“Rushia-chan, she’s just joking. Don’t worry about it.”

“Ah...” Mia glared at me with teary eyes.

“I knew you had ulterior motives for those tears.”

“Tch.” Mia clicked her tongue and shook her head.





We all took turns bathing in the provided tub. It was a shame there wasn't enough space for mixed bathing...

We briefly discussed whether to split up into two rooms, but in the end we decided it would be safest to pull the sleeping bags into the largest room on the second floor and all lie down together. There was always the chance the building could be ambushed like that morning.

"You can do lewd things, you know?" Mia-chan said as she approached me with a suggestive smirk on her face. She had just taken a bath and was wearing an oversized shirt. I gave her a smack on the forehead.

But the very person who said such a thing, as soon as the lights were off, fell into a deep sleep almost instantly.

Well, we're all tired today, aren't we?

Despite this, I found myself wide awake and unable to sleep. Pretending to get up to go to the restroom, I went downstairs and went outside.

Since I was the one who'd cast Alert Territory, I knew precisely which lines not to cross to avoid triggering a response. As I circled the cottage, the small pack of wolf familiars came over to me. When I stroked their heads, they responded with contented whines. Such lovable creatures.

By the way, there was also one Invisible Scout. It was on the roof, vigilantly observing all directions. I figured our defenses were foolproof.

Just then, I heard the cottage door open, and I saw the silhouette of someone following me outside—black hair shining silver in the moonlight.

It was Arisu.

"I couldn't sleep," she confessed with an askew expression as she walked over to me. Soon we found ourselves sitting side by side on the grass, leaning against the wall of the cottage. Looking up, we saw two moons in the sky, both nearing fullness.

“The world might end tomorrow...” Arisu murmured. “I can’t believe it.”

She rested her head on my shoulder, and I could feel her body trembling slightly. It was then that I understood her sleeplessness wasn’t the result of the day’s thrilling battles.

She was frightened and anxious about all the unknowns of tomorrow. Tomorrow, the humans of this world were scheduled to make their final desperate stand. We, however, cut off even from their communication channels, could only hide in the woods on the continent’s outskirts.

It’s only natural to be scared at a time like this, I thought. *Still...*

“It’ll be okay. No, we’ll *make* it okay. We’ll find a way,” I assured Arisu. My words had no guarantee of coming true, but they were what I needed to say right then. “So, Arisu, stay with me. As long as you’re there to back me up, I can fight no matter what.”

Arisu raised her head to look at me, and I tried to return her gaze with a confident grin.

I could feel my heart hammering inside my chest as I worried she might see through my pretense of bravery. Still, I wanted to appear strong before her.

Arisu... She offered a slight smile, her hand reaching behind my neck and pulling me into a kiss.

“Yes. I’ll always be by your side, Kazu-san.”

After the lingering kiss, Arisu looked straight into my eyes and declared, “Because I believe in you.”

In the glow of the moonlight, our shadows merged into one.



Arisu and I remained close, wrapped in a single white cloth that I had summoned using my conjuration magic, our bare bodies hidden underneath. Just feeling Arisu's warmth brought a certain calmness to my mind.

As she gazed up at me, the anxiety that had marked her face just moments before had disappeared without a trace. I guessed she was feeling the same relief as I was.

"If you're with me, I can fight no matter where I am," she asserted.

"I feel the same, Arisu. If you're with me, I feel like I can face anything."

We shared another kiss, one among many we'd lost count of.

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And thus, our third day in this world concluded. It had been a day filled with turmoil.

The fourth day dawned—the prophesied day of the apocalypse.

***To be continued in Another World Survival: Min-Maxing My Support and
Summoning Magic Vol. 6***

Side Story: Keiko Isogaki's Perpetual Confusion Between Right and Left

My name is Keiko Isogaki. I'm a nineteen-year-old university student who embodies the very essence of "normal." Trust me when I say, I'm as regular as they come. During my time at university, I've mostly kept to myself.

However, when I returned to my old high school for a little personal errand, I found out something extraordinary had happened. The entire school, along with the surrounding mountains, had been mysteriously transported to another world. Suddenly, I found myself smack in the middle of a survival situation.

I mean, how could this not trouble me?

To add to my predicament, monstrous creatures vaguely resembling pigs began attacking us. I recognized them as orcs from a somewhat risqué book I'd once spotted in Yuu-kun's possession. When one attacked me, I instinctively snapped its neck, killing it instantly. A triumphant fanfare echoed in my head right after.

The next thing I knew, I was in a room with stark white walls.

Following my master's teachings, I observed this peculiar phenomenon closely. He had taught me to train diligently to resist magic, considering I have a natural inclination toward it. Even when he left to confront some mainland demons and returned to Hong Kong, I continued to follow his teachings and train. That's why I'd managed to kill an orc with my bare hands. But remember, I'm just a regular university student.

There was a computer in the room, and I set about learning as much as I could. The computer was responsive, and I spent what felt like an entire day and night bombarding it with questions. Oddly enough, in this place, there was no sense of time, and I never felt hungry.

Once I'd gathered enough information, I acquired the skills of reconnaissance and support magic. Finally, I was confident I could take an orc one-on-one. However, an ambush or a horde of enemies could pose a challenge. So, using the Reconnaissance skill to keep one step ahead seemed like the smart thing to do.

I opted to learn support magic in order to take down enemies more efficiently. After all, I reasoned, orcs may not be the only creatures out to get me. Given that I might face foes beyond my karate and aikido capabilities (my master had advised me to prepare for such scenarios), support magic seemed like a great choice, as it could enhance my physical abilities.

I felt like I had everything under control. I was sure Yuu-kun was out there somewhere, leveling up just like I was. There was no way he'd have been defeated by creatures of this level. All I could think to do next was find him as quickly as possible.

Returning to where I'd slain the orc, I picked up the red gem that it had left behind, as well as its hand axe. I then set off through the forest toward the high school with a spring in my step, looking forward to the surprise on Yuu-kun's face.

And then I get lost. Hopelessly, frustratingly lost.

As I meandered through the mountains, a few orcs crossed my path and met their end. Suddenly, I found myself confronting a bear at the rear of the school's mountain. *Wait a second, where did the orcs go?* This was becoming quite a predicament.

I let out a sigh as I split the bear's head open with the axe, a sense of weariness creeping over me.

That night, I made camp at the back of the mountain. *I would kill for a bath right now*, I thought. *Yuu-kun, where are you?!*

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The following day, I continued my aimless trek around the back of the mountain.

By evening, I stumbled upon a hot spring. There was a wild boar lingering nearby, but I released a surge of violent vibes, scaring it off and claiming the bath for myself. Ah, the relief was indescribable.

Just as I was emerging from the bath, feeling rejuvenated, a group of orcs launched an attack. Thanks to my Reconnaissance skill tree, I had already detected their approach and was able to take them down with relative ease.

The blue-skinned orc who led the group was notably stronger than his comrades. But with a few well-timed swings of my hand axe and the use of Deflection—Rank 3 support magic—he eventually stopped moving. He was tougher than the bear, but not by much.

Honestly, though, my master could have defeated him in seconds. I still had a lot to learn.

By the third day, I'd managed to reach the front of the school's mountain, thanks to the orc footprints guiding me.

Ah, a road! A sign of civilization!

As I stepped onto the mountain trail with a surge of excitement, a giant bee descended from the sky and launched a massive stinger straight at me. I activated Deflection in time, and the stinger—as big as a spear—pierced the bee instead, ending its life in an instant.

Hmm, that timing was a bit tricky. Now, which way is the high school?

As I stood contemplating my route, a group of my juniors from the track team appeared. Many of them were armed with swords and spears.

"Huh? Keiko-senpai? What are you doing here?"

"Hey, how are you guys doing?" I greeted the surprised kids with a cheerful wave. Then, I sensed an enemy presence approaching.

"Watch out! It's orcs!" I called out.

As I swiftly dealt with the enemies that had tried to ambush my juniors, they watched in amazement.

"Heh, aikido... It's strong, isn't it?" I quipped.

“That’s definitely not aikido, Senpai. Looks more like Chinese martial arts...”

“Huh? Didn’t I learn aikido?” I said, playing dumb. That was what my master had told me. According to him, our aikido included the use of spears and guns—it’s based on four thousand years of Chinese history.

“Senpai, isn’t aikido a Japanese martial art?”

“Details...”

“Huh... Well, okay.”

Anyway, I was lucky to have met up with my juniors. Some were so relieved to see me that they had started crying. As I comforted them, I asked for updates on the situation.

It seemed they had gone through quite a lot. For one thing, Yuu-kun had stepped up as a leader, keeping the high school division united. That surprised me; he usually shied away from the limelight, always saying things like, “A ninja must remain hidden.” I wondered what prompted this change.

Maybe his sister encouraged him? Yeah, that sounds likely.

But, just to be sure... If he’s been beguiled by another girl, I might have to administer a bit of punishment, right? Nah, probably not.

Yuu-kun was serious. Even if he was oblivious to my presence in this world, I was certain he would deal with girls in a sincere and straightforward manner. That’s what I loved about him.

“All right then, let’s go see my beloved Yuu-kun,” I said aloud.

My juniors looked shocked. Huh? Had I not mentioned that Yuu-kun and I were dating?

“Wait a minute! This is the first we’ve heard about you having a boyfriend, Senpai!”

Wow, that’s loud. If you yell like that, the orcs will come. See, a group of them, quite a large one at that, including two with blue skin, is attacking us.

Nonchalantly, I dealt with them. Another massacre, just like that!

Standing there, my axe dripping with blue blood, I laughed, only to see my juniors backing away. *What? I'm not intimidating. I'm your kind senior!*

"Anyway," I said, "let's go see Yuu-kun. Onward!"

"Senpai, you're going the wrong way! It's the other way! The other way!"

Huh?

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Upon entering the principal's office in the main high school building, I found Yuu-kun busy directing his comrades.

He was strikingly more handsome than the last time I'd seen him.

When he saw me, he gave a start, probably surprised that a university student like me had been swept up in this otherworldly journey. But he quickly recovered and was clearly thrilled to see me.

"What surprises me most is that you navigated here from the other side of the mountain all on your own," he said, impressed.

"Huh? *That's* what you're worried about? Not the mortal peril?"

"You wouldn't lose to something like an orc, Keiko."

Well, of course. I've never lost a sparring match to you, have I? I thought, but I kept it to myself.

"By the way, Yuu-kun. I heard on my way here..."

"What is it?"

"Is it true that you're having trouble because you're so popular with the girls?" I posed the question with a grin.

But for some reason, Yuu-kun started sweating profusely and backed away a few steps. Could he be feeling guilty?

"It's a misunderstanding! I've only had eyes for you, Keiko, and I've resisted every temptation!"

"But weren't some of the first-year students hugging you?"

A girl was sitting at a makeshift desk next to us, and at that moment she shook her head slightly, making her ponytail sway. All the while, she hadn't even lifted her eyes from the stack of papers she was working on.

He froze. *Uh-oh, he's in hot water.*

"Yuu-kun..."

"Wait! It's not what you think! I just..."

"Don't worry. I won't leave any lasting damage."

Just a little bit of pain, that's all.

He let out quite an impressive scream. The younger students in the room recoiled in surprise, but I was smiling the whole time.

At that very moment, the ponytailed girl who was engrossed in her paperwork stepped in to intervene. "We understand that you're stronger than Tagamiya-senpai. Could you help us, please?"

"Of course," I answered. "Leave everything to your big sister."

"Do you have any weaknesses?"

"There's nothing I can't handle. If you have me, we can do *anything*."

The ponytailed girl thought on that, her hand covering her mouth. "I see. In that case, perhaps it would be best if you acted alone..."

"W-Wait!" Yuuki cried. "It's not okay *at all* to leave Keiko on her own..."

"What do you mean, Tagamiya-kun?"

"Keiko... has a terrible sense of direction..."

Just then, Yuu-kun vomited blood and collapsed. *Did I overdo it a bit?*

"Is that true, Keiko-san?" the girl with the ponytail asked.

"Just a little bit," I answered. "I managed to make it here from the other side of the mountain. Even though it took me until this morning..."

She looked shocked. "Um, when did you get lost?"

"The day before yesterday, right after the transition, I walked from the northern path to the high school section... but for some reason, I ended up on

the other side of the mountain.”

“I understand. We’ll always assign you a partner or a guide... or a few.”

The girl pressed her hand to her forehead and groaned as if utterly exhausted. “For three days now, the forest’s been infested with bees. They’ve seen archer orcs in there. It would be very reassuring if someone with scouting skills could provide protection.”

“I see,” Keiko said. “So, you want big sis to guard and eliminate all the orcs and bees, right?”

“With the skill composition you just mentioned—reconnaissance, support magic, movement, and strength—it would be...”

“I mean, I was just thinking, but then I realized that I could just throw a hand axe. It’s pretty fun, you know?”

Ponytail Girl looked at Yuu-kun with a serious expression.

“Keiko can do it!” he asserted.

“I’m good at aikido,” I agreed.

“Huh. Aikido, you say?”

“With aikido, I can conquer anything!”

Flexing my arm to showcase my strength, I puffed out my chest confidently. However, this only elicited another groan from Ponytail Girl, who again placed a hand to her forehead. *Odd.*

“Tagamiya-kun, I’m starting to get a headache.”

“Give it up. Keiko surpasses us all,” Yuu-kun explained.

“Gotcha. It’s wise not to consider her an ordinary human.”

Despite their words, I didn’t exactly feel like I was being praised.

Ponytail Girl then declared, “I’ll summon the team who’ll go with Keiko-san,” before exiting the principal’s office. This left me and Yuu-kun in solitude.

From the shelf, he retrieved a large, white sword and offered it to me. “This weapon was seized from the mightiest breed of orc—a General Orc. It’s

incredibly sharp and easy to wield. This sword will protect you, Keiko.”

“Are you sure? I’m new here... I don’t want people to resent me for using a weapon like that.”

“Sure, but it was the middle school Cultural Arts Center group who vanquished the general. And frankly, not many here are advancing their sword skills since the kendo club has been pretty much wiped out.”

“In that case, I’d be honored to accept it. Tee-hee! A gift from Yuu-kun.”

“I’m sorry it’s not a more sentimental present.”

“Yuu-kun, just knowing that you’re looking out for me warms my heart.”

I embraced him, lightly running my fingers through his hair. Removing his mask, Yuu-kun gazed up at me.

“You must have had a tough time. I’m sorry for leaving you with all the responsibility, Yuu-kun,” I told him. “But from now on, I’ll be with you. You’re not alone anymore.”

“... If you keep saying stuff like that, I might shed a tear.”

Ah, there it was—a shift in Yuu-kun’s tone.

“It’s okay to cry,” I reassured him.

Yuu-kun managed a solitary smile, his voice barely above a whisper. “I can’t afford to,” he said. “We have a few eavesdroppers just outside.”

“I see. A leader always has to put on a brave front, huh?” I chuckled, wiping away Yuu-kun’s stray tears with my hand.

Yeah, I thought. He’s strong. Yuu-kun is definitely capable of leading everyone.

Promising myself that I would always remain beside Yuu-kun and support him, I hugged him tightly once again. I couldn’t help but press my chest against him. Perhaps I should just allow this tender moment to linger...

“Keiko...”

“What is it, Yuu-kun?”

“My back... It’s aching...”

Suddenly, Yuu-kun's face was a frothy mess.

Wait, what?

Ah, of course, I've been enhancing my Strength.

Afterword

Greetings, I'm Tsukasa Yokotsuka.

I present to you the fifth installment of *Another World Survival: Min-maxing My Support and Summoning Magic*.

With this volume, the third day finally draws to a close.

Most of the main characters I envisioned at the outset have now been introduced. The only thing left to do is advance the story—well, that's the plan at least. But plans, as we all know, are prone to change. Initially, I never intended for the second day to stretch this long...

The central theme for the third day is the expansion of the world. What started as a narrative contained within the confines of a mountain school (although rife with varied situations) has suddenly sprawled to engulf the entire world. Creating a pathway for this expansion was a challenge, as was introducing, in a sequential manner, the diverse individuals in this world and the kinds of battles being waged.

Also, we have the introduction of the god-soldier class and the formidable Four Heavenly Kings positioned above them, as well as the potential expansion of the skill system.

I had considered the expansion of the skill system from the very beginning, but I was doubtful whether I would be able to write it out fully. I'm relieved I was able to introduce it seamlessly.

However, many trials still await Kazu-kun and the others before they can reach Level 45...

What are the monsters? What is the impending crisis facing this world? What actions should Kazu-kun and his friends take?

Leaving these questions and numerous hints behind, the story will charge into the fourth day, marked by one intense battle after another.

Please look forward to the sixth volume.

Back Matter

Author: Tsukasa Yokotsuka While also serving as a fleet admiral in a certain ship-girl training browser game, I began writing when I decided to post stories on the “Shousetsuka ni Narou” self-publishing website, and here I am now! My admiral duties are currently on hold. (As of November 2015.)

Illustrator: Manyako (MANYAKO)

From Saga Prefecture, currently living in Tokyo. A freelance illustrator who primarily draws illustrations for books and games. (As of November 2015.)



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