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Another World Survival

Min-maxing
my Support and
Summoning
Magic

Author: Yokotsuka Tsukasa

Illustrator: Manyako

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I won't be
powerless
anymore



*Can I become
strong, too? Strong
like you?*



Every boy loves a girl in briefs, right?

Huh? What do you mean?

Umm, does seeing this make you happy?

First Year Highschooler

Yukariko Shiki

First Year Middle Schooler

Mia Tagamiya

Third Year Middle Schooler

Tamaki Ryūki

Third Year Middle Schooler

Arisu Shimoazono

Once we're out of the White Room and back to reality,
you'll go back to being a virgin again.
So basically, as long as we do it inside of this space,
every time will be your first.



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ANOTHER WORLD SURVIVAL

MIN-MAXING MY SUPPORT AND
SUMMONING MAGIC

STORY BY YOKOTSUKA TSUKASA

ART BY MANYAKO



Chapter 1: Pitfall

A Saturday afternoon at the end of September. School had come to an end for the day already.

A forest surrounded the path connecting the middle school building to the high school building, and one person stood somewhere within that forest about five or so minutes away from the path—me. Shovel in hand, mud caked on my clothing, I was digging a pitfall.

The hole in question stretched far deeper than a person's height. My digging went smoothly and efficiently for the most part, this being the third one that I'd dug. If you included the ones that I'd filled back in, this was my fifth time shoveling through dirt. I was more or less used to the process by now.

This should be deep enough. Satisfied, I thrust one of the spears that I'd prepared beforehand into the bottom of the pit. The spear itself wasn't anything special; it was just a piece of bamboo cut at an angle with a tapered point. However, I had made plenty. Over and over, I thrust the spears into the ground. Obstinate. Incessantly. My actions were on loop.

Once I was finished setting those up, I grabbed the rope that I'd tied to a nearby tree and climbed out of the pitfall. Next, I carefully covered the pitfall using fallen leaves and camouflaged the trap. There was not a moment to waste; time was of the essence. *He* was sure to be making his way here any moment now.

I wiped the sweat dripping from my forehead with my hand. Right now, it was about 2:30 p.m.

I had left behind a trail for him to follow—an invitation to come visit this spot. He wouldn't see it as one, though. He probably thought I'd made some sort of mistake, thinking, *He has to be hiding something important there. That's gotta be why he's been going over there every single day. He's been disappearing as soon as school ends because he's coming out here!*

In a sense, he wasn't wrong. I had been out here digging pitfalls this entire time, after all. The first pit that I'd dug was lacking, so I'd filled it back in. The next one wasn't too bad, but everything needed to be perfect for the plan, so once more I shoveled the earth back in. My next actions were something I could not afford to make a misstep in.

I was going to kill him. He would drop down into the pitfall, and I would put him six feet under.

However, simply falling onto the spears waiting below might not have been enough to kill him, so I'd prepped a few plastic canisters filled with gasoline in the shade of the nearby foliage. The moment he fell into the pit, I would pour the gasoline down on him from above and toss in a spark for the finisher.

He was rather tenacious, though. Perhaps even that would not be enough to end his life. With that in mind, I had prepared a bamboo spear over fifteen feet long. The spear's tip had been cut obliquely, sharpened even more than the ones in the pit. After sparking the gas, I would pierce him with the spear from above over and over until he fell still.

Just like that, my revenge would be complete. What would happen afterward? Hell if I cared. If things were left as is, someday he'd kill me first. The constant bullying and harassment would be the end of me. He'd erase my presence—and by extension, me—from society.

This person was not only powerful physically, but socially, too. His parents were influential individuals and were lining the school's pocketbooks. Sounds like some crap from a manga, doesn't it? Regrettably, this was the reality of the situation. There really was a student walking around our school who not even the teachers could touch, and the human scum in question had his eyes set on me.

Our school had adopted the boarding system, and to top it off, it was located deep in the mountain. A society closed off from the rest of the world, much like a village-bound society. And the chief of the village was dead set on making my life hell.

He had found his *raison d'être* in harassing and bullying me. The day where I wouldn't be able to take it anymore would eventually come... and that meant

getting rid of him before the reverse happened.

I held my breath and lied in wait. This may have been my imagination, but the noisy cries of the birds and insects that normally rang out through the forest were unusually silent today. A dead silence had descended in their stead.

It's about time. He'll be here any minute. The sound of leaves being crushed underfoot was growing louder. He was close.

A sense of tension overtook me, and I quietly took hold of my trembling hand. Droplets of sweat ran down my cheeks. While it was the end of September, this part of the mountain shouldn't have been very hot, yet my entire body was drenched in sweat and showed no signs of stopping. A consequence of having just completed a strenuous task, perhaps?

No... This has to be due to nervousness. Yeah, that's it. I'm just nervous. Who wouldn't be when they're about to kill someone? It's only natural for my limbs to be shaky when I think about that.

As I reasoned with myself, I felt my lips curl into a... sneer. I was going to kill that man; the very thought made my entire body shiver with joy. After all, this man was... *Ngh?!*

A violent tremor seized my body, and I placed my hand atop the fallen leaves in a panic to stop myself from falling over. I was dumbfounded. Had he heard the sound that I'd just made? *Actually, wait a sec. What even caused that...?*

The tree that I was leaning against was shaking. Branches were bending and leaves were swaying. An earthquake—a fairly large one to boot. The shaking reverberated through my body. The tremors were severe, but they didn't cause any real damage.

The shaking soon came to an end. The trees were unlikely to topple over, nor did a landslide seem likely to occur. I breathed a sigh of relief. *The pitfall isn't damaged either. That's good and all, but now there's another problem...*

"An earthquake!" I heard him cry out, accompanied a second later by the sound of his tongue clicking. *Shit, that's not good.* If he changed his mind and turned back now, then all of my hard work and preparations would be for nothing. Sure enough, his footsteps began to grow distant. Now I was the one

who wanted to click his tongue. I bit down hard on my lip and clenched both of my fists tightly.

No, I can't just give up yet. He may have just been worried about the possibility of a landslide and the like. He might return in a bit. I prayed to myself and continued to lie in wait.

How many minutes had passed? It felt as though I'd been waiting there for forever, though I imagined the actual time was closer to ten minutes.

The footsteps crunching the leaves reached my ears once more. *Hell yeah!* I clenched my hands tight, wishing I could pump a fist into the air. He was back... and this time, he was *going* to come this way.

The footsteps were growing louder. For some reason, they sounded heavier than before.

Well, whatever. I shrugged it off as my imagination and sharpened my senses. *His breathing seems a bit... off?* It was kind of rough, almost like a pig's snorting. Again my mind nagged me. *But why? Is he exhausted?* How pitiful. He was always so sure of himself, but in the end, he was a weakling.

I grinned deeply at the thought. *This is the perfect chance.* His exhaustion would ensure he'd be careless and neglect to check underfoot. *Like... so.* Something whooshed—the sound of him falling.

There was a sharp cry, followed by groans. I quickly rushed out from under the shade and ran up to the pitfall, plastic container in hand. Without even sparing so much as a glance as to what was within, I began pouring the gasoline inside. Time practically slowed down as the liquid poured out, making the amount seem endless. All that was left was the spark. I pulled out a lighter and lit a scrap of paper on fire, tossing it inside the hole. Screams echoed out—his agonized death throes. *Man, this feels good.*

Now, for the coup de grâce. I picked up the spear lying nearby and thrust it into the pit. With it still in my hands, I could feel it pierce his flesh as I pushed downward. His stomach was much softer than I expected. I kept my eyes closed as I stabbed him over and over and over, losing myself in the thrill of the moment.

Eventually, the resistance against my spear at the bottom of the pit ceased. I timidly opened my eyes and peered down into the hole, expecting to find his pierced corpse... but there was something far more disturbing in its stead.

A fat, bipedal creature similar to a pig was laying at the bottom of the pit, blood oozing from the numerous wounds across its entire body. The thing was clearly dead. Its skin was reddish-brown, and its body stout. To top it off, the creature's blood... was blue. Blue blood was pouring out from its entire body.

"Huh?" I sputtered like an idiot in complete shock. My bamboo spear fell to the ground. A gasp came from the pig-human thing right then. Its body began to... blur.

No, that wasn't quite right. The creature's body began to dissipate like mist. My eyes blinked in surprise. As I gaped at the pig-human below, its body vanished entirely...

You have leveled up!

A trumpet fanfare echoed inside my head as did an androgynous voice. Then everything became blindingly white.

Chapter 2: The White Room

I found myself standing in an all-white room once my vision cleared. The room's ceiling was shining similarly to a fluorescent light, making the room appear as bright as the middle of the day. This place seemed about as big as a classroom, though as far as desks and chairs went, there was only a single pair placed in the center of the room. Resting on top of the desk was a laptop computer. These three objects were the only things inside.

The computer was already booted up, and software that reminded me of Microsoft Excel was displayed across the entire screen. Nervous, I gingerly approached the desk and peered at the screen.

My name was written across the top of the screen above the labels "Level: 1" and "Skill Points: 2." Even further below was a table filled with terms such as "Swords," "Spears," "Magic," *etc.*

Stunned by the turn of events, I shook my head in confusion. Was someone playing a prank on me? What the hell *was* this? As perplexed as I felt, though, I wasn't entirely clueless as to what was displayed before me.

I could see a status table with terms similar to what you'd expect from a video game—specifically, it was *my* status table. Comparisons aside, values such as STR, INT, HP, and MP were not written anywhere.

From what I could tell, the only things made available for viewing in this gamelike world (or wherever I was) were my level and skills. There were plenty of games out there like this, some even choosing to disguise all of the characters' stat values by data masking.

So, what exactly does the stuff on this screen mean...? I pondered, my mind a disordered mess. *Level: 1 and Skill Points: 2... Does that mean I can pick two skills now? Or are the points required to pick skills different for each one...?*

Either way, I could set that stuff aside for now. Perhaps I shouldn't have dismissed it so casually, but I decided to leave it be. My top priority right now

was to find out what was happening.

“Hey!” I cried out. “Is someone out there? Could you please explain what this is and what these values mean?”

I wasn’t expecting a reply. I mean, who would? If the world was kind enough to offer an explanation to anyone who asked, then I’m sure I would’ve lived a much better life. At the very least, I might not have been so desperate to get out of my situation that I had tried to kill *him*.

Fortunately, the one reigning over this space appeared to be far kinder than the various people back in my world. A pop-up appeared on the screen with the words “Please ask any questions here” written inside, even being so considerate as to include a blank field.

※ ※ ※

I’m afraid I’ll have to omit the computer’s response to my initial question. Not only was the answer lengthy, but there was also more than a fair share of useless explanations mixed in as well. Not one to be discouraged, I continued to ask question after question, probing further with each one. I started with simple ones such as “What is this place?” and “Who are you?” before switching to more detailed ones, like “Who is the person who created this computer?” I even asked about the specifics of parts inside, like the CPU.



Most of my questions had the same response: **Cannot be answered**. That wasn't a problem; receiving no response was valuable in its own way. In the end, I'd managed to learn a lot about the situation.

This is not a dream.

With that said, the only person who could determine the veracity of someone's claim that they were speaking the truth was the person himself, so as far as I was concerned, maybe it *was* a dream. Between you and me, I was hoping for that.

You are the only person inside of this room.

A private room, essentially. The dormitory I'd been living in had three other inhabitants alongside me, so having a room to myself felt pretty nice.

You can stay in this room as long as you like until you use the computer and close the Skill Acquisition screen.

The moment I closed that window, I would be returned to the spot I was originally in—in my case, back in the forest. Quite the nifty piece of technology.

So long as you remain inside of the room, time will not pass outside of it.

No matter how many years passed in here, not even a tenth of a second would elapse outside. Not even the Room of Spirit and Time could keep up compared to this almost-frighteningly amazing technology... Hmm. At this point, it wasn't really technology anymore, huh? Ha ha...

You can only enter this room upon leveling up.

In order to come to this room a second time, I needed to level up again. To do that, I needed to defeat enemies and collect a certain amount of experience points.

Frankly, I didn't even know what to say anymore. Point is: this thing was incredible.

You will acquire skill points each time you level up.

You gained skills by spending skill points. Once spent, however, it was fundamentally impossible to refund skills for skill points. A slight inconvenience.

Skills are essentially a bonus being bestowed onto your current body.

Or so the pop-up told me. Basically, the instant that I obtained the Swordsmanship skill, I would become an expert swordsman. Well, “expert” might be exaggerating a bit. Skills had ranks to them, and Rank 1 didn’t seem to get you to the level of an expert. Unsurprisingly, raising these ranks took skill points.

One skill point is needed to reach Rank 1 in a skill.

Upgrading a skill from Rank 1 to Rank 2 took 2 skill points, and in similar fashion Rank 3 took 3 skill points. The maximum was reportedly Rank 9. Doing some quick calculations, that meant you would need to be Level 23 if you were going to max out one skill.

As your level raised, so will things like your endurance and mental fortitude.

Your HP and MP, I was willing to bet. This was growing more and more gamelike by the minute.

Skill ranks are purely bonuses bestowed to your *original* body.

To rephrase, let’s say I was an expert swordsman before being given any skills. I could *potentially* beat a person with a Rank 9 Swordsmanship skill. Unfortunately for me, the only sword I’d ever held in my life were the bamboo practice swords we used during gym practice.

There are six different types of weapon attack skills: Pugilist, Swordsmanship, Spearmanship, Stick-fighting, Marksmanship, and Throwing.

By acquiring the Swordsmanship skill, your form and posture and things like that would improve whenever you were holding a sword. Also, axes apparently fell under the Swordsmanship skill, too, for whatever reason. Perhaps the skill encompassed every weapon that could be used to cut?

In a similar vein, the Spearmanship skill wasn’t only limited to bamboo spears; any weapon that could be used to pierce would be affected by the skill. I got curious and asked what would happen if I used a shovel to fight and received a

response along the lines of “Using the weapon as a sword would be affected by the Swordsmanship skill, using the flat end of the shovel head would be affected by the Stick-fighting skill, and using the sharp tip to pierce would be affected by the Spearmanship skill.” Behold: the almighty shovel.

Bows, slingshots, pistols, and machine guns fell under the Marksmanship skill. Grenades and throwing stuff like cans of cola would be affected by the Throwing skill. I asked what would happen if one were to kick a soccer ball but was shot down with a **There is no such skill.**

Next, I asked what would happen if you threw a spear that could be used for both piercing and throwing, and was told that either the Throwing or Spearmanship skills would work in that situation instead. A subtle difference from the shovel. The same would apply whenever you threw a dagger or hatchet.

The monster that you killed is a monster referred to locally as an orc.

... Locally? What's that supposed to mean? And the hell's a monster? Damn it...

Magic is a technique by which one creates fire or wind by using something known as mana.

Mana? Isn't that a fantasy thing?... Yeah, definitely fantasy. Seriously, how crazy.

There are seven types of Magic Skills. Four of them encompass the basic elements (fire, earth, wind, water), and the remaining three are Support Magic, Summoning Magic, and Healing Magic.

Each skill came equipped with different spells, apparently. There were four spells for each rank, and you would automatically gain them by simply increasing the rank of the skill.

In addition to the ones listed above, there are extra skills that do not fit into a specific category: Strength, Movement, Reconnaissance, and Music.

The Strength skill was something akin to muscle-enhancement drugs; they granted you the capabilities to carry heavy objects. Swinging around something

massive like, say, a sword longer than your body, was within the realm of possibility.

The Movement skill allowed you to move with greater agility as well as increased how high you could jump. While your running speed itself was not affected, apparently the force behind each footstep was amplified.

The Reconnaissance skill granted abilities for covert operations, like identifying distant sounds and seeing things from far away. As I saw it, these were the perfect set of skills needed for an aspiring member of the Ranger Courses.

As for the Music skill, it supposedly improved your sense of pitch and made you a better singer. I was curious if this would allow you to subdue a giant enemy with a song—but nope. Besides being a good vocalist, I had no idea what this could be used for.

Questions surrounding the existence of this computer or why there exists a system for people to acquire skills like this are met with no reply.

Something was seriously off here. This was weird.

When I asked why I was being given skills and levels, this was the answer provided by the computer: **They will be necessary for you in the future.**

Hmm, yes, I see. So you want me to become a hero or something? Too bad, I refuse.

This isn't a dream; it's quite real.

The worst-case scenario. It couldn't get much worse.

Death is permanent. There is no way to revive.

Somehow, it got worse.

For the time being, I decided to cast aside all the worrisome parts, like why I needed to gain skills, what was going to happen after this, and the unfamiliar and strange terms like “mana” and “monsters.” In any case, I was sorely lacking in information. There was no small number of things I needed to think over, but going into that right now wasn't going to help.

The important thing I had learned was the fact that I could acquire skills and that I would have to wait until I leveled up again to pick more skills if I chose to ignore them now. Leveling up entailed defeating those “orc” monsters as they were called, and to achieve that without skills? A game asking you to do that was a shit game beyond belief.

Thus, I decided to review what I knew so far. These were all of the skills currently being displayed on the computer screen.

SKILL DETAILS
PHYSICAL: Pugilist, Swordsmanship, Spearmanship, Stick-fighting, Marksmanship, Throwing.
MAGIC: Earth, Water, Fire, Wind, Support, Summoning, Healing.
EXTRA: Strength, Movement, Reconnaissance, Music.

I needed to choose one or two of the seventeen skills in total listed on the display and upgrade them to Rank 1. I didn’t have to use up all of my skill points, either.

While carefully considering my options, I asked several more questions. I racked my mind over the possibilities. My head felt almost fuzzy from the exhaustion. A couple of hours must have passed since I arrived in this room, but I couldn’t be certain. My stomach had yet to wrack with pangs of hunger, nor did my throat feel even the slightest bit parched. I began to wonder if this was an intended feature in the room’s design, or something else. Who knows.

Finally, I came to a decision and stood in front of the computer. Moving the cursor, I selected two of the skills from the display list and upgraded each of them to Rank 1.

KAZUHISA

LEVEL: 1	SUPPORT MAGIC: 0→1
SUMMONING MAGIC: 0→1	SKILL POINTS: 2→0

I moved the cursor to the “Confirm?” button and clicked it. The next moment, I found myself standing back in the middle of the woods.

Chapter 3: Support Magic and Summoning Magic

I was back in the forest, standing in front of the pitfall. The events that had happened moments prior felt surreal to me, yet the pitfall remained. The hole was still open, and the smell of burnt flesh drifted in the air. .

The orc's body had vanished already, but the tip of the bamboo spear was still dyed blue from the creature's blood. I guess that had all been real after all. That creature with the pig-shaped face—the orc, as it was called—had actually been there, and I... killed it.

That wasn't a problem—or I didn't think to regard it as one anyway. The psychological shock of killing something was less intense than I had expected, but my goal had been to lure a person and murder them from the very beginning, so my reaction was probably normal for someone who'd been willing to do such a thing. He didn't fall prey to my scheme. Sure a standard repulsive monster from a fantasy RPG was the one who became my victim instead, but there was no need to sweat the small stuff.

Rather, there was a more pressing concern. Was that orc the only one out there?

The answer to that was, in all likelihood, a big fat *no*. The Q&A session I'd held in the white room even served to reaffirm as much. When I had asked the laptop why my skills were going to be needed, the reply had confirmed that they'd be necessary for the future.

At some point, I was going to need these “skills.” There was someone out there that had created that room with the knowledge that things would turn out like this. *That could only mean...* I thought as I clenched my fists. *Okay, first thing's first. I gotta test out these special powers since they're gonna protect me down the line. Let's see what these skills have got.*

Thus, I began to try out the ones I'd gained. First up was Support Magic. According to the information I obtained from the laptop, Rank 1 would enable

me to use four spells. Using magic depleted MP; around ten or so uses of magic would empty it entirely. The only way to recover MP was to simply wait for the time to pass. Waiting for about ten minutes would apparently restore MP by a spell's worth.

Testing time. I focused my gaze on my right arm and muttered, "Mighty Arm."

Using magic required a strong mental image of the spell being invoked. In the Q&A session, whoever or whatever I was talking with had given me the helpful advice of setting a key phrase for a spell for the invocation. I gave that a shot and, sure enough, a pale light began to envelop my right hand as I felt my MP being spent, a slight feeling of weakness assailed me in the process.

I bent down and picked up the shovel lying nearby with my glowing right hand. The shovel felt lighter compared to before. The weight of the shovel had clearly lessened since I last used it—wait, that couldn't be right. The shovel's weight hadn't changed; the power of my hand had increased. This was the result of that Support Magic.

To test it out, I balled my hand into a fist and punched a nearby tree. *Ow!* The tree didn't so much as shake, and the skin on my knuckle was cut open a little. Blood began to flow slowly from the wound... red, unlike the orc's bluish. Tears began to form in the corners of my eyes.

"Well, at least it works," I grumbled in a sour tone, bitter over getting my just desserts, before shaking my head. In any case, I had determined that magic was something that actually existed.

Though this may have been a bit late, after witnessing both the orc's death and the white room that followed, the possibility was beginning to float in my mind that the supernatural might be real. Well, actually, now I was *positive* this was all real.

This world, as well as myself, are... I shrugged my shoulders. *Oh well. Onto Summoning Magic now.*

"Summon Raven!"

The space right in front of me blackened and distorted, and a lone raven emerged from within. It perched on a nearby tree branch before cawing.

“Search for enemies,” I ordered, pointing in the direction of the road. The raven cawed once more before flying off in the direction of the road. It didn’t take long before it was out of sight. It returned several minutes later, chattering at me.

However, rather than the caws of the bird, I heard, “There is a single monster wandering around the road.”

“Did you just... speak?” I asked, bewildered.

The raven squawked again but I only heard a normal caw this time. I made a mental note to confirm later whether I’d misheard or the raven actually did speak, and began to head towards the road while taking extra caution to ensure I didn’t accidentally step on any dead leaves. The next five minutes I spent on foot felt abnormally long.

I ended up at an area close to the asphalt road paving its way through the forest. The road itself was barely wide enough for two lightweight trucks to pass each other, and the very edges were covered in leaves.

A bipedal creature stood on the road, wandering aimlessly. The creature was humanoid and naked, its face shaped like a pig’s, with copper skin. Its belly jutted out, and there was a putrid odor coming from the creature. An orc.

A rusty sword was dangling from its hand. Yep. A sword. Did the other orc have a sword, too? I couldn’t remember. By the time I’d opened my eyes upon my return, the orc was already disappearing. I would just have to check the pitfall later.

All right, back to the orc. I hadn’t gotten a good look at it earlier, but its body was much larger than mine. It had some burly muscles too, and its limbs were unnaturally thick. It kind of reminded me of an athlete from a hammer-throwing competition. However, the athlete I was thinking of was outstanding enough to take home the gold medal in the Olympics, while this orc looked nearly indistinguishable from the one I caught a glimpse of earlier. In other words, that meant an Olympic athlete was simply your everyday orc. The thought sent shivers down my spine. Taking a direct blow from that orc would send me to an early grave, yet I had no choice but to attack it, lest I kiss my visits to that white room goodbye. No more level-ups, no more skills—nada.

Now that I thought back on it, the individual on the other side of that computer was kind. They patiently answered my every question. Of course, there *were* questions they were unable to answer—a lot of them, at that. Still, despite the many questions I peppered at them, I'd learned a lot from their replies.

Now that I could use magic, I had so much I wanted to ask them. I wouldn't get my answers if I didn't go back to that room, so leveling up was a necessity. My mind was made up. I had to kill orcs, starting with the one right in front of me.

"Let's do this," I whispered to myself before clenching my fist. I looked down at my feet and concentrated. "Physical Up."

Both of my legs shimmered weakly. This magic strengthened physical abilities, especially running capabilities.

I steeled myself and charged into the road the instant the orc looked in my direction. Twenty-odd meters lay between the creature and myself. Having noticed my presence, the pig-nosed monster let out a roar before lifting its sword into the air and charging.

A wave of bloodlust threatened me. I was certain that even the slightest graze from that sword would hurt like hell. Avoiding that was something I needed to do no matter what.



I quickly twisted my body around and immediately jumped back into the thicket I'd just leaped out of. Sure enough, the orc gave chase, letting loose a roar in the process. I didn't spare so much as a glance backwards as I desperately fled, the corners of my mouth curling into a smirk.

The roars coming from behind me gradually began to grow more distant. *Huh?* I thought to myself, before realizing the cause. *Oh, right, it's because I'm strengthening my body's capabilities using magic.* It was for this very reason that I chose Support Magic as one of my skills. Surviving was top priority in my mind, and so I'd disregarded all of the weapon-oriented skills and gone with Support Magic.

Still, though, I've gained this much distance on it? I glimpsed back over my shoulder and caught glimpses of reddish-brown skin in the gaps between the trees. It looked to be about fifteen meters away from me.

"Over here, you dumb pig!" I taunted, dropping my speed a slight bit. The orc appeared to have caught sight of my figure once more thanks to my comment. It charged ferociously towards me, and I ran away in a hurry.

Our game of tag was about to come to an abrupt end. Up ahead was an area with dead leaves lying everywhere on the ground. The moment I reached the area, I jumped into the air and sailed over my trap, landing safely on the other side. The orc, on the other hand, stepped onto the trap with no hesitation, and seemingly vanished into thin air.

The reason for the orc's sudden disappearance was, naturally, a pitfall. More specifically, one of the three I'd made in preparation. While one of them had been rendered unusable in the previous fight, there were still two more I could make use of. I had envisioned every route that *he* might use to reach me and created a trap on each route. *Not like that matters at this point, though. He's nothing but a thing of the past now.*

Setting that aside, there were other uses for these pitfalls. These traps were absolutely indispensable for me to return to the white room a second time. In fact, they were the very reason that I had gone with these skills to begin with.

Summoning Magic would allow me to call upon a raven and use it to scout from a bird's eye view, and Support Magic would grant me enhanced physical

capabilities and allow me to take control of our game of tag, and thus safely drop the orc into the pitfall. So had been the idea, and putting it into practice had gone off without a hitch.

I peered down into the hole at the orc from above and confirmed that the bamboo spears lying within had damaged the pig-man. Bluish blood was spilling from the wounds on the orc's body, and it was glaring up at me, fuming with anger. It aimlessly swung around the rusted sword it was holding at the bottom of the pit, but the blade never reached me no matter how hard it tried.

As I had done previously, I poured in gasoline before throwing in a spark. The orc's body was wreathed in flames, and the pig-man writhed around in agony. *And now for the finisher.* I picked up the bamboo spear. Mighty Arm's magical buff was still in effect. My strengthened body thrust the bamboo spear into the hole with an energetic "Hiyaaahhh!" The feeling of the tip carving through the orc's flesh made me scowl in disgust. Nevertheless, I thrust the spear over and over into the pit. Before long, the orc's anguished cries ceased.

I carefully checked the bottom of the hole. The orc's body grew pale before fading away, just like it had before. I had killed an orc... a second one. The orc's corpse vanished in its entirety, and then... nothing happened. I hadn't been transported to the white room.

"Well," I sighed in dissatisfaction. "Figured as much."

If this were a computer game, then there's no way the required amount of XP to level up from 0 to 1 and 1 to 2 would be the same, I thought to myself. Best case scenario, it's probably double. If I'm unlucky, then it might even be triple, or quadruple. In any case, there's still another pitfall left. If push comes to shove, I'll just reuse one of the pitfalls.

My train of thoughts came to an abrupt pause as I noticed something at the bottom of the pitfall after the orc disappeared. There was a red gem about the size of a small fingernail lying on the ground inside the pitfall. *What is that? In game terms, this would be a drop item, right? This is starting to look more and more like an RPG...*

I dropped into the hole and picked up the dropped item. *Is this a ruby?... Well, beats me. I'm no gem expert.*

I decided to store it in my pocket for the time being and made my way back to the pitfall where I'd killed the first orc. I similarly checked the bottom of the pit—sure enough, I found a similar red gem. *I must've overlooked it the first time.* I made sure to pick up this one as well.

Afterward, I sent out the raven to scout again. It had yet to disappear. *Next time I return to the white room, I should ask how long the ravens that I summon will last.* I made a mental note in my head.

The raven returned after a short while and squawked, "There is a single monster chasing after a lone person."

Chapter 4: The Orc & the Girl

After a few minutes of travel, I was hiding in the shade of the trees, observing the orc and the figure locked in a struggle around ten or so paces ahead. Although Mighty Arm's buff had run out by the time I'd gotten here, Physical Up's was still active. It seemed like the spells' effects seem to last around 20 to 30 minutes. The list of things I would need to confirm once I got back to the white room was steadily growing.

The orc had pinned down a girl wearing a middle school uniform with long black hair reaching her waist. Rough, sharp inhales came from the orc's nostrils as it tried to assault the girl.

The hell is this? Why is the orc trying to spread her legs open? Why did it just toss its sword off to the side? And why is it pointing its bare, defenseless ass right towards me as it's trying to rape her? Does it not realize how defenseless it is?

This was my chance. The girl was crying out as she struggled from underneath the monster, so the chances of me being noticed if I approached stealthily were pretty low. I could use her as bait and sneak in for the kill. Eventually a day would come where I would have to defeat these monsters without a pitfall. Might as well take this opportunity while I could.

I calmed myself and took a deep breath before casting magic onto my spear. "Keen Weapon."

The bamboo spear began to glow faintly. From my understanding, the effects of this spell made the sharpened tip become harder and increased the piercing power of the weapon.

"Mighty Arm. Physical Up."

My arms and legs also began to glow faintly. The first Physical Up that I'd cast was still in effect but I wanted to err on the side of caution. These spells would

serve to strengthen both my physical strength as well as my running speed. If things took a turn for the worse, I could just abandon the girl and flee.

A slight dizziness assailed me from the repeated use of magic. A part of me hoped my maximum MP would increase as I leveled up. My build required my skills be cast in advance, though.

A little more wouldn't hurt, I thought. Making a quick judgment, I called over the raven that I'd summoned earlier and cast magic on it. "Mighty Arm, Physical Up, Keen Weapon."

The raven was now magically strengthened. Support Magic could be used on other things; in fact, using spells to assist and support others seemed to be the very essence of Support Magic.

I had cast Keen Weapon on the raven's beak in hopes it would be able to keep the orc in check for a little while. *Seriously, I'm begging you here. Please help me out here. The idea of taking on that orc all by myself is... incredibly disheartening.*

There was nothing else I could do in terms of preparation, meaning there was only one thing to do now...

Bamboo spear in hand, I slowly began to sneak up behind the orc as it wrestled with the girl. The orc reached down to its loincloth and tore it off, exposing its unseemly rear to the world. *Humans are most defenseless during excretion.* My mind flashed back to something a certain distinguished individual had once spoken. *And if you think about it, ejaculation is a form of excretion. I mean, look at it. I've caught it with its pants down—literally.*

I deliberated for a moment on where to aim before eventually deciding to go with the neck to be safe. There was the chance that I would miss and strike the girl instead, but I'd find a way to deal with that if it happened. This girl wasn't even someone I knew anyway.

I ordered the raven to snatch the fallen sword nearby and flee as soon as the battle started. Even if I failed to catch it by surprise, the orc would have no choice but to fight me bare-handed.

One step, two steps. The distance between us shrunk as I approached the orc from behind. *Just a bit more to go.* I swallowed the saliva in my mouth when suddenly... my eyes locked with the girl's as she struggled underneath the orc. *Shit.* Cold sweat dripped down my brow. There was a chance the orc would become aware of my presence if she made a strange face while looking in this direction.

I'll save you. Anger welled up inside me at the thought, and I berated myself, *That's nothing more than a convenient excuse, and you know it.* Mere seconds ago, I'd been willing to use her as bait to secure the kill, and now...

You'll be betrayed. My mind reached this conclusion almost reflexively. *Just like back then, the trigger that made him first notice you.*

He was being bullied in our class. I tried to help him out, but my actions were unwelcome. The target quickly changed from them to me, and even the person I helped eventually was joining in on the harassment. I would never forget the moment when the kid that I'd attempted to help had loomed over me as I crawled miserably on the ground. The sadistic grin carved into *his* face, and *his* eyes filled to the brim with joy as I wiped off my face with the wet towel used to clean the toilets.

My kindness had been met with betrayal in the worst way possible. An act of attempted justice had resulted only in anguish for me. I had shown kindness only to see it spat on and thrown into the dirt. Believing everyone to be a good person had backfired on me. That was why I would never believe in anyone.

All alone had I made a plan to kill *him*. All alone had I gathered everything I needed. Fortunately, solitude had its perks. Without any friends or anyone who cared about me to speak of, it was easy to act under the radar. I had been, and always would be, alone. But that didn't matter to me. I liked being alone. If this girl betrayed me, it wouldn't change anything. I would kill this orc and turn it into experience points. That's all that mattered.

There's still about one or two meters between us, but I can probably close the distance instantly if I rush out now. I readied myself to rush out, but a sudden cry stopped me in my tracks.

“Nooooo!! Stop it, stay away!!” the girl screamed out, almost as if trying to keep the orc focused on herself, and batted the orc’s massive chest with both hands. The orc made an annoyed face as it looked down at the girl, and gave her face a small slap. The side of her mouth was cut open, and a small bit of blood trickled from the wound. Despite her injury, the girl still struggled beneath the orc, furthering angering it. It raised its hand once more.

This is close enough. I raised a war cry and thrust the spear towards the orc’s neck as hard as I could. Blue blood gushed out as the orc shouted out in pain, body shaking. It was plenty strong, but I grabbed onto the spear with both hands to avoid losing my grip. I pushed on it even harder.

The orc rolled off of the girl to the side. The spear slipped out of my grasp at that moment but remained stuck in the orc’s thick neck. Angrily, the orc yanked it out before tossing it aside. Its head swung left and right as it searched for its sword, which was nowhere to be found.

There’s no way you’ll find it. After all... The raven flew over to me, the rusted sword clutched in its beak. Thanks to my magic buffs on it, it could somehow fly while carrying a sword several times its height.

All right! I took the sword from the raven and assumed a prone position before ordering the raven to aim for the orc’s eyes. Ever the loyal servant, the raven squawked once before throwing itself at the orc’s face. It attempted to swat away the raven with its hand, but the summoned servant continued to relentlessly assault its face.

Making use of the gap, I launched myself at the orc while giving a loud shout. The sword met its mark, carving into the orc’s abdomen. Blue blood spewed out from the wound, and the orc tottered backwards. I took another step forward and sliced at the orc again. This time, however, my attack was blocked by the orc’s hand. The fierce impact shook me, the recoil numbing my arms. The sword danced in the air before falling into the brush.

Shit. I barely had time to process the exchange before the orc charged towards me. I quickly took some distance. My body felt light, thanks to the boost from the magic. Distancing myself from the orc was an easy task.

However, I now no longer had the element of surprise on my side. There was also a bigger problem—I was shaking like a leaf.

Am I scared? Damn right I am! I'm so scared that I want to turn tail and run right now! My teeth chattered and my breaths grew erratic. I was wheezing so badly that the orc's rough breathing from before seemed normal. Despite having not taken even the slightest injury yet, I was groggier than the orc was.

That being said, I wasn't the only one reeling. The orc was stumbling around. Gouging it from the back of the neck had apparently worked wonders. That wound would've been fatal if it had happened to a human, but this fellow was quite tough. Well, its entire body *was* basically muscle... Nevertheless, the sword came up short in the end.

Suddenly I caught sight of the bamboo spear, still laying on the ground near the orc. The orc must not have recognized the spear as a weapon despite my having used it as such. *Seriously. What a simple-minded creature.* With that said, its intelligence, or lack thereof, was a huge advantage for me. I could make use of this.

I ordered the raven to fly around the orc's face.

The diversion worked perfectly. Distracted, the orc forgot about me, giving me a chance to rush over to the spear and nimbly pick it up.

... At least, that's what I wished had happened. Truthfully, I half-ran, half-stumbled over to the spear and even dropped it twice due to my shaky hands before I finally grabbed the anti-slip cloth that I'd wrapped around the spear.

The raven stabbed its beak into the orc's eye right at that moment, eliciting a shrill scream in response from the orc. I prepared to strike and then charged at the orc with a roar. The orc's hands were too busy holding its face to block my strike, and the bamboo spear pierced into its defenseless stomach.

Blue blood sprayed from its abdomen as it wailed in agony. I stabbed the orc with the spear repeatedly as it weakly attempted to counterattack before collapsing to its knees. I continued to stab it over and over with the spear until its body turned transparent and faded.

You have leveled up!

The sound of a trumpet fanfare reached my ears, and the androgynous voice once again reverberated through my mind as everything went white.

Before I knew it, I found myself standing back inside of the white room.

Chapter 5: Which Path to Choose

I stood in a daze inside of the white room. The battle had drawn me in. A fierce fight, completely different from the previous two. Only now did the realization dawn on me that I was fighting with my life on the line back there. I could feel my body trembling again as that truth soaked in, and I squatted down on the floor for a few moments to calm my breathing.

Okay. Now that my heart was out of my throat and back into my chest, I stood back up. There was no need to worry about any time passing as long as I was in this room, and that meant I had to make the most of the room's advantages. *Moreover, there's a heap of things that I need to ask about.*

Firstly, I had learned one thing about myself: fighting with a sword was an absolute impossibility for me. It was just too scary. While I may have lost myself in the battle earlier, I was rather timid. I couldn't stop shaking even now.

The orc had packed some serious power. Even though the orc had been forced to fight barehanded, I hadn't felt like I'd had an advantage with my weapon. The fight had felt extremely tough, possibly due to the fact I lacked the power to pierce the orc's thick fat and deal a fatal blow.

I had won the two previous battles only thanks to the pitfalls, and this time wasn't much different. My victory here was thanks only to a certain combination: having the element of surprise, ordering the raven to rob the orc of its weapon before having it fly around the orc's head as a distraction, and strengthening my body's basic abilities beforehand by casting Support Magic on myself. I'm sure I would be nothing but a corpse on the ground right about now if even a single one of those factors had been missing.

I wasn't suited for fighting up close; in fact, I believed it to be a fatal mistake for me to do so. This was something I'd been vaguely aware of. Even back in my gym classes doing judo or kendo, my opponents overwhelmed me almost immediately. That hadn't happened this time, but my movements were linear

and my attacks were parried with ease. Despite my lack of skill, whenever I would watch other people have matches with each other, I would still chip in with half-assed comments like “Do it that way,” or “Do it like this.” I supposed I was fundamentally unsuited for something like this.

Well, it's not like finding that out was a total bust. At least I now know it'd be pointless to take a weapon skill. Skill points were valuable. I couldn't afford to waste a single one.

I needed to take the future into consideration—to find a reliable method to fight the orcs from a safe distance. So far, the most plausible way to do that was looking to be using Summoning Magic to conjure up something other than a raven. As I'd learned recently, while it could serve as a distraction, it would be impossible for a Rank 1 summoned raven to act as a wall standing between me and my opponent.

I sat down in front of the laptop and began to barrage it with question after question. *First up: What creature can I summon with Rank 2 Summoning Magic?*

“A puppet golem?” I repeated out loud as I stared at the answer.

Ooh! My chest swelled with expectation. Several questions later, I obtained the following information.

Puppet Golems were club-armed familiars with wooden doll-like bodies nearly one hundred and fifty centimeters tall. In terms of strength, two puppet golems could fight evenly against a single orc.

The series of questions had led me to discover something: the creatures that I summoned using Summoning Magic were called “Familiars.” This was something I should've asked about earlier. Speaking of which...

The duration of Support Magic spells is twenty-five minutes, plus or minus five minutes at Rank 1.

In other words, the duration was up to chance.

Maybe I should recast magic every twenty minutes just in case?... Wait a minute. What would happen if my level or the skill's rank increased? I typed my next question and then waited for a response.

An increase in your level would have no effect on the duration. Raising the rank of the corresponding magic, however, would affect the duration.

Support Magic spells, like Mighty Arm and Physical Up, would increase to fifty minutes, plus or minus ten minutes, if the skill's rank was increased to two. *Hmm, I see. That means I would have anywhere from forty minutes to an hour.* This information was *extremely* important for decreasing MP expenditure.

Next, I moved on to asking about familiars.

Unlike other spells, familiars summoned using Summoning Magic expend magic following a different formula. The MP cost is affected by the rank of the familiar and, in simple terms, follows a quadratic formula. For example, Rank 2 familiars cost 4 MP, Rank 3 cost 9 MP, and Rank 4 cost 16 MP.

Familiars will follow their summoner's orders until they are either sent away by their summoner or disappear upon the familiar's death. Your maximum MP will remain decreased while they are summoned. Although there is no upper limit to the number of familiars that you are able to summon at once, your maximum MP will be decreased for each one.

Now *that* was *super* important. I could summon two ravens at once! Not that I would, though. Summoning too many would be a burden. Heh. Get it? 'Cause burden kinda sounds like *birden*. Ha ha...

A-Anyway, being able to summon two puppet golems at once was quite nice. Although Rank 2 familiars cost four times as much MP as the ravens, two golems buffed by Keen Weapon, Physical Up, and Mighty Arm would probably be enough to take down an orc.

On second thought, this strategy blows...

Leveling up from Level 1 to Level 2 had required me to kill two orcs. The number of monsters I had to kill would only increase with my level. Skill points, on the other hand, were capped at two per level. Furthermore, raising a skill's rank by one took the same amount of skill points as the rank's number. Eventually there would come a day where this method of fighting hit a wall.

And what about the enemies? Orcs were the only enemy? I didn't believe that for a second. At the very least, there had to be an Orc Chief. Maybe there

existed monsters even fiercer than that. No, there *had* to be. Like a dragon, for example. What would happen if my puppet golems were to fight against one of those?... Well, I wasn't entirely sure what a dragon was exactly—how about a Tyrannosaurus instead?

A mental image formed in my head: dozens of wooden dolls facing off against a Tyrannosaurus. I watched as the puppets charged at the huge dinosaur in my head... and were crushed and kicked away almost immediately. Futile, absolutely futile. Even with my Support Magic, I was sure to lose. Not even in my most optimistic outlooks could I see myself lasting more than a few seconds.

There was one thing I knew to be certain: any summoned familiar, including those of Rank 3 or 4, would be vastly inferior when using direct attacks compared to a Swordsman or Spearman of the same rank. To put it another way, the ideal vanguard would be a person with those kinds of weapon skills.

That's right. Another *person*.

"Maybe... I should find a companion?" I murmured to myself. Would trusting someone else and finding a companion be a better option?

Of course not. Like hell that'd work. I shook my head. Only after I did that did I happen to recall what had happened earlier. More specifically, the girl in the middle school uniform that I ended up helping. Once she noticed that I was sneaking up behind the orc, she kept the orc's attention on herself by thrashing about, and continued to do so even after being hit. Her efforts had played a big part in the success behind my surprise attack.

If she hadn't done that, I wonder how the fight would've turned out. Maybe I would've lost. If things had gone poorly enough, I might've died, unable to escape in time. As these possibilities flashed through my mind, I began to wonder if I'd perhaps picked a fight with an orc far sooner than I should have...

Well, let's forget about that for the moment. Right now we're focused on the girl. She had trusted me, if only once. She struggled against the orc desperately while believing that I would save her. *Maybe she would be willing to become my companion?*

"Or you'll just be betrayed again..." I muttered. And maybe I would be. But there was a chance I wouldn't be.

Let's first consider the power one can obtain in this room. First, a person had to level up before getting here. It had taken me killing a single orc to come to this room the first time. That victory had been brought about only by an insane amount of luck. In fact, that pitfall wasn't intended for the orc but rather the man bullying me. Imagine my shock at finding not a human but instead a pig-human hybrid leaking blue blood... *Whoops, I went off on a tangent. Let's get back to the main topic.* The problem was killing a single orc was no simple task. I wondered how many other people had been as lucky as I was.

From my experiences so far, I had run into three orcs in a short timeframe. Following that logic, just how many orcs were on this mountain right now? And how many among them had gone to the school? There were students and teachers there. What had happened to them?

"Well, there's no way they could win normally."

Perhaps one of the kendo members in the middle of practice could perform a multiple-hit strike and bring down one or two orcs. The judo team... might struggle a little bit. Our baseball players could swing a bat, hope for the best, and maaaaybe survive. As for the soccer team, they could bring down any number of orcs by kicking balls at them... in the world of manga, that is. Not so much for real life. Our school was lacking in smaller sports clubs such as archery, so that about summed up the clubs.

If I counted the middle school and high school students together, there should've been about two thousand students in our school. In addition to them there were around two hundred adults such as teachers, business men, and contractors.

"A good outcome would leave... maybe ten or twenty?"

Even with the most optimistic outlook, the number of people capable of reaching Level 1 on their own would be around that many. *However, I slipped into thought, what would happen if I helped this girl?*

There was still one pitfall left for me to use. I could lend her the bamboo spear, boost her strength a bit with Support Magic, and have her stab an orc down in the hole. Were she to follow my orders, her reaching the white room safely wasn't a stretch.

Once there, she could acquire skills. *Oh, actually, maybe I should have her get Spearmanship since I have the bamboo spear?* Another good choice would be Healing Magic. Even in games, healing was important, and this being our current reality meant all the more so. The area near her lip had been cut open, and it looked like her knees were bruised. Getting something to heal those injuries wasn't a bad plan.

Unfortunately, the idea wasn't without its downsides, and there were a lot of them.

First and foremost, allowing her to carry a weapon meant I would be our rearguard. *Would she even follow my orders? Could I trust her?* I also ran the risk of being killed the moment she acquired skills. And even if that didn't happen, maybe letting her hold a weapon would get to her head and make her start giving *me* orders. Or perhaps she would act how she wanted without paying any mind to my thoughts. She might even pick a different skill than the ones I had in mind and throw my plan completely out of whack... A heap of negative thoughts swirled around in my head. I scrutinized each and every one of these possibilities, and the risks and returns.

The first thing I had to take into consideration was the extreme composure she displayed. *How did she realize my plan, and how calm was she?* Even under the duress of almost being raped, she'd believed I would help her and acted accordingly. Though I couldn't be entirely certain of the specifics, there were monsters like orcs wandering about throughout the mountain. Would she act against me in a situation like this?

Most likely not. Someone as shallow as that would've betrayed me the moment our eyes met.

... Shallow, huh? In a situation like that, one would normally scream out "Save me!" Personally, I would've done it before even considering the consequences. Though not exactly proud of it, I was a coward. To put it another way, her careful consideration and forethought was leagues above my own.

As the smarter person, she might be the one giving the orders. I didn't have any issues with this so long as her orders were the right move. It wasn't like I hated being ordered around; I just hated when the orders being given were

completely unreasonable. In fact, I didn't even mind her being younger than me with the situation being as bad as it was. If she could make more correct judgements than me, I would gladly follow her orders.

So, would she trust me? A few minutes ago, she'd acted as a decoy to help me. Was that not proof enough that she trusted me? No, hold on. Wasn't that way too convenient an explanation?

At that moment, she and I had both been in a situation in which using the other would result in the best outcome. That may be different in the future. Perhaps she wouldn't need my help next time, or maybe she planned on using me for her own gain.

A person using another solely for their own benefit. As nasty as it sounded, there were people like that. I'd met my fair share of people with those intentions in mind. That's why I was well aware that anyone would and could nonchalantly abandon another person as soon as it got dangerous for them.

Wait a sec. What if a situation arose where continuing to use the other would be best for both parties? What if the give-and-take relationship continued to flourish? Hmm. It's worth looking at this from another angle.

I needed to show her that working with me would be beneficial for the both of us. Of course, there were other possibilities. Maybe she didn't want to be the vanguard, or perhaps killing an orc was completely out of the question to her from the get-go due to its similarities to a human.

These possibilities couldn't help but run through my mind. In that case, I would just have to resort to my original plan: fighting alone. Yep, you heard me. Alone. I had a few long-term plans.

First and foremost, however, I needed to grasp the current situation and gather up a basis for my next move. Figuring out a long-term plan could come later; the thing I needed to do the most right now was strive with all my strength to survive in the short-term.

"... Let's try talking to her first," I muttered as I considered the possibility.

Proposing a shitty-sounding deal like that to a girl who'd nearly been raped moments prior sounded like a terrible idea to me... but right now really was the

best chance. The best and only chance for both me and her. *Which means I'll have to offer her a hand.*

Fortunately for me, there seemed to be nearly no demerits in offering a deal to her. Sure, there might've been a few things here and there that I hadn't considered, but I was no stranger to acting before fully reckoning with the consequences. I just had to give it my very best shot. Staying too much of a coward would mean even the things I could win would become unwinnable.

Truth be told, I've spent many days in listless idling, apathetic to everything happening to me... until I dug that first pitfall. Sure, it might've been an act of rebellion out of pure desperation. But even so, had I not done anything and remained stagnant... Then I never would've lived to kill the first orc. Going forward, I had to more proactive.

My fingers began typing questions on the keyboard once more. Fortunately, my efforts were not in vain. I was met with yet another valuable piece of information.

There was a party system.

“... It gets more and more like an RPG the more questions I ask.”

A party system. This feature was the most gamelike of everything I'd seen so far.

The party leader could form a party by thinking *I wish to invite them to a party* while making physical contact with another person who wanted to join. Leaving a party was equally simple. You just had to think, *I want to leave the party*. Party leaders also had the option to boot out a party member whenever they wanted.

The maximum number of party members in any given party is six.

... Hm? Isn't that number the same as it was in the world's first RPG computer game?

You need to be Level 1 or higher to join a party.

In other words, this meant that someone could not join a party unless they killed at least one orc by themselves. A difficult task, to say the least.

Experience points are equally divided amongst party members.

The amount of experience each person gained appeared to be the same. There wasn't an experience point bonus like in MMORPGs, however.

There exists magic which can only be used on party members.

Apparently, there were certain spells that affected all party members. In addition to this, some skills could only be used on party members. The specifics were unknown. It seemed I would have to find them out for myself later.

Experience points will not be split amongst party members too far apart from one another.

Party members too far from the party would be treated as though they were not in the party. Though I was not given a specific answer regarding the distance, it didn't seem to matter if you were within one hundred meters or so.

Hmm, I see. This system is important. A while back I was considering using the girl as a shield while having puppet golems kill monsters so I could gain experience points, but now I just needed her to defeat a monster solo. Not completely alone, naturally: I would be supporting her with my magic so she could fight orcs with a substantial safety net. If needed, I could also use my Summoning Magic to keep them in check for her. Defeating an orc without a pitfall would be a piece of cake compared to how it was previous. This was all assuming she would agree to my proposal, of course...

"Should I trust another person... just this once?"

I absentmindedly stared at the ceiling and recalled her eyes. We'd stared at each other, eyes locked at that moment. Her obsidian black eyes, the pupils within clear enough to suck in the air around them, were etched into my mind. If I were to put aside my rational judgment and speak based purely on emotion, then... Strangely enough, I thought her betraying me was about as likely as hell freezing over.

"For now, let's try having some faith in her."

Despite coming from my own mouth, those words felt alien. Nevertheless, I clenched my fist tightly and nodded. My mind was made up.

I turned to face the laptop and then proceeded to use the two new skill points, both of which were needed to raise the rank of one of my pre-existing skills from Rank 1 to Rank 2. I'd bet all my chips on this one play.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 2	SUPPORT MAGIC: 1→2
SUMMONING MAGIC: 1	SKILL POINTS: 2→0

I moved the cursor to the “Confirm” button and clicked. The next moment, I found myself back in the woods next to the girl.

Chapter 6: The Girl's Decision

Looking back on it now, I think I may have just wanted something definite. Something I would be able to place my trust in... or *someone*. There wasn't anyone in particular I was looking for, anyone would've done. But by some stroke of luck, she just happened to be right there.

I spent a great while in the white room turning over everything in my mind, but all of the time I wasted away there only amounted to an instant in reality.

The moment I returned to the forest, a wave of fatigue forced me to my knees.

I groaned, gasping for air, and placed both of my hands on the leaf-littered ground in an attempt to calm my rough breaths. The thick scent of the forest assaulted my nose. Leaves scattered on the ground, rotting and wet from the rain, mixed in with the feces of the many insects and birds living within the forest. A feeling of calm began to take over me as I took in the peculiar smell. I could hear footsteps crushing the carpet of leaves underfoot as they approached, and raised my face to find that the girl I'd saved was now standing right next to me.

The blouse part of her uniform was in tatters. The right sleeve of her short-sleeved summer uniform had been torn up to the shoulder, leaving her bare shoulder exposed. The chest area was nearly in shreds. I could see her cleavage pronounced by her bra. She was attempting to hide that area with both of her hands but wasn't having much success.

She might be a small girl, but she's plenty large in other areas.

The uniform's skirt portion was nearly torn in half, revealing her white panties underneath. Her body was covered in bruises, and blood oozed from the skinned areas on her hands and legs. Her cheek was red and swollen from the hard hit she'd taken, and a line of blood dripped down from her mouth. She had taken a beating.

Despite the state she was in, the girl simply stared at me quietly with her dark eyes. Her quiet staring made me notice how big and bright her eyes looked. Although she was battered and bruised all over, I couldn't help but find her beautiful. *Whoa. Her glossy black hair is... gorgeous.* Her bangs were in complete disorder, and twigs and leaves were caught in her long black hair here and there yet my thoughts were encapsulated by her beauty.

"You..." I murmured meaninglessly.

My words had just kind of spilled out. Unsure of what to even say I simply stood there, completely overwhelmed. The girl, on the other hand, appeared to understand what I was getting at.

"I'm a third-year middle school student, from Class 3. My name is Arisu Shimosono."

"Arisu Shimosono..."

The name flowed from my lips almost seamlessly. *Well, she introduced herself, so it's common courtesy for me to do the same.*

"First-year high school student, Class 2. Kazuhisa Kaya."

"Kaya... san," Arisu muttered before quickly bowing her head. A leaf stuck in her hair near the top of her head shook back and forth, like the tuft sticking out. I'd seen that a lot in manga.

Despite the current situation, I found that coincidental action to be kind of comical, and couldn't help but grin.

"Thank you for saving me from that... thing?" Arisu raised her head to find me grinning in her direction, and her cheeks puffed out in annoyance. "What is it?"

"S-Sorry, it's just, on top of your head there's a leaf..." I rushed to explain, hoping she didn't think I was making fun of her.

"Hrrrm." Arisu's mouth bent into a dissatisfied frown. She lifted one hand away from her chest to the top of her head, looking up as she did. A confused "Where... are you...?" escaped her lips as she patted the top of her head, feeling for the leaf. It looked like she was having trouble getting it out.



I gently walked up to her and brushed the leaf out of her hair. For some odd reason, I hadn't thought twice about doing that.

"Ah."

Arisu looked up at me blankly, and I showed her the leaf before tossing it aside.

"So... um." I stared at Arisu's face before my gaze unintentionally fell to her nearly exposed chest. Her cheeks were reddened in shame.

"Please don't stare."

"Sorry," I said, averting my gaze. "By the way, do you—"

"You should look a person in the eyes when you have a conversation with them."

Do you want me to look or not?! I retorted in my heart. Left with no other option, I stared directly into eyes. Their obsidian glow seemed to almost suck me in, making me panic.

Under that strong gaze, I was compelled to ask an extremely pointless question: "Are you okay?"

"Huh? Oh, yes. Thanks to you."

"That's good. I guess, um, I made it in time."

Nooo! That's not what I want to talk about! And, Arisu, shouldn't you want to ask about some things? Unsure what to do next, I cursed her in my mind. There was a mountain of clearly unnatural things taking place right now, like the glowing on my arms and legs, and the raven perched on my shoulder. *And you're not curious about any of that?!*

On top of this, I was a guy. Considering the unfortunate circumstances she'd almost met with a few moments ago, I'm sure her wariness towards me right now was at its peak. *Oh, but what should I even say to a girl who was nearly raped? Wait, forget talking to her. Clothes should come first!* I took off my shirt and started to say "Here, use this..." before noticing a problem.

The battle that took place a few minutes ago had left my shirt in the same state as hers. Arisu glanced back and forth between me and my tattered shirt before giving a bitter smile.

“I appreciate the sentiment but you can keep the shirt.”

“Y-Yeah, my bad.”

Crap. Not only was I slow on the uptake, but my cool hero image was crumbling too. I scratched my head to hide my frustration and considered running away from her.

“So, umm... Why are your hands and legs glowing?” she asked.

Thank you, so much, for getting the conversation moving. As though some sort of goddess, Arisu suddenly seemed to shine divinely inside my head. I even wanted to lay prostrate on the floor in appreciation.

“Hmm, where should I even begin...”

“Um, sorry to interrupt, but... is it all right for me to sit down?”

“S-Sure, go ahead... I’m kind of tired too.”

Arisu and I sat down side by side. I considered sitting a distance away from her but Arisu sat down right next to me, close enough that I could feel the warmth of her skin. I looked beside me only to find myself gazing downward due to the difference in height. Our eyes met. A bashful smile was on her face.

I began to explain everything in order. Though my plans had derailed at the start, I’d racked my brain for quite some time in the white room over how to explain everything to her. Luckily, time was abundant in that place. One of the only things, as a matter of fact. As such, I believed my explanation to be easy to understand and well-thought-out.

There was only one thing that I had chosen to omit from the explanation: the reason I had made the pitfalls to begin with. Though she seemed to be a tad bit curious about why, Arisu didn’t delve further and instead simply listened while reacting every once in a while.

She was a good listener. I had done my best to make such a ridiculous situation be easy to understand, but there was no denying that it was still

absolutely ridiculous. To be honest, I don't even think *I* could listen to this kind of explanation and immediately believe it to be true. Arisu, however, had just been attacked by an orc—a creature of fantasy. I guess that's what made her believe in my explanation despite the craziness of it all.

"I... was trying to run away," she said. "That monster... You called it an orc, right? A lot of them attacked, and everyone scattered..."

So that's why she was out here. I nodded in understanding. Arisu looked up at me and then began to stare motionlessly.

"Can I become strong too? Strong like you?" Her eyes seemed to bore into mine as she spoke.

"If you can kill the orcs, then yeah, probably. If you want to, then I'll help you do so, of course..."

"I *will* kill them." Arisu spoke with no hesitation. Not even a full second had passed since I spoke. "I beg you, Kaya-san. Please give me strength... the strength to fight. I hate being helpless. I don't want to be trampled on while being unable to do anything to stop it."

"All right. I'll help you."

Exactly as planned. Well, actually, things had unfolded a bit differently than planned, but everything was back on track now.

At least... I hope so.

Chapter 7: Arisu's Awakening

Only twenty minutes later, I running away from the fourth orc I'd come across today, guiding it towards the last pitfall where Arisu was lying in wait. My raven familiar was in the skies above, cawing as I ran. Cheering me on, perhaps?

Unlike any of the previous creatures, the orc currently chasing me was equipped with a spear. The spear, though rusty and crudely made, looked stronger than the bamboo spear. *I might need to do something about the spear once we get it in the pitfall trap.* Engaging in a completely one-sided fight was the reason for our victory. The possibility of fighting against a monster capable of fighting back sent shivers down my spine. That was how I felt, anyway. I'm sure she was even more scared.

But let's leave that for later. I switched to focusing on the task at hand. I had to be far enough away from the orc for my safety but also stay close enough to keep it chasing me. This was a feat possible only due to the fact that my Physical Up buff was about twenty percent more effective than it was before.

I'd discovered that increasing the rank of Support Magic up to Rank 2 had left me not only with new spells to use, but also more powerful versions of the Rank 1 spells. And that's not all. Reaching Level 2 had also increased my MP. It took a few repeated questions to the computer to find out this information, but apparently I could now use Rank 1 spells twice as much as I did before. Ten uses had been my limit when I was at Level 1, but now it was twenty.

Describing it in this fashion felt like a mess, so I came up with a new method. Using Rank 1 magic only once would cost "1 MP." Essentially, my new MP maximum amount was twenty. As for HP, I could only be certain that it'd increased. There was no way I was going to let myself be attacked by an orc to find out my maximum amount.

I neared the pitfall area and glanced at the shady area below the trees. Arisu should've been hiding on the opposite side of the trees as we'd discussed

beforehand. Her once-torn clothing was now back to the way it was before the orc's attack thanks to one of my new Rank 2 Support Magic spells—Repair. Originally it was meant to be used as a magic for restoring weapons and armor, but when used on torn clothing it would restore the clothes to their former, undamaged state. The magic appeared to be unable to remove the stickiness of sweat and the mud stains, though, so they were still fairly dirty.

Here goes. I leaped over the pitfall and landed on the other side. After doing this three times, I was getting used to it. I turned around and watched as the orc charged through the same path as me while its heavy footsteps shook the ground. The orc stepped onto the camouflaged leaves before disappearing entirely. A moment later, a fierce scream came from the bottom of the hole.

I peered down into the hole and saw the bamboo spears at the bottom had cleanly pierced through the orc's body. This time around the spears had worked quite nicely, even forcing the orc to drop the spear it was carrying. I was relieved to no longer worry about the orc having a weapon, but that comfort was short-lived.

Shit, it could die any second now. We have to act fast. I quickly picked up the plastic tank and poured out the contents into the hole, covering the orc's entire body in a layer of oil.

"Now!" I shouted to Arisu.

"Got it!"

Arisu rushed out from the trees' shade and ignited a rolled-up newspaper with the lighter, and then threw it into the hole. The orc was wreathed in flames almost immediately.

"Use the spear!" I instructed.

"H-Here goes!"

Arisu gripped the bamboo spear with a nervous expression. I ran up to her and touched her trembling hand. "Mighty Arm."

A pale glow appeared on Arisu's arms. The glow seemed brighter than before, possibly due to my level up.

“Thank... you.”

“No problem. Give it your all.” I cheered her on, giving her shoulders a light pat to encourage her. “And be careful!”

“Okay!”

The tip of the bamboo spear she held was dyed a murky dark due to the spell I’d enchanted it with beforehand: Blood Attraction. It was one of the new Rank 2 spells I’d learned by ranking up Support Magic.

Arisu gave a cute cry as she thrust the spear down into the hole. The orc at the bottom groaned in pain. Arisu’s body was wrapped in a pale light, and the wounds scattered across her body began to heal bit by bit. This effect was brought about by none other than the Blood Attraction spell. Wounding an enemy with a weapon enchanted by this spell would heal the injuries of the user depending on the damage dealt. In RPG terms, it was a drain attack; the user’s HP would be restored as the monster’s HP fell. On top of that, the spell also increased the damage you dealt overall. Truly befitting of a Rank 2 magic.

Arisu’s every thrust made the orc scream out in pain. She pushed it and pulled it out over and over, almost as though in a trance. Eventually, the orcs screaming subsided. I peered down into the hole to see the orc’s heavily-wounded body beginning to fade away.

Arisu’s body twitched and she froze. Though the change happened in a fraction of a second, I could tell that something had changed about her. *Yep. She’s now Level 1.*

Just as I had, she could enter that white room. And, in that instant, she had probably spent a long time in that room. I’d advised her to ask the PC about whatever she could think of. She had to have spent at least one or two hours there if she listened, hence the reason she seemed so calm.

Arisu exhaled deeply before turning to face me, the spear still in her grasp. It might’ve been my imagination, but the way she held the spear seemed to be more natural than before. *No. Something’s definitely different.*

“I have acquired Spearmanship and Healing Magic,” she stated matter-of-factly.



“Heal,” Arisu said as she cast healing magic on the scrape on the back of my hand. While not serious, the skin was peeled and I could feel the occasional throb. The back of my hand was enveloped in a blue light. The pain faded almost immediately, and the scrape had disappeared just like that. Possibly a remnant of the peeling, the small area remained a shade pinker than normal.

“So that’s how it works. Pretty handy.”

“Yeah.” Arisu smiled sweetly before tending to her own wounds. She was clearly the one worse off, yet was insistent on healing me first. “So, there really is a white room...”

“Did you doubt me?”

“I wouldn’t say that, but...”

“I guess it is pretty unbelievable.” I forced a smile.

“Yeah,” Arisu agreed.

To tell you the truth, had the situation been reversed, I would’ve had my reservations as well.

“In any case, I made sure to choose my skills properly. All thanks to you, Kaya-san.”

“How about you call me Kazuhisa, or simply Kazu instead? We’re companions, aren’t we?”

“Okay, Kazuhisa-san... Kazu-san. Um...” Arisu gazed up at me with a shy smile. “Please call me Arisu. That’s how everyone else calls me. And, I’m your junior. Please feel no need for formalities with me.”

“Sure thing, Arisu.”

“Right!” Arisu gave a cheerful response and smiled happily. Seeing her like that made me a bit happy as well, and a small smile donned my face.

“Can you use the spear?”

“Yes.”

Right now, Arisu was holding the rusty spear the orc had carried before its demise. Its iron-forged tip was rusted, but the spear could be used a lot more effectively than the half-assed bamboo spear I'd made. *Actually, let's fix this thing up.* I took the spear from Arisu for a moment and touched the tip with my finger.

"Repair." The tip began to glow with blue light, and rust particles fell off from the tip. After about ten seconds, the metal part of the spear had regained its original luster, making the weapon feel brand new. So it did work.

"Wow!" Arisu cried out in wonder. "That's so amazing, Kazu-san!"

"Yeah, it really is."

Even though I'd been the one to do it, my response made it feel like someone else entirely had cleaned off the rust. The event I was witnessing was simply too unrealistic. *Or so it should be, but the feeling of realism has long since vanished from my mind,* I lamented.

"But now... I can fight." Arisu's lips tightened, and she nodded with a stern expression. "I won't be powerless anymore."

Chapter 8: The Distant Scenery

Forming a party was a rather simplistic process. By grabbing onto each other's hands and simply wishing to form one, the party would be formed. As proof of the party's creation, a red ring appeared around the pinkies on each of our right hands. While the ring looked normal, it was completely intangible and could not be touched. It kind of reminded me of AR technology in a way. "Any sufficiently advanced magic is indistinguishable from technology," I think the phrase went. A famous science fiction author had once said that... *Hmm, I feel like I might have that backwards.*

"M-Matching rings..."

Arisu looked up at me with upturned eyes and smiled bashfully. Her smile was pure, like a flower blooming in spring. The intensity behind it made me gulp reflexively. *Did she notice my panic?* I snuck a look back at her, but she seemed to just be smiling out of happiness. Well, whatever. In any case, I got myself a companion—a huge step for me.

So then, the first thing we need to do is...

"We should get a clear outlook on the current situation," I muttered and motioned Arisu to follow before walking in the opposite direction of the road. She rushed up to me in a hurry.

"Um, where are we going?" she asked.

"There's a steep cliff up ahead. We can survey the station from there."

Arisu continued to stare at me in puzzlement despite the explanation I offered. *Yeah, I know. If things were normal, I would be doing the same.* But right now, the situation was not normal. Arisu and I had to come to terms with that, and seeing it with our own eyes would be all the proof needed.

Whatever was happening at the mountain's peak, we had to figure it out.

Our school, Kitayama Private Academy, was located within the mountain known to the locals as “Kitayama.” To be precise, the entire mountain was the academy’s property. Traveling by car to the base of the mountain from the nearest city required a thirty-minute drive down a road winding through and about the rice fields, and walking up to either school building from the mountain’s base was another thirty-minute trek, and a bit of a difficult one at that.

The middle school building was on the southwest side of the mountain and the high school building lay to the southeast, with two roads connecting the two buildings. The road we’d been using to hunt orcs was a roundabout path commonly referred to as the South Road.

The other path was known as the North Straightaway and connected both buildings by a long, straight path that took about ten minutes to walk. Or it should’ve at least, but according to Arisu, this path had been covered in a wave of dirt and sand after the earthquake, rendering the path unusable. She apparently had attempted to run away to the North Straightaway before discovering it was a dead end and then, left with no other options, ran this way.

At any rate, our current location was on the roundabout path connecting the two school buildings, a bit further south than the middle of the road. We were walking farther south from there. Once we reached the cliff up ahead, we would be able to look down and survey the station and surrounding townscape.

Once we reached the cliffside we took in the distant scenery... and could only stare in blank amazement at the vast grassy plain below us. Yep, you heard me. A plain. A huge mountain could be seen looming in the distant horizon, but everything before it was a huge grassland. There was not even a single house, much less a city. I couldn’t even see a single rice field, and there was no one to be found.

Birds were flying high in the sky. Upon closer investigation, however, these birds were nothing like ones we’d ever seen before. The birds we were familiar with on a day-to-day basis were nowhere near this size. Forget present day birds—even a pteranodon wouldn’t be as big as the so-called birds flying in front of us.

One of the gigantic birds dove down to the plain, toward an elephant grazing. The bird was much larger than it, and the bird's talons agilely snatched up the elephant before it began ascending, the elephant still caught in its clutches... and before long, it vanished beyond the horizon.

"I... um... really want to ask something that might sound a *bit* ridiculous, but..." Arisu mumbled.

Yep, same here. I wanted to say something that would sound absolutely far-fetched. I couldn't help but want to ask it, because...

"Where exactly... is the station?"

"I'm not sure... but it's probably far, far away from here."

"I think so too," Arisu replied as she awkwardly scratched the back of her head.

Wait, that's not what I wanted to say. I'm pretty sure it was something else. I gazed down at the girl beside me, and she looked up at me with a troubled expression.

"I'm sorry. I... don't know what face I should be making."

You can just smile... I wanted to say that but didn't want to reveal my total nerd side by quoting an anime, so I kept quiet. Deep down, though, I felt like there was no point in worrying over something so trivial now...

I had expected this type of development. The situation we'd been thrust into had given me a faint idea of what was happening. I had asked countless questions around that kind of supposed idea back in the white room too. The questions weren't given a clear answer every time, but by combining the various answers I received afterward I was able to come to my supposed conclusion. Coming to this cliff was akin to a confirmation of that. That earthquake was probably when it happened. As the earth shook, we were... no, the entire *mountain* was wrapped up in some huge supernatural event.

I gently took hold of Arisu's hand. It was warm, and she squeezed back tightly in return, as though desperate for something to hold onto.

"Arisu, let's level up and go back to ask some questions."

“Sure... let’s do that, Kazu-san.”

We couldn’t afford to sit here idly nor could we stop now, so the two of us decided we were going to keep progressing. We would level up, return to the white room, and question the computer about this shithole of a situation.

Hand in hand, we went back the way we came from.

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The raven scouted high in the sky and soon spotted an orc.

The orcs seemed to be coming down from the mountain’s peak. By following the straightaway and descending further down the mountain you would stumble upon a road diverging to the left and right. Going east would lead you to the high school building, and west would take you to the middle school building.

“Is there something on top of the mountain?”

Perturbed as I was, I had no intention of plunging into an orc minefield now. We lured them each one by one to the forest near the South Road and, once far enough away that their cries would go unheard by their orc friends, Arisu and I killed them.

Arisu’s spear technique was simply marvelous, or more accurately, the power of the Spearmanship skill was. She could only be called a mess a while ago; her knees were weak from fear, her thrusts had no power behind them, and her aim was iffy at best. With her new Rank 1 Spearmanship skill, however, she was putting her own weight in each thrust like a veteran soldier and could make short work of the orcs.

In terms of pure skill, Arisu was about an even match for an orc, but that didn’t mean her odds were necessarily even. After all, she had me backing her up with Support Magic spells like Keen Weapon, Physical Up, and Mighty Arm. These three spells had been helping me ever since I first learned Support Magic, and now that I’d increased the skill’s rank, the spells were giving me more power and were helping Arisu. Thanks to them, a girl both smaller and

supposedly weaker than me was overwhelming the muscle-made orc, albeit in a one-on-one.

An orc charged at her, swinging its sword with reckless abandon. Arisu took some distance with some handy footwork (only made possible by Physical Up), put some power into her arms and legs (enhanced by Mighty Arm), and finally thrust forward the glowing iron-tipped spear (an effect of Keen Weapon). Her thrust dealt a severe wound to the orc's leg, and the orc fell forward with a scream, unable to keep itself upright. Arisu didn't hesitate as she stabbed its back. The spear gouged into the orc's back deeply, blue blood splattering onto its face.

The orc attempted to flee by rolling away, but Arisu mercilessly chased it down. Thanks to Physical Up, her pace was quicker than the orc's, and she caught up in an instant. With a spirited yell she thrust at the orc yet again, and the orc cried out in pain as its throat was pierced.

How fast was that fight? Around a minute or so? Having been dealt a fatal blow, the orc's body was enveloped in a pale glow before fading away.

We had fought head-on and won against an orc.



“I did it!” Arisu shouted out in joy. Her breathing might’ve been heavy after the battle, but she hopped in joy, spear in hand, and rushed over to me before giving me a huge hug. I could feel her voluptuous breasts pressing against my chest. *So soft.* My thoughts were jumbled and I looked down at her in confusion.

When Arisu realized what she’d done, her cheeks were dyed bright red and she averted her eyes.

“U-Um, I’m sorry.”

She jumped back in a panic and looked to the side but occasionally sent glances my way before quickly facing the other way again.

What’s up with her? Just a few seconds ago she was shrewd and tactful, yet now she’s completely innocent and defenseless... A wave of skepticism suddenly overtook me. *Is she trying to ensnare me with her looks? Or maybe use me whenever possible?*

Hmm... but it’s not all that bad. Right now, we needed one another. Without the aid of my magic, Arisu would find herself in a tough spot against the orcs. Even with the help of Mighty Arm, her physical strength was still inferior to an orc’s. Were she to attempt to try and face one in a bout of strength, she would be grappled to the ground and lose in a second. The orcs were no slouches when it came to speed, either. We needed Physical Up’s agility boost to be able to escape from one of them.

My magic had both removed the rust from the spear tip and strengthened it. I even could have a raven fly in as a distraction to protect her if need be. The gist being, there were many cards I could play now that I was Level 2. For the time being, at least, our interests aligned. The problem was everything after that. As she said herself, she needed to get stronger. *I should have asked her what she needed to obtain that strength for...* I chided myself for not asking beforehand. This was a blunder on my part.

My head remained downcast as I sat in silence, and Arisu peeked at me with a nervous expression. I raised my head to speak.

“Arisu, we can clearly hold our own together. We should decide on a plan.” My eyes met with hers as I spoke, and I stared deep into her obsidian-black eyes. “What do you want to do next?”

Arisu hesitated for a second before giving a big nod. “I... have a request I’d like to make,” she said, turning her head and looking off to the west.

If I remembered correctly, the middle school building should have been on the other side of those trees... and come to think of it, that was where she came from when she was fleeing from the orc. She mentioned going to the North Road before having to retrace her steps and come this way instead, but where was she before then? Where had she run into the orcs?

“I want to help my friend. Could you please go to the middle school with me, Kazu-san?”

A friend? And she wants... to help them?

“You mean... to help you rescue your friend from the orc’s clutches?” I asked.

Arisu nodded in response, and then cast her eyes downward. Her mouth opened and closed soundlessly as she hesitated over her next words. Appearing as though preparing herself for something, she clutched her chest with both hands and stared at me with a sincere but emotionally-packed gaze. She clearly wanted to confess something that was weighing heavily on her.

“I abandoned my friend while the orcs were chasing us. I escaped alone.”

Chapter 9: Level Up

Arisu was apparently best friends with this girl called Tamaki Ryuki. Apparently, she and Arisu had been in the same class as one another for the entire three-year period she had attended middle school so far, and the two were always attached by the hip.

“She’s a very energetic girl, always running around. I’m not that athletic, but I like watching Tamaki run. One day she came up to me, and held out her hand. ‘Let’s go play, come on!’ I was able to form many friendships thanks to her.” Arisu smiled bashfully. She was no social butterfly, or so she claimed, but her friend gave her a chance to enjoy her school life.

I quietly listened as she explained and nodded for her to continue.

“Today we went to the Cultivation Center. Tamaki wanted to learn how to cook, so I was supposed to teach her.”

The Cultivation Center was a multipurpose building refurbished from an old school facility not far from the middle school. Several rooms with overly-fancy wooden floors or tatami mats had been created under the guise of granting the students the opportunity to learn all sorts of skills and tricks while isolated atop the mountain, and the culinary room was one of many such spots in the building for the students.

“After the earthquake, the burners went out, and we couldn’t get any water from the faucets anymore... The orcs came not too long after that.”

She claimed there were about ten of them in total. Tamaki and Arisu had succeeded in escaping the Cultivation Center and were on their way to the high school. They first made their way to the North Straightaway but found it buried in rocks and dirt. Left with no choice, they decided to escape through the forest to the south. However, the two were found by an orc midway through the journey when Arisu accidentally stepped on something noisy, alerting the orc to their presence.

“And then... she chose to become a decoy so I could escape. ‘I’m faster, so I’m more likely to be able to get away from it’, is what she told me before jumping out and breaking into a run.”

Tamaki’s distraction lured the orc away and allowed Arisu to escape into the forest. Unfortunately for her, another orc ended up stumbling upon her, and that was when my familiar found them.

“Tamaki is still out there, I’m sure of it. She told me to meet up with her in the woods if she escaped, but...”

“Was there any spot in particular you chose?”

Arisu answered my question by silently pointing at a stone monument near the area we were hunting in. *Huh? Was this always here? I don’t remember seeing anything like this until now...*

“We found this a long time ago while we were exploring the forest,” Arisu explained. They must have chosen this spot because it was an important memory for the two of them. “Tamaki allowing herself to be a distraction was the only reason I was able to escape. I have to go help her.”

I fell into thought: *What are the chances that this “Tamaki” was successful in escaping yet incapable of meeting at this monument...?* Personally, I had never been to the Cultivation Center. That being said, I *had* heard some things from people.

The Cultivation Center was isolated in the forest some distance away from any other buildings. As soon as the area became infrequent, the sea of trees had practically devoured it, the building hidden within the forest in the blink of an eye. Visibility around the perimeter was poor due to this, and warnings had been issued to take caution once it was dark outside. If Tamaki was able to flee from the orc safely, then it seemed likely she would take refuge in the trees around the Cultivation Center.

There was also the chance that she couldn’t reach this spot, however. *Perhaps she was injured and was hiding somewhere in desperation?* I couldn’t ignore the possibility.

Setting aside whether Tamaki had managed to escape the orc, the main issue lay in the fact that Arisu would go to help her friend if there existed even the tiniest of possibilities that she was safe.

“Let’s not put the cart before the horse,” I argued. “What good would it do if we go to help and end up dying instead? We can’t rush this.”

“Yes, I agree.”

“So, once your Spearmanship and my Summoning Magic skills are both Rank 2, let’s go and scout out the area.”

“Okay, let’s do it!” Arisu nodded wholeheartedly.

You could call this a compromise... I suppose. Her having a goal like that could not have been more helpful for me, though. Understanding what she wanted to do made it easy to figure out her end-game. Now all I needed to do was make sure each of our wants were fulfilled.

On the contrary, it would prove difficult for her to move as she wanted while keeping her objective a secret from me. Now, however, our goals were one and the same. There would be no reason for us to part ways now. At least, not until I leveled up and raised the rank of my Summoning Magic.

Once I leveled up, I would become capable of calling upon puppet golems. By summoning two puppet golems and enchanting them with Support Magic, I figured I should be able to fight against the orcs to some extent... Well, maybe not. The specifics of a puppet golem were still a mystery to me. With that said, the last time I was in the white room, the computer had told me that familiars were about two or so levels behind a human with attack skills. Now that my Support Magic was Level 2, the effects of Keen Weapon, Physical Up, and Mighty Arm had increased. If I took Arisu’s current ability into consideration, defeating one orc with a Rank 2 familiar strengthened with Support Magic’s buffs shouldn’t prove too difficult. Until then, I needed a meatshi—err, Arisu. Parting ways with her would not end well for me.

I could only call it fortunate that she accepted my suggestion. My heart was racing from the panic of the thought that she might ask me to go look for her immediately. Aside from that situation, I had no plans on breaking my promise to her. As soon as I leveled up, I would raise my Summoning Magic to Rank 2

and then send out some ravens for reconnaissance. Though, if the ravens revealed that attacking the Cultivation Center was tantamount to suicide, I would tell her outright. I certainly wasn't about to embark on a suicide mission... and I hoped Arisu wouldn't, either.

Once Arisu's Spearmanship and my Summoning Magic skills were both Rank 2, I was sure taking on two or three orcs at once wouldn't prove difficult. Hell, even four at once might be possible. But if the ten orcs she'd mentioned earlier were still around? No way. We would be obliterated.

Regardless, we needed to raise our levels. I intended to use sound logic to persuade her that this was the only way if all ten orcs were still there. A 10-on-2 battle was not going to work out, and I would try my hardest to make sure she understood that. If she still insisted on going even despite my warning... then I would have no choice but to abandon her. She would have to attempt to save her friend alone. There was no way she could win against all of those orcs, and I was certain she would meet a terrible end.

But I wouldn't stop her from going—more like I *couldn't* stop her. That would be like spitting in her face after all she'd done for me. It was only thanks to her that I was able to raise my level with such safety. Having someone to rely on was very helpful.

And above all else, she actually interacted with me like I was a human being. She chose to not hide but instead properly inform me that danger awaited me at the Cultivation Center, and there were ten orcs in total there. She'd even gone so far as to ask me for *help*. She didn't even try to hide the fact that it was dangerous despite the fact that someone would normally decline to help with something so perilous. Every single thing Arisu had done so far was done without any ulterior motives. As such, I would reply with the same treatment. There would be no deception from now on.

I glanced at my watch. 4:30 p.m. I was pretty sure the earthquake happened between 2:30 and 3:00, so less than two hours had passed. Around this time of the year, the sun would usually set around 6 p.m. Well, it did yesterday, at least. With all that had happened today, I wasn't sure if today would be the same, but considering the sun's current position, I figured we could count on that being

the same at least. In any case, moving through the forest at night was far too dangerous.

“It’s almost five. We have to level up within the next thirty minutes, okay? Let’s get moving.”

“Okay!”

I motioned for the raven to take off and had it search for a lone orc. Once it discovered one, I let the orc discover me and led it back to Arisu. I searched for another orc whilst she dealt with that one, and so on and so forth.

Through our efficient strategy, three orcs were brought to an end in less than twenty minutes. The third orc gave the last push that Arisu needed to level up.

All of a sudden, my vision went white... and the next moment, I found myself in the white room alongside Arisu.

Chapter 10: Preparations for the Fight

Arisu and I turned to face one another inside of the white room.

“We’re here... together?”

“Hmm. I think this might have something to do with it,” I said, glancing down at the intangible red rings on each of our pinkies. My eyes then shifted down to the desk—or rather, two desks.

Two sets of desks and chairs were placed side-by-side in the center of the room, laptops sitting atop each desk. The statuses of both Arisu and I were each displayed on the screens.

“So, this is your status, huh...” I spoke as I glanced over Arisu’s screen curiously.

“H-Hey, don’t look!”

“It’s fine, isn’t it? There’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“It’s still kind of embarrassing!”

Arisu jumped next to me in a hurry, hands waving, and frantically tried to push me away from her screen. Her comical reaction made me smile despite my best attempts not to, and I continued to try and peek at her screen with a smirk on my face.

“Hrmm.” After a while, Arisu poked my side with a bright-red face. “This is sexual harassment.”

“I did nothing of the sort. Just a joke to lighten the mood.”

“Then why do you have a huge smirk on your face!”

I chose to not reply and instead burst out smiling at her poor attempt to hide the screen with her hands, still beet-red in the face.

“Geeez! You’re so mean! I made a mistake in thinking you were a good person!”

“Sorry, sorry. I overdid it a little.”

I knew the conversation would never go anywhere unless I apologized, so I did so meekly. We would be doing nothing but wasting time if we kept joking around... Though, time was kind of unlimited in this world, so I guess we weren’t really wasting any of it. *Huh, so I guess this means that we can’t really waste any time here? This room makes for the perfect place to strategize, then.*

For the time being, I took a seat at my respective desk and began typing questions to the laptop. *First up: Was the reason for us coming to this room together due to the two of us being in a party?*

The word “**Yes**” appeared on the screen. It turned out we would come to this room every time a member of the party leveled up. You could also turn off this feature and instead come to this room alone if you disabled it in the settings menu.

Now that I look closer, there’s a few more displayed items than before. I could see Arisu’s full name listed in a ‘Party Members’ section, and an icon displayed to the left of this field. Clicking on this icon would apparently disable the feature that allowed your party members to come to the room with you, or in simpler terms, the accompanying feature.

“Why did they even bother making this feature...?” I mumbled.

It wasn’t like I didn’t want anyone coming to the room with me. Rather, the opposite was the case. Unless you were on bad terms with your party members or had some ability to hide, there were only benefits in coming to the room together. One particularly huge benefit was the fact that you could take the time to calm down and gather your thoughts. Not only that, there was ample time for you to discuss things over with your party. This gave me plenty of time to have a strategy meeting with Arisu. Considering sunset was just around the corner, this feature was a saving grace.

While it’s definitely a nice feature, I don’t really see any need in having a huge discussion just yet. There was no need for us to wrack our brains over a plan of attack on the Cultivation Center until I reached Level 3.

“There’s not much we need to discuss right now, but just in case, is there anything you want to talk about?” I asked, turning to face Arisu.

“Um... There is one thing.” Slightly perplexed, Arisu gazed at me as I sat in the chair. “Is it all right if I ask... about you?”

“Huh? Me? I’m a pretty boring guy, though.”

Arisu’s head fell downcast at my immediate dismissal to her question. *She’s pretty smart. It looks like she realized that I didn’t want to touch on my past.*

“I see. Maybe someday, then?”

“Sure. I’ll tell you about myself one day.”

One day, I will. Provided you’re still together with me, anyway. I added inside my mind.

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Arisu sat down in her chair once more and began clicking on the computer.

ARISU	
LEVEL: 2	SPEARMANSHIP: 1→2
HEALING MAGIC: 1	SKILL POINTS: 2→0

The moment Arisu upgraded her Spearmanship skill to Rank 2 and clicked the “**Confirm?**” button, we found ourselves back in the woods.

“All right, let’s get a move on,” I said. “I’m not sure how many more orcs we’ll have to defeat for me to level up, but it’s best we hurry.”

“Okay... Um, so, hear me out. If you find a group of two orcs, is it possible you could take them both to me at once?”

Hmm, that wasn’t a bad idea. Now that her Spearmanship skill was Rank 2, there was a chance she could take on two orcs at once if I backed her up. If it

looks like things weren't going well, I could send in a raven to back her up. Furthermore, even if we ended up being outmatched, we could always make a quick getaway with Support Magic. There was no problem as long as we can run away from our enemies.

Either way, there would eventually come a time where we would have to take on multiple enemies at once. Thus, it would be for the best that we tried things like this out now.

It was at this moment that the raven returned.

"Two enemies that way. One enemy this way," the raven squawked, using its beak to indicate the direction.

"Guide me to the group of two." The moment I finished speaking, I broke off into a run.

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Arisu had a calm complexion on her face when I returned. Quite surprising, considering the two armed orcs following close behind me. As soon as she spotted me, she readied her spear. It might've been my imagination, but it looked as though there was some technique behind the way she held her spear.

"You up for this?" I asked.

"I'm ready!"

Once we finished our brief exchange, Arisu lowered her waist and pushed off the ground, a sharp cry coming from her as she charged at the orcs. I stopped running once I passed by Arisu and came to a stop before looking back to watch.

Arisu held the heavy spear with ease, both hands gripped tight on the handle, and stared at one of the approaching orcs. The orc held its sword high overhead as it charged at her. Suddenly, Arisu moved diagonally to the right before thrusting with the spear. Her movements were very smooth. The spear pierced through the rightmost orc's windpipe in a single blow. I could only stare in pure amazement as I watched on from the sidelines. Her movements appeared so natural that I could feel goosebumps on my arms. Just like a master, she moved

with complete understanding of not only the breathing but also the distance between her and her opponent.

The other orc nearly tripped over itself as it tried to stop its approach, and Arisu let go of the spear during that moment and looked in my direction.

“Now, Kazu-san! Pass it!”

“Y-Yeah, here.” I hurriedly grabbed onto a bamboo spear I’d left standing against a nearby tree and tossed it at her. There was a chance that her spear would get stuck after piercing through one of them, so I’d left a spare spear handy nearby with that scenario in mind.

The moment Arisu caught the spear, she readied herself and stepped forward. The other orc, clearly shaken by the fact that its partner had been taken out nearly instantaneously, was pierced by her attack. However, her attack wasn’t as deep this time. The spear pierced the orc in the shoulder, and despite letting loose a groan of pain, the orc forcibly rotated its body to attack with the spear that it held.

The orc swung its spear in a sideways swipe, the wind pressure generated from which nearly blowing Arisu’s petite body away. No matter how skilled she was thanks to her skill, she was still just a third-year middle school girl. Nevertheless, Arisu planted her feet on the ground and barely managed to hold on thanks to Physical Up and Mighty Arm’s effects. The force behind the swing made the orc lose its balance, and Arisu did not let this chance go to waste. She leaped at the orc with agile movements and moved her hands from the middle to the front-end of the spear. With great accuracy, she stabbed the spear into the orc’s throat. A stream of blue blood sprayed from the orc’s neck, and it collapsed on the spot, ceasing movement not long after.

Including her quick execution of the first orc, the total time it had taken for her to dispatch both of them was around ten seconds. If I’d been a bit smoother about tossing her the spear, that time could’ve been shortened even more.

“Huh... You were definitely ready.”

Arisu looked back at me and gave a small smile. The two orcs collapsed behind her began to glow and disappeared from view, leaving behind nothing

but two small gems. A familiar fanfare sounded out in my head accompanied by an androgynous voice.

You have leveled up!

Ah, so that's how it is, I thought. Arisu and I had defeated 6 orcs in total since we formed a party. That meant each person in the party had acquired about three orcs worth of experience points. Does that mean each person has to defeat as many orcs as their next level?

That was my last thought before Arisu and I were warped to the white room.

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Inside once more, we glanced at each other.

“Now that I'm Level 3, I can make my Summoning Magic Rank 2,” I announced.

“All right.”

“As promised, let's try scouting out the Cultivation Center.”

“Okay! Let's do it!”

It was time to get down to business. Time was of the essence now, so coming up with a detailed plan of attack while we were still in this room was a must.

“First, we'll sneak up to the side of the Cultivation Center. If there are any orcs wandering around the building, we'll stealthily eliminate them when they are isolated.”

“Oh, I see. We're reducing their numbers.”

“Once we're done with that, we'll just have to see for ourselves how many there are...”

Right now, it should've been about 5pm. There might not have been enough time for us to get proper reconnaissance done, but I wasn't going to try and get every single detail down. The fight was lost the moment night settled. After all, there was the possibility the orcs possessed night vision. Whether this was actually true or not mattered little while the sun was still up, though. Their

biological features were a complete mystery; we just had to assume they could see at night.

“Night vision... Does that mean their eyes shine like cats’?” Arisu asked.

“I’m not sure. What I am sure of, though, is that wild boars act at night, and pigs are domesticated versions of them.”

“Oh, that’s a good point.”

“Modern day humans have very degenerated eyes... Basically, we’re in the group of creatures with poor night vision. Though, I’ve heard stories of tribes which walk through pitch-black forests with no issues and survive on a hunter-gatherer type of lifestyle...”

“Whoa. You sure know a lot, Kazu-san.” Arisu stared at me with glittering eyes.

Wait, actually, wasn’t that something I read in a web novel? I chose to keep that tidbit to myself. Well, the point is, we’d be at a disadvantage once night fell.

“Just in case we have to fight at night, there’s a new spell I learned from ranking up Support Magic called ‘Summon Floating Lantern’. Apparently, it summons a ball of light that floats around, but doing that would...”

“Our position would be given away by the light. I see.”

A pocket flashlight would do us some good, though unfortunately, I was not in possession of one at the moment.

“Anyway, back to the point. We can’t do anything that would lure enemies to us. We’re completely outnumbered; there would be no way out for us if we got surrounded by a huge group of orcs.”

What was one to do when the enemy’s numbers were high? Simple: the classic hit-and-run strategy.

“If we can find a group of three of them in one spot, then we’ll hit ’em fast and hard. The skill you displayed earlier against the other orcs was amazing. You just have to bring it out again. That’s all there is to it!”

“U-Um... I’ll give it my best shot,” Arisu said, clenching her tiny fists in the process. Her current cute appearance was completely unlike the fierce expression she displayed during the fight earlier. I could barely believe she was the same person as before.

“We’ll have to run if there’s seven or more. If there’s around four to six, then me and my familiars will act as decoys while you take them out.”

“Won’t that be dangerous for you?”

“You’re still unfamiliar with how the orcs move, so I think you’d be in more danger. You could get surrounded, and I won’t be able to do anything if that happens. One mistake could be fatal...”

“I know.”

Arisu clutched her chest with both hands, her shoulders trembling slightly. Her fear was only natural. One tiny mistake and she would experience a fate worse than death before finally being killed. She just wanted to save her friend from suffering a similar fate.

“I... was almost caught once... If you hadn’t saved me right then, Kazu-san, I would have...”

“Whether we carry out this operation or not depends on you, Arisu. If you think it’s too much, then...”

“No way.” Arisu interrupted me, shaking her head. Even despite the fear carved into her heart, she held down the tremors shaking her body and stared right at my eyes with a gaze filled with determination.

“I’ll do it. Let me save my friend.”

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 3	SUPPORT MAGIC: 2
SUMMONING MAGIC: 1→2	SKILL POINTS: 2→0

Chapter 11: Breaking into the Cultivation Center

Fifteen minutes had passed since I reached Level 3. Currently, the two of us were hiding in the thicket around the Cultivation Center.

As someone who transferred into the academy during his first year of high school, I was not familiar with the interior of this building and therefore requested a rundown from Arisu.

The Cultivation Center was a wooden three-story school building that was used up until about forty years ago and had since been refurbished. Well, “refurbished” was putting it a bit lightly; the entire building was basically rebuilt from the ground up. The decrepit, rotting wood was replaced, and the little leftover wood that wasn’t completely unusable was reused. Key points in the building’s structure were reinforced with rebar, and the once two-story building had a third floor added on top. The old electricity, gas, and water systems were thrown out and replaced entirely, and a new air-conditioning system was installed. Equipment and facilities too expensive to be put into the main school building were instead installed into this one.

The arrangement of rooms within was much closer to that of a western-style house you would sooner see in a movie than a school building. After passing through the front entrance, there was an open lobby with both the first and second floors open to see. The first floor contained a kitchen and a bathroom, and on the second were some Japanese-style rooms and small-scale party rooms meant for a tea ceremony or other small events. The third floor was made up of a large conference room which could be used for all sorts of purposes, as well as a housing facility made for visitors. Underneath the first floor lay a (usually locked) basement containing supplies in case of a disaster, such as emergency rations or fuel.

Rations, huh? To tell you the truth, I could actually conjure some up with Summoning Magic. The same held true for water. That being said, MP wasn’t something I could afford to spend thoughtlessly and we had no use for those

things as of present, so I had yet to experiment with it. The emergency fuel, however, was an unexpected find. In a dire situation like this, gasoline and the items with it were all priceless commodities. Securing the Cultivation Center as a base was, accordingly, an attractive proposal even without taking Arisu's situation into the equation. Night was fast approaching, meaning finding a safe place to sleep would be a problem.

According to Arisu, there were, in total, around ten people in the Cultivation Center when the orcs attacked. There were five people using the kitchen, and then five members of the tea ceremony club upstairs.

"The door in front of the stairs to the third floor was closed and locked earlier. As long as the orcs don't break down the door and go upstairs, we shouldn't have to worry about the third floor," Arisu whispered to me as we crouched within the thicket. "If there are any orcs on the second-floor balcony then we should see them immediately... Either way, if we take a peek inside the lobby, we should be able to get a general grasp of everything."

"Got it. Feel free to take down any groups of two or less that we come across."

"Understood."

On our way here we had fought two orcs, both of which were brought down by Arisu with a single stab to the throat. Her opponents weren't even given the chance to scream anymore; she had perfected her method.

Arisu was now Level 2, and had defeated four orcs since her level rose. The experience points gained were being split between us so she would level up if we brought down two more orcs. Leveling up would allow us to hold a strategy meeting in the white room. We could spend time coming up with a plan even during the heat of battle. This was a huge benefit, which was why I told her to take down a group of two or less. If the worst-case scenario came to be and reinforcements showed up, we would be able to regain our footing, so to speak, and plan out our escape.

There didn't appear to be any orcs in the nearby area, so the first thing I did was send out a raven to scout the building. It flew up to the wide-open doors of the Cultivation Center's front entrance, descended to the ground, and slowly

peeked its head inside. *Yeah, that totally doesn't look suspicious or anything. Well, I guess it is doing spy work...*

Fortunately, no exclamation points appeared or anything of the sort. The raven flapped its wings and lifted itself off the ground, and then returned to us.

"Two orcs." Its voice, only audible to me, echoed within my ears.

"Phew. Good work!"

I nodded and turned to face Arisu. She anxiously gulped, her grip on the handle of the spear tightening.

"Stay calm. I'm going to cast magic on you now."

First, Keen Weapon... now Physical up, Mighty Arm, and lastly, Blood Attraction. There. She should be set now.

On the off chance that she did get hurt a little, Blood Attraction would let her sap the orcs' HP and continue to fight without any issues. The real problem here was whether or not her slender body could take a hit from something with so much muscle mass... *Hmm, doesn't that mean this magic is kind of pointless right now?... Well, it's the thought that counts, right? Better than nothing, anyway. My MP's still holding strong, so it's fine.*

Taking into account the raven's 1 MP usage, my current maximum MP was 29. The four spells I just cast on Arisu left my MP at 25... *No, scratch that, it's 24.* Blood Attraction was a Rank 2 spell, which meant the MP cost was double compared to a Rank 1 spell. *All right. Now, it's time to really start burning through MP.*

"Summon Puppet Golem."

A wooden doll around 150 centimeters high appeared in front of me. The wooden-crafted doll was rough, and its nose stuck out like a branch on a tree. I couldn't help but be reminded of Pinocchio as I looked at it. A club was clutched in its right hand, and the other wielded a round, wooden shield. The doll turned to me and bowed.

"S-So cuuuute!" Arisu squealed in excitement, her eyes sparkling as she stared at the golem. *So you think it's cute, huh? Let's see you say the same once its*

body is dyed blue in blood. Well, in any case, I'm glad she's still in a good mood.

"Keen Weapon, Physical Up, Mighty Arm," I chanted. The golem shone as the spells enchanted it. I didn't bother casting Blood Attraction on the golem. If it ended up being killed, then that was that.

Lastly, I casted the same three spells on myself. Summoning the puppet golem had reduced my maximum MP by another 4, and if you included the two sets of spells I'd just cast, that left my current MP at 14, and the maximum at 25. *This should be good for now, I think... Hopefully.*

Knowing how many more times you could cast magic was very important to keep track of. I'd love it if we could always see our HP and MP like in a game, but there was no status screen constantly keeping track of your current condition that I could find, as much as it saddened me, meaning we would have to be ever mindful of our MP expenditure in the future.

Calculating how much we'd recovered wasn't easy, either... *A stopwatch might be necessary in the future.*

I decided to set that matter aside for now and instead weighed the benefits of summoning another puppet golem. The thought of having a golem to guard me sounded ideal, but MP wasn't something I could spend in excess. With that said, I wouldn't hold back in summoning another one if the battle began to tip in the orcs' favor.

Guess I'll hold off for now. Now then... It's go time.

"Go!!!" I shouted. At my signal, Arisu jumped out of the thicket. I waited a couple of seconds before following behind her.

Two orcs weren't enough of a threat for us to consider formulating a plan. In fact, the better option would be for us to go inside of the Cultivation Center, shut the doors, and eliminate them in a quick and quiet fashion, so as to not alert any orcs wandering outside.

The puppet golem followed behind me, staggering as it did. Contrary to its unsteady footwork, however, the golem was keeping up with my running speed. Arisu reached the front doors ahead of me before stopping in front of them, her body going rigid momentarily.

What the hell happened? I wondered as I caught up to her.

She was staring motionlessly at the center of the room. Curious, I looked in that direction...

In the center of the dimly-lit lobby, I could make out the figures of two orcs hunched over something similar-looking to a white doll. Their ugly rears were exposed for the world to see, and their hips were rocking back and forth.

Arisu scowled, her teeth grinding fiercely enough for me to hear. She had remained a calm, collected person in the face of everything happening around her up until now, not a trace of rashness or violence to be found. I'd believed her to be the type of person that acted composed as she moved, concealing her emotions within. Presently, however, her expression could only be described as *vicious*. Anger was clouding her sense of judgment.

Arisu bent her knees and kicked off the ground, her long, black hair fluttering in the air as she rushed forward. A strong wind blew as she charged forward, speeding towards the orcs. The orcs, absorbed in the shaking of their hips, appeared to have noticed the unusual sound made by Arisu launching herself forward and turned to face this way.

But by then, it was too late. Arisu's spear was already pierced into the throat of the orc closest to the door. Blue blood sprayed from the wound on its throat but not a single drop of it managed to land on Arisu. The next moment, she disappeared. No, "disappeared" wasn't quite accurate; she simply moved faster than I'd expected, forcefully extracting the spear from the orc's neck by spinning her body, and shielded her figure from sight behind the now-very-dead orc.

The uninjured orc spun around in a panicked attempt to catch sight of the mystery assassin, but by then Arisu had positioned herself right beside the unaware orc. She thrust her spear once more, using her waist for momentum, and the spear's tip embedded itself deep within the orc's throat. The orc collapsed in a heap atop its former friend, and a few seconds later, both of their bodies began to fade slowly.

The hell...? She's freaking terrifying! As I watched the orcs fade into nothingness, I solemnly swore to never make her angry. Arisu breathed out a

heavy sigh and looked down at the white, doll-like figure lying motionlessly at her feet. Once again, she bit down hard on her lip.

The next moment, I felt us being warped to the white room.

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As soon as my vision cleared, I turned to look at Arisu.

She looked at me, tears streaming down her face. I didn't want to hear her say it... but knew I had no choice but to ask. A dry feeling assailed my throat as my lips began to move.

"Was that..."

"That person... was not Tamaki-chan."

"I-I see," I fumbled, and shook my head. "Is she breathing?"

"Her neck is twisted at a weird angle." Arisu ground her teeth in frustration. Both of her fists were clenched tight, and she looked down at the floor. "What a horrible thing to do to a person."

I timidly walked up to Arisu and began gently stroking her head. She buried her face in my chest and started sobbing. I simply let her cry into my chest. That was all I could do for her right now.

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"I'm such a terrible person," Arisu mumbled after a while of crying into my chest. "For a moment there, I was glad that the person lying there wasn't Tamaki-chan—glad that it was somebody else instead."

Currently, Arisu was sitting down on the floor, sobbing in between her sentences. As she had been crying into my chest for a while now, I also sat down when she did, and currently I was holding up her body so she didn't fall to the floor. Her chest was pressed against mine again, and the feeling made me swallow my saliva instinctively. Those bad thoughts were very short-lived, though, and faded almost immediately.

Arisu lifted up her hands and grabbed hold of the collar of my uniform. Her hands—her entire body—quivered every few seconds. The cruel reality from moments prior left her in a pitiable state.

“That person... is dead. She was raped by an orc, killed, and then humiliated posthumously. And yet, even though I witnessed something so horrible, I was happy that it wasn’t my friend. I’m a horrible person, the absolute worst!”

That’s only natural, I thought to myself. Someone important to you versus a complete stranger. Weighing the two wasn’t an option; it was obvious which side the scales would tip towards. If I were in her position, I’m sure I would feel just as relieved. Although I found her reaction normal, Arisu was being so hard on herself because she couldn’t stand having felt relieved at anyone’s death.

How kindhearted of her. Her compassion for others is amazing. However, that kindheartedness could only be called a virtue in times of peace. In our present situation, this feeling was nothing but a hindrance for her, yet there was nothing I could say nor do about it.

How could I, someone who would abandon her if the situation called for it, give any words to comfort her? Would feelings as half-hearted as mine reach her pained heart? As such, I simply stayed silent as I listened to Arisu confess her sins. It was the only thing I could do, really.

Eventually, her sobs began to quiet down, and her body relaxed into my chest. I quickly hugged her to prevent her from falling to the floor. Quiet breaths came from her lips in a rhythmic pattern.

“... Looks like she fell asleep,” I murmured.

Careful not to wake her, I kneeled down with great care and slowly lowered her body onto the white floor and head onto my lap. Time in the real world would remain at a standstill so long as we were within the white room so, at the very least, I could give her heart as much rest as it needed. She could sleep to her heart’s content here. Once we returned to the real world, the continuation of our horrific reality would begin. Her heart would be worn down bit by bit.

I looked down at Arisu’s peaceful sleeping face. *Please, take a good, long rest. For now, at least*, I prayed from the bottom of my heart.

Chapter 12: Cultivation Center Clean-up Battle

She's been sleeping for a while now. My legs were beginning to grow numb but I chose to refrain from doing anything so rude as to wake Arisu from her peaceful slumber or scribble something on her face. I simply stared at her peaceful, sleeping expression.

I was spurring her into battle. She was younger than me, a delicate maiden, yet I was using her in battle as a shield to give myself a safety buffer. I was the man here, yet I still hid behind her. Feelings of guilt washed over me. *Everything below my legs has gone numb, but if letting her use my lap to rest like this is enough to pay back the debt a little, then...*

As the thought crossed my mind, a certain truth dawned on me. There was no doubt about it: I was a coward. *Yep, a complete and utter coward. But that's fine. No matter how dirty it is, I'll survive at all costs.*

My mind flashed back to the scenery I'd taken in from the top of the cliff. The grassy plain that I had never seen until now, the gigantic bird preying on that elephant with ease... and the orcs that attacked us.

"It's almost like... we're in another world," I thought aloud.

Another world. I began mulling over the strange idea. Even if we managed to get away from the orcs and somehow descend the mountain, I knew for a fact that our homes wouldn't be there waiting for our return. That's why this room existed now... and why skills existed now. There was no choice left for us but to live inside of this unbelievable, fantasy game-esque world.

"I don't wanna die."

Until about two or three hours ago, I would have killed that guy and then gone, "Well, what now?" Now, however, the only thing on my mind was survival. This was most likely due to the fact that I'd experienced actual combat for the first time... and had felt the fear of death encroach on me as I fought. I never could have imagined the level of dread I would feel towards the idea of

death until I was forced into combat, and the fear had pushed me into cowardice. My skills were my only method of fighting back, and I would use them to survive. For the sake of survival, I would use Arisu, too. *Hmm, by that logic, doesn't that mean that something as small as a few moments of numbness in my legs is trivial in comparison?*

Time appeared to have flown by as I was lost in thought; Arisu was beginning to stir. Her eyelids fluttered open and she rubbed her eyes with her hands to clear them, still half-asleep. Her hand moved to wipe away a bit of drool spilling from her mouth, and she gave a cute yawn before her eyes began to move. I was still staring down at her, and our gazes met.

"Nyah!" she screamed, rolling off of my lap and onto the floor. Smiling impishly, I greeted her.

"Morning!"

Not long after, I found myself sitting on the floor apologizing repeatedly.

"I'm sorry, okay? But, you see, there's no passage of time in this room, so it's fine, isn't it?"

"B-But!"

"Besides, your sleeping face was cute."

"Y-You were looking?!"

"You bet."

"Geez, whatever, I don't care!" Arisu cried, her cheeks dyed vermillion, and swatted at my head as I remained sitting. *Hmm? Why was I still sitting, you ask?* Well, that was due to the fact my legs were still numb as ever, which prevented me from standing up... *Hmm. If we were to return right now, would my legs still feel numb once we were back?* I didn't feel like they would be. Even if I were to exhaust myself in this space, I was sure I would feel nothing at all once I returned to reality. *If that's true, then even if I were to injure myself here, wouldn't it be like nothing ever happened once I went back? Doesn't that make this place perfect for testing out magic?*

While there was an abundance of things I wanted to experiment with in here, I would have to leave the testing for later. Our focus had to be concentrated on our foremost objective: killing the orcs.

There were many things I wanted to experiment with, but I would have to leave all of that for later. Right now, we had to focus on our current objective, killing the orcs, and that meant we would need to leave this peaceful, ever-static world behind and return to the world of violence awaiting us.

“Kazu-san,” Arisu began. “Should I raise the rank of my Healing Magic?”

Arisu had just leveled up to Level 3, and the skills she possessed currently were Spearmanship Rank 2 as well as Healing Magic Rank 1. While she did not have enough skill points to increase her Spearmanship skill to Rank 3 (even with the two additional skill points from leveling up), it was possible for her to raise her Healing Magic skill to Rank 2. *Now, with that said...*

“Nah, I think it’d be best to save them for now,” I replied. “Defeating an orc became a much easier task by simply increasing Spearmanship’s rank from 1 to 2, so if you increase its rank again to 3, I’m sure you could come out on top even if you ended up surrounded by orcs.”

“No, being able to defeat them is all thanks to your support spells, Kazu-san.”

I mean, you’re not wrong. After all, the boost provided by Support Magic’s spells was nothing to scoff at. The increase to her physical prowess had allowed Arisu to always stay ahead when fighting the orcs. This was the reason for my thinking that she should prioritize raising her Spearmanship skill in order for her to always stay ahead in a fight.

“All right. I’ll keep my points,” she relented.

After conveying my line of thought to her, she agreed to hold off on spending them. Well, maybe “agreed” wasn’t the right term; it was more like she accepted what I said. In any case, she sat down in front of the laptop.

After taking a deep breath, she spoke.

“Let’s go back.”

“All right.”

In mere seconds, we would once more be at a scene of carnage. The fight for our lives would begin again.

Arisu clicked on the confirm button, and the next moment, we returned to the lobby area of the Cultivation Center.

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An unpleasant stench hung in the air inside the lobby of the Cultivation Center. Arisu looked down a final time at the naked schoolgirl's sullied corpse before shaking her head and looking up at me.

I took a few steps forward into the lobby, and looked up at the second floor's balcony. Noisy, heavy footsteps could be heard coming from the second floor. It looked like the orcs waiting on the second floor had realized there were intruders. There were two sets of stairs leading up to the second floor, one on each side of the lobby.

"Arisu!" I shouted, "get the orcs coming from the left staircase. I'll hold off the right with a puppet golem."

"Okay!"

We couldn't allow ourselves to get caught in a pincer attack. Arisu and I separated temporarily, and we each went to the bottom of our respective staircases. Looking up, I saw two orcs barreling down the stairs, their fat bodies shaking about. The stairs were quite narrow, however, so they were coming down in a nice, vertical line.

This is our chance. I ordered the puppet golem to fight the two orcs and then ran over to Arisu. She was standing at the bottom of the staircase, waiting for the orcs descending to reach the bottom.

"There are two coming on the right! Let's kill these first!" I shouted before chanting the spell to summon a puppet golem. Behind Arisu, a second puppet golem appeared.

"Keen Weapon, Physical Up, Mighty Arm!"

Only 7 MP left out of 21 MP. I was nearly out. I wanted to save my leftover MP for Support Magic, so we had no choice but to make do with what we had for the time being.

“Arisu!” I gave Arisu the signal once I finished strengthening the puppet golem with magic.

“Got it! Let’s do this!”

Arisu took a step back, standing next to the newly-created puppet golem. The foremost orc seemed to see this as an opportunity, and leaped down from the stairs, bringing down its sword towards her. However, the puppet golem stepped forward and used its shield to parry the attack. The wooden puppet’s stance nearly collapsed from the force behind the attack but it managed to keep its footing. *Nice job, my golem. Don’t give in.* Sweating nervously, I cheered on my puppet golem. There wasn’t much I could really do to help it out besides cheering, honestly.

On the other hand, the orc whose attack was blocked was even more off balance than the puppet golem, and Arisu wasn’t about to let the opening go to waste. She thrust her spear at the orc, the tip sinking into its belly. The orc staggered from the blow and attempted to retreat but was stopped when the puppet golem’s club smacked it on the head. The orc collapsed on the spot, and didn’t move afterwards.

The other orc went into a fury after witnessing its friend’s demise. It reached the bottom of the stairs and brandished its sword before charging at Arisu. She quickly took some distance from the orc and hid herself behind the puppet golem. Once again, the puppet golem’s shield stopped the orc’s attack. Arisu crouched down and spun counterclockwise around the puppet golem’s body, causing the orc to lose sight of her for a moment. It was the same strategy that she used to defeat the orcs earlier. Back then she had used the body of the fallen orc, but this time she made herself smaller and used the puppet golem’s frame to hide herself. By the time the orc caught sight of Arisu once again, the tip of her spear was piercing the pigman’s defenseless throat.

As usual, her technique left me breathless in admiration. She never overestimated her ability and fought strategically, choosing the best way to

take down her opponent. It seemed as though she had a good battle sense.

While I stared at her, lost in thought, Arisu didn't even spare me so much as a glance as she ran over to the right staircase where the puppet golem was holding off the other orcs. Realizing I'd gotten lost in thought, I hurriedly ran over to Arisu with the second puppet golem hot in pursuit behind me.

The two orcs stood no chance against the three of them and were killed in a matter of no time. Their deaths caused me to level up, and we found ourselves being warped to the white room.

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Huh, well isn't that convenient? Apparently, I'd gathered enough experience points to reach Level 4. This time around, however, there wasn't anything for us to do in this space. We couldn't raise the ranks of our skills, and there was no need to adjust our strategy as of yet.

Arisu and I turned to face one another and went over our game-plan again with ease.

"First, we'll use the puppet golems to check the rooms on the first floor. Once we're done with that, we'll head up to the second floor and find the rest of the orcs."

There was no way for us to know if they were planning a surprise attack. Thus, we would use the puppet golems as decoys. Arisu was our main attacker. A part of me wanted to send Arisu out into the battlefield with something comical and easy-going, like: "Please, Ms. Arisu, if you would." "Hiyaaaah!"

... Y'know, maybe not. For some reason, the idea of Arisu shouting "Hiyaaaah!" gives me the chills.

"Even if there are survivors, our first priority is to eliminate the orcs," I said.

"Okay."

"That means if there are too many for us to handle or something, we have to run away no matter what. Got it?"

"Even if there are survivors?"

“We can come back here again as long as we survive. If we die, no one will come for them.”

“... Okay. If you say so.” Arisu reluctantly agreed.

“All right. Let’s get going, then.”

I clicked on the confirm button, and the two of us returned to the Cultivation Center’s lobby.

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We first fished through the rooms on the first floor but found no orcs in our search. There still seemed to be a few upstairs, however; every so often during our exploration of the first floor, an orc would step down the staircases. They were all swiftly dealt with by Arisu, though. In total, three orcs met their end after wandering downstairs before we finished our search.

“I think it’s safe now. Let’s head upstairs,” Arisu declared. I had the puppet golems take the lead, and we cautiously ascended the staircase. Not a single sound could be heard around the second floor balcony.

“... Guess there’s no orcs here,” I mumbled and began walking down the corridor, my sense of caution thrown to the wind. Ahead of me lay a cross section, and upon reaching it, I spared only a glance down each side before haphazardly deciding it was safe. That’s when it happened.

“Look out, Kazu-san!” Arisu cried sharply. Her shrill warning snapped me back to attention, and I looked to the side again. An orc’s face was peeking out from the end of the hallway, as though waiting for a chance to strike, and its hand was wound back. The moment I registered this, the orc launched the hatchet that was in its hand in my direction.

Oh shit. The sudden event made me freeze in my tracks. It was like when you were crossing the street, and suddenly a car rushed out from seemingly nowhere. Your mind went blank, and the deer-in-the-headlights response kicked in. This was one of our many responses to a sudden threat. In the military, people with a tendency to freeze like I did here would force themselves through rigorous training in order to remove this response to fear,

or so I'd heard. Sadly, I was no soldier: far from one, actually. I was nothing more than a high school boy that wasn't too good at exercise.

Time itself seemed to slow to a crawl. The hatchet slowly spun in the air, heading straight for my forehead. As I watched the hatchet draw closer and closer, I felt my body begin to shift to the side. By the time I realized that Arisu shoved me out of the way, I was already laying on the floor. A stifled groan escaped her lips, and when I turned my gaze upward, the sight of her holding her now-bleeding shoulder entered my vision. The hatchet must've grazed her.

Its preliminary attack finished, the orc began approaching us, and I hurriedly directed the two puppet golems to intercept it. Arisu immediately brandished her spear and charged behind them to act as their vanguard.

Not even a minute later, the orc was dead on the ground, and Arisu leveled up.

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I stared blankly at Arisu in the white room.

"Why did you save me?"

"Huh? Why...?" Confused by my question, Arisu looked at me.

Well, I guess that's the proper response. I'd be just as perplexed if I saved someone and they demanded to know why.

"My body just kind of... moved on its own. I got the thought 'I have to save him!' stuck in my head."

"But you almost died because of that, so... No, sorry, forget it. That's not what I should be saying. My comment was uncalled for, pardon my rudeness."

"Y-Yeah, no problem."

I took a deep breath in an attempt to calm myself. *The hell am I getting so worked up for? Why am I angry with her?*

The answer to that was, in all likelihood, due to the fact that Arisu selflessly risked herself to save me. The battle for the Cultivation Center was already in

the clean-up stage, and that orc was probably the last one remaining in the building. I’m sure she would be able to manage on her own now, yet she risked her own life to save mine. If you weighed the costs and benefits of saving me, the costs outnumbered the benefits by a great margin. So then, why was her doing something so reckless as to risk her life for me a possible outcome?

The answer was obvious: her sacrificial action was not brought about by logical thought or by the process of weighing the costs and benefits.

I had always been suspicious of Arisu from the moment I met her. *She might just be pretending to be an airhead so she can trick me*, I thought. *She’s just acting with her own self-interests in mind*. How incredibly stupid of me. Arisu had been intent on helping me from the very beginning. She was simply a kind-hearted person by nature.

The realization that I was a terrible person vaguely began to dawn on me. *No, there is no “vaguely”; I am a terrible person. A dirty, no-good, scheming coward*. Moments prior to this I had decided that I would survive no matter the cost. *So then, when I look at Arisu, why is it I...*

“What’s wrong?”

My eyes met with hers as she stared at me, puzzled by my silence. Her concerned stare made me feel a slight pain twinge in my chest, and I averted my eyes for some reason. Her face grew suspicious, and I quickly gave her a random excuse.

“If you say you’re fine, then I guess it’s fine...”

“... Yeah. I’m A-OK over here.”

The injury on Arisu’s shoulder was shallow, fortunately enough, and could be healed with Healing Magic without any issue. It seemed as though there was no need to rush raising the rank of her Healing Magic, so Arisu instead spent her skill points on increasing her Spearmanship skill’s Rank to 3, which gave her all the more reason to not need me. *In my opinion, anyway.*

ARISU	
LEVEL:	SPEARMANSHIP:

4	2→3
HEALING MAGIC: 1	SKILL POINTS: 4→1

Chapter 13: Survivors

The first thing we did to commemorate us both being Level 4, was to heal the injury on Arisu's shoulder with magic. Three uses of magic later and her wounds had disappeared in their entirety.

We began to search the rooms on the second floor, paying close attention to our surroundings. One of the many forced-open rooms we came across had a peculiar odor coming from within. The stench was a mixture of orc sweat and semen. Arisu looked hesitant to go into the room so I had her wait outside while I took a peek inside.

The collapsed figures of three naked women were lying on the floor inside, each of them covered in a cloudy liquid. One of the girl's hands twitched slightly as I entered. Hidden behind her disheveled bangs, her eyelids fluttered open in a dazed manner.

"Arisu, get in here! One of them is still alive!"

Arisu rushed into the room once she heard my frantic call. She ran over to the girl and helped her sit up, and when the girl acknowledged her, a wave of relief rushed over Arisu from the bottom of her heart. A few strands of hair were concealing the girl's face, and when Arisu brushed them aside, a flash of recognition crossed her expression.

"Shiki-san...? Is that you?"

"Kaya... kun?"

Yukariko Shiki. She was in the same class as me—the vice president of our class, in fact. The majority of my feelings towards the entire high school was, to put it mildly, something along the lines of "You pieces of shit should just die," and my sentiment towards her was no different... until a little while ago anyway. While she hadn't participated in the bullying—unlike my other classmates—she also hadn't done anything to help me. That was something I hadn't forgotten.

That being said, no matter how popular or influential you were, going against *him* would only serve to land yourself in the same position as me. In that respect, her choice to remain neutral was rational. She calmly avoided the social landmine that I was and simply watched from afar with an indifferent gaze. Didn't change the fact that I hated her guts, though.

"Yes, Kaya-kun and I saved you. You're safe now."

"Spare me any gratitude," I said. "Arisu's the one you should thank. She's the one who wanted to free this place. In fact, she—"

"Hey, Kazu-san!" Arisu interrupted, glaring daggers at me. "G-Get out of here, will you!"

"Huh? Oh... yeah."

The gruesome spectacle before me might've numbed my senses a little. Albeit far too late, I averted my eyes from my naked classmate. *I didn't know they were so huge.* My mind was filled with pointless drivel.

"I'm gonna go check the other rooms," I stated before turning around and quickly making my exit from the room. On my way out, I happened to glance at the nameplate on the door. Written neatly on the plate were the words "Tea Ceremony Club Waiting Room."

Ohhh. So she was part of the Tea Ceremony club. Thinking back on it, I'm pretty sure I remembered Arisu mentioning there being a few members of the Tea Ceremony club in the building in addition to those in the kitchen. There were no tatami rooms available for students in the high school building, which was why the club used a room in the Cultivation Center. The two corpses beside her were probably the remains of the less fortunate Tea Ceremony club members. The mystery behind their identities was solved, though it was far too late for them now...

Having learned from my earlier mistake, this time I had the puppet golems take the lead as I searched the floor. In one of the rooms, I stumbled across the corpses of two boys. Both of their heads were split open by a sword. Their shoes were caked with mud, suggesting that they had come from outside and decided to take shelter inside the building. They must've been spooked pretty bad to hide in a place with so many dead ends.

One of the boys was holding a key in their hand, which was outstretched toward the window. I opened it, hoping he would be at peace now that his final desire was fulfilled. A fresh yet slightly chilly wind spilled into the room.

Nightfall was approaching fast. We needed to hurry. There were still a few things we needed to get done before daylight vanished completely and the forest was enshrouded in darkness.

I left the room and crossed the balcony, heading opposite of the room where Arisu and the others were. There I found a tightly shut door. I imagined the staircase leading to the third floor was behind it and attempted to turn the knob, but it didn't budge. Locked.

"Just like she said it would be, huh," I muttered to myself. The moment I did, the sound of someone's voice came from the other side of the door.

"Hey, is someone there?"

I tensed at the sudden noise, and my mind raced through the possibilities. *Could it be an orc? No, it can't be. There's no way they would bother closing the door after forcing it open. And that could only mean...*

"You're a survivor, right? The orcs have all been killed. You can come out. It's safe now," I said, trying to give a sense of reassurance.

"You're telling the truth... right?" came the voice of a frightened girl.

I decided to leave out all the mumble jumble and gave a brief overview: "So basically, a lot of shit happened, and I came here to help along with a girl named Arisu Shimozoneo."

"Arisu?!"

The voice from behind the door grew excited at Arisu's name.

"Is Arisu safe?"

"Y-Yeah. Right now she's taking care of someone hurt on the other side of the... floor..." My voice began to trail off as I suddenly recalled something. *Y'know, didn't Arisu want to come here specifically to find her friend?* I wasn't sure if the girl behind the door was the one that used herself as a decoy to let Arisu escape, but on the off chance she was...

“Are you... Tamaki-san?”

“Yep, that’s me! So Arisu did make it! I’m so happy!”

The doorknob began jiggling frantically but didn’t seem to want to turn. In the meantime, I had the puppet golems fall back until they were out of sight. Trying to explain would prove troublesome, and I didn’t want her to be scared.

“Aaah, geez! Come. On!”

I’m starting to see why this door was never opened by the orcs, I thought to myself. The girl behind the door was messing with the knob, growing more frustrated with each failed attempt, but eventually she managed to unlock it. Her brute force swung it wide open, and out rushed a girl with blonde pigtails. Her head embedded itself in my stomach, and I let out a sound similar to a frog being crushed before I collapsed to the floor in pain.

“Huh? I-I’m so sorry!”

The girl lifted her face and glanced down at me with a flustered expression as I lay collapsed on the floor in pain. She was about the same height as Arisu, but the bulges on her chest looked to be a size smaller compared to her. Her eyes were as blue as the bottom of the sea, her skin as white as porcelain. The girl’s nose was sharp.

She had Western features. *Hmm, let’s see, blonde hair and blue eyes...* Wherever she was from, she didn’t look Japanese to me.

“You’re... Tamaki-san?” I asked hesitantly. Her appearance left me in a state of confusion.

“Yep, yep, that’s me. Oh, did my face confuse you? Heh heh, cat got your tongue? Am I just that cute? I’m adopted, you see.”

Adopted. She had probably been through a lot. I got the impression that I shouldn’t ask about it.

“Oh, and no need to be so formal! Any friend of Arisu is a friend of mine!”

I was about to correct her and tell her that I didn’t plan on being friends with Arisu but decided against it. Either way, Arisu was an ally with the same goal as me.

Well, I guess she was an ally, anyway... Now that this best friend of hers was free from the orcs' clutches, Arisu no longer had a reason to fight.

"The name's Kaya Kazuhisa, but you can call me Kazu if you'd like. That's what Arisu calls me, anyway."

"You got it, Kazu-san! Nice to meet you!" Tamaki chirped cheerfully, smiling brightly towards me. Her pigtails swung like the rice stalks in autumn. *She's just liked the sun, I thought. So dazzling and radiant that it makes you want to avert your eyes.*



“Oh, that’s right—where’s Arisu?”

“She’s uh, over there...” I paused, pointing in the opposite direction. “But I don’t think you should go over there just yet.”

“Why not?”

“Well, she’s, um... treating the wounded at the moment.”

It didn’t take Tamaki long to understand what I meant by “wounded,” or so it seemed; her expression clouded.

Can’t say I blame her. She was hiding behind this door the entire time. Most likely, she knew what had happened on the second floor. Nevertheless, she held her breath and hid herself away throughout. It was by all means the smart thing to do. However, doing the smart thing didn’t always leave you happy in the end. I was sure she’d been tormenting herself as time slowly passed.

“Oh, I totally forgot. I need to let the others know,” Tamaki said.

“Others? Are there more survivors up top?”

“Yeah. I was hiding up there with everyone.” She turned around and made her way to the stairs.

Ah, I see. Then that means th—

My thoughts, as well as Tamaki’s walk up the stairs, were suddenly cut short. A roar suddenly came from the lobby’s direction, shaking the entire building. Tamaki accidentally tripped over herself and fell down with a loud thud.

Oops, and there’s her underwear. Black today, huh? That’s against school policy. Wait, no, that’s not the point!

That roar was no ordinary one; it was a war declaration from the enemy. Somehow, deep down, I could just tell.

“Tamaki. Close the door again, and hide. Now,” I demanded.

“O-Okay. But what abou—”

“Arisu and I will be fine. Now get in there, and don’t you dare open that door until I say it’s safe.”

“Y-You got it!”

I turned away from her, listening to the rushed sound of the door closing and locking. I ran back down the hallway, meeting up with my puppet golems along the way, and arrived at the balcony. On the other side, I saw Arisu rush out from the room. Our eyes met. We both nodded at each other, and I looked downstairs from atop the balcony.

My eyes snapped to an orc staring at us. Its ominous red eyes shot through me like a bullet. The orc’s skin was the color of bronze, and it was a bit bigger than the other orcs surrounding it, dwarfed even more by the gigantic axe in its hand, larger than the orc carrying it. *It looks a lot like an elite orc of sorts*, I thought absent-mindedly.

I immediately came to a conclusion: we stood no chance of winning. That thing was out of the norm. It appeared to be the leader of the pack, and even worse, there were six orcs surrounding it. *Forget the elite orc, taking this many on alone with Arisu is just...*

The elite orc gave the signal, and the mob orcs began climbing the stairs. Two of them came up each staircase, for a total of four at once. In a panic, I ordered the two puppet golems to wait at the top of the stairs on this side of the building. I could see Arisu also waiting at the top of the stairs, her spear at the ready. Our battles began around the same time.

The staircases were narrow, which meant the puppet golems were able to fight the orcs two-on-one. Even with the magical reinforcements provided by my magic, a single puppet golem still fell short in ability compared to a single orc. However, with the potential to fight two-on-one like this, they held a great advantage over the single orc.

The leading orc was getting more and more injured by the second. The orc in the back couldn’t move forward to help its partner, and could do nothing but watch it be smacked around by the puppet golems’ clubs. As for Arisu, she had the advantage of being in a place where she could thrust her spear down at them, and the two orcs were dealt with in the blink of an eye. Finished with her fight, she raced down the stairs.

Huh? Wait, no!

“Wait, don’t do it! Arisu, don’t go dow—*ngh!*”

But my warning came too late. When Arisu got about halfway down her staircase, the bronze orc swung its ax at the pillar supporting the staircase. A huge tremor shook the entire building, and I found myself holding onto the railing to keep my balance. It was a tremendous show of force.

The stairs below Arisu’s feet collapsed, and she screamed as she fell. She lost her balance and tumbled down to the bottom floor. Luckily, the two orcs running to her were also caught up in the collapse, and they also fell to the floor. Despite landing on her back, it looked like she wasn’t heavily injured, and she got to her feet immediately.

Unfortunately, the staircase on her side had collapsed completely. In front of her stood the bronze orc, the cause of the heavy destruction, blocking her from escaping.

“A-Ahh, n-no...” Arisu stammered.

She backed away, clearly afraid, with her spear ready. The orc swung down its axe at her, and she used her magically-buffed body to jump back from the attack to avoid being hit, but her delicate body was subsequently blown away from the wind pressure alone. She slammed into the wall with a loud crash.

The elite orc stepped forward to finish her off. Arisu lay collapsed on the floor, groaning in pain. She couldn’t move.

“Arisu, roll to the side!!!”

Arisu heeded my instructions, narrowly avoiding being split in two. The axe smashed into the floor, scattering pieces of concrete in the air.

What the hell?! What the hell is this?! The fuck is this thing? This orc is in a totally different league! The stage difficulty just multiplied out of nowhere! What a shitty game this is.

There was only one thing we had going for us right now, and that was the fact that Arisu, who’d just gotten up, was right in the front of the lobby. In other words, the exit was right behind her. She could run to safety. I glanced at the room next to me. The window I opened a while ago was just wide enough that it looked like I could squeeze through by myself.

“Arisu! I’ll send a puppet golem your way, so use it as a distraction to escape!”

“Huh? But...!”

“I’ll jump out through a window! As long as we’re still alive, we can come back here later to help!”

Shiki Yukariko is still in that room, I thought. I’m sure she finally thinks that she’s safe, but we’re going to abandon her. However, I don’t think Arisu has realized that yet.

Arisu’s survival as well as my own came first and foremost. Fortunately, Tamaki had locked the door and barricaded herself up on the third floor. She might even remain undetected if fate were to look kindly upon her. Furthermore, Arisu was still unaware that Tamaki was here. Persuading her to retreat would be far harder if she knew her friend was here.

Of the two puppet golems—which had finally finished killing one of the orcs—I called over the one with light injuries and had it jump down to the first floor. One of the two orcs on the first floor was caught completely off-guard as it the puppet golem used it as a landing pad. My golem then launched a suicide attack on the elite orc. It did nothing more than stall the orc for a second or two, but that was good enough. Buying enough time for Arisu and myself to escape was the only thing that mattered.

“Quick, get out of here! We’ll meet up at the spot!” I shouted from the balcony before racing into the room next to me. I forced my body through the open window and then took a leap of faith, falling to the ground from the second floor. The rough impact made my feet go completely numb, and I grunted in pain.

My leg may have broken due to the fall but I didn’t have any time to sit around; my pursuers would catch up to me before long. Grimacing, I began to run towards the forest, my leg dragging behind me.

You have leveled up!

A fanfare sounded out within my head accompanied by the familiar androgynous voice, and I felt myself being warped to the white room.

“Huh?... What?”

For a moment, I couldn't process what just unfolded and stood rooted to the spot.

In order to level up... if all of the orcs except for the boss were killed, then that might be just enough XP to net me Level 5. But Arisu should've escaped. There's no way she had enough time to defeat the orcs.

I saw Arisu standing in front of me. She was a mess. Blood was dripping from several places on her body, most likely due to all the scrapes and scratches. Her hand was clutching the side of her stomach, and the part of her shirt around that area was being dyed red before my very eyes.

Arisu looked up at me and strained a smile.

"I missed my chance to escape," she muttered powerlessly. "I'm sorry for breaking our promise."

Chapter 14: Reason for Failure

Dumbfounded, I stared at Arisu's disheveled figure in front of me. *Why couldn't she get away in time? And what are we going to do now?* My mind was firing faster than I could keep up with.

"It wasn't your fault." Arisu noticed my stare and shook her head. Her tone was dismissive and soft, as though to comfort me as I stood there frozen. The hand holding her flank began to heal the wound with Healing Magic as her other moved to scratch the back of her head. Regardless if she used magic to heal her injuries now, her body would return to whatever state it was in before entering the room once we left, but the wounds hurt just that much now. She was trying to stop the pain she felt in the moment.

"When I thought about how I would be abandoning Shiki-senpai if I just left... my legs froze up," she admitted.

She was beyond irrational. Even feeling practically braindead, I could see the error in her thinking. Yukariko Shiki wasn't even someone Arisu was acquainted with; she just happened to be in the building with us at the time. They probably hadn't even spoken to one another before. I couldn't see a reason why she felt compelled to help her.

I was just as irrational, though. Yukariko Shiki had abandoned me in the past. Albeit fully aware of the harsh treatment I underwent in the class, she turned a blind eye to my plight and pretended to not have seen a thing. Leaving her to die was already a done deal in my mind, but was there anything wrong with that? I mean, this was her simply getting her just deserts, wasn't it? An enemy we were incapable of defeating had shown itself, so escaping was not only the correct decision but the only way to survive.

Wait a sec... Something suddenly clicked inside me. *Rather than view this from my perspective, shouldn't I be thinking of Arisu?*

From Arisu's point of view, Shiki Yukariko was my classmate. She was not someone that I was unfamiliar with, and there was a chance that she could've been more to me than just a friend.

I chose to conceal my true feelings about Yukariko Shiki from her: a decision brought about by nothing more than my desire to look even the tiniest bit better in Arisu's eyes. I didn't want Arisu to see the dark side of my heart. I didn't want her to realize how much of a miserable person I was.

And yet, this decision of mine had become the very reason why Arisu hesitated to escape, if only for a second. Her fate was a result of my decision.

"It's... my fault." Arisu's expression morphed into a self-deprecating smile. "I wanted to save someone... even if it was only a single person. To tell you the truth, I didn't want to die... not until I made sure Tamaki-chan was safe."

"Tamaki-san is... hiding on the third floor," I said. "She's safe. The door is shut tight, and she should be holing up there right now."

"So she's okay, then... That's good." Arisu smiled weakly. "I don't have to worry anymore."

"Anymore...? What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, r-right, that reminds me. Forgive my asking, Kazu-san, but can you... can you go and rescue Tamaki-chan? That's my one final... request."

"Final req— What the hell are you saying?!"

"I'm... not going to make it out of this. I managed to kill all of the smaller orcs, but that big one's blocking the entrance right now. As battered as I am, I don't think I can make it past him."

Why... Why are you smiling? I bit down hard on my lip and my fists tightened into balls. *Why are you looking at me with such a pitiful expression? Don't you get it? You're going to die. You're going to die, and it's going to do far worse to you in the process.*

"Please forgive me, Kazu-san. You gave me your experience points because you thought I could be useful, didn't you?"

"Yeah... I did."

“In the end, I guess I didn’t end up being of much help. I did nothing more than just waste some of your experience points.”

Not useful? Wasted? As if. There’s no way I would ever consider fighting with you a waste of experience. And, most of all, I... I walked up to her, not entirely aware of what I was doing, and brought her slender body into a tight embrace.

“Don’t say something like that.”

“But...”

It was at that moment I realized that I was going to lose her. I could feel a tearing pain in my chest. Deep within my heart, my emotions were raging about like a hurricane. I wanted to hug her forever, to hold her tight. I had a burning desire to make her mine, but that desire was slowly slipping away, and soon she would be in a place forever out of my reach.

“It hurts...”

Arisu protested weakly in my embrace. In response, I rubbed my cheek against hers. Her face was wet with tears.

“I don’t...” Arisu muttered softly, “I don’t want to die. I don’t want to be violated and then killed by that monster.” Gasping at every breath, her tone was soft and fragile. “I’m such an idiot. You finally found Tamaki-chan, and yet I’m just... I’m just going to leave her alone.”

I couldn’t say anything in response. There was nothing I could do but hug Arisu tightly.

“I’ve wanted this for a while now. Finally, after all this, you held me close... but I don’t want to say goodbye.”

“Arisu...? What are you saying?” I asked quietly. My hold on her loosened, and I drew back a little from her to look at her face, soaked with tears. Her expression was awful, and I saw it in even more detail as she moved her face closer to mine. Her lips began to part, words spilling out in a quiet whisper.

“I love you.”

I pushed against her cherry-red lips with my own. It was an awful kiss, and our front teeth collided together. Arisu didn’t mind though; she continued to kiss

me in heated passion. Our tongues intertwined with one another, and my saliva mixed with hers. We lost ourselves in the moment, continuing until we were both gasping for breath.

I'm sure this was something akin to the suspension bridge effect. Forced into a strange and nerve-wracking situation, there was no one for her to rely on but me. It was the same for me. The orcs, another world, the whole works; I was at my wit's end trying to process the situation, and without her being there, I knew for sure that I would've lost my mind.



But who cares? Right now, the only thing I wanted in the world was her. Even if it was just a momentary impulse, the value behind her passionate confession wasn't diminished in the slightest.

Our lips separated, a thin string of saliva still connecting us. I stared at Arisu, whose expression was red and unfocused. Her eyes were puffy and swollen from crying, and she looked a mess, but I stared at her nonetheless... and came to a decision.

No, that's not right. I'd made this decision a while ago; I was going to protect her no matter what. I didn't care how risky it was—I'd finally found something I wanted to protect.

"Arisu," I said strongly.

"Y-Yes?"

"I want to protect you."

My sudden declaration left her mouth open wide in surprise. Such a simple and silly gesture, yet I found it irresistibly charming. My chest began to tighten up. I wanted to hold her tightly once again, but there was no reason that I needed to act on it now. I could embrace her to my heart's content after I'd saved her.

"I've come to a decision. I'm going to save you. You have to win, for me."

"H-Huh? What?"

"I'm gonna come up with a plan. I'm sure it won't be pretty, probably something completely reckless. But even so, you can still win."

"... Umm, I..."

"If you don't win, then you and I both will die."

"No! I don't want that! If you get dragged into this because of me, I..."

"Don't like it? Then follow my orders. Win."

Arisu stared at me in a serious manner. I was the victim of her intense eyes for several minutes before her gaze turned doubtful, as though wondering what

on earth I could be talking about. Her lips twisted into a frown, and after she saw that I was dead-serious, she let out a frustrated sigh.

“This was my fault. You don’t need to bear the consequences of my mistake, Kazu-san.”

“But I do. Because I like you, Arisu.”

“Wh-Wha?! Um!” Her face was dyed a dark shade of red, and she stared at me with wide open eyes for a while before giving me a bashful smile. “... Okay.”

“Wanting to protect something you like is only natural. I want you, Arisu. There’s no way I’m going to let something as disgusting as an orc take you from me. I’ve made up my mind, and so I’ll risk my life to protect you. Got a problem with that?!”

“Wh-Why are you raising your voice at me? *I’m* the one who should be angry! Calm down, please!”

“The girl I like is just about to get violated! How the hell can I stay calm?!”

“Aaaah, wh-wh-what?! Don’t say stuff like that so loudly!” Arisu flapped her arms around wildly, clearly flustered by my comments.

Ha who, look around, dummy. There’s no one here besides us, you know.

“If I’m being perfectly honest, I kind of want to push you down right here and now,” I said.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What?!”

“But I won’t. I wouldn’t feel satisfied doing that right now. I’ll just go save you and leave my pent-up frustration for later.”

“... That super romantic vibe you had going on just kinda disappeared.” Arisu stared at me in reproach. Despite the not-so-friendly gaze from her, I couldn’t help but find her super cute.

“Do you hate the idea of me pushing you down?” I asked.

“It’s not that I hate it, but please use better phrasing for it!” She huffed. Arisu paused for a moment, the realization of what she just said dawning on her, and

then she let out another “Aaaaaah!” before flapping her arms around wildly. “N-No, I-I just meant, um!”

“Anyway! I’m gonna come save you. So, you aren’t allowed to die! Got it?”

“Umm, well... okay. I’ll do my best to survive. Frankly speaking, it’s going to be quite difficult to do.”

“I’m sure you’ll manage.”

Arisu’s expression went blank at my words. Now I knew how a boss felt when he handed down an impossible task to a worker and told them to manage somehow. *There’s really no other option, so just believe in yourself, I guess?*

I sat down in the chair in front of the laptop and fell deep into thought. *Think, gotta think. Is there something we can use? Can I do something right now? Is it even possible?* Whatever the case was, I was certain the answers lied in the laptop in front of me.

Let’s see, how does my current status look?

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 5	SUPPORT MAGIC: 2
SUMMONING MAGIC: 2	SKILL POINTS: 4

I could either upgrade one of my current skills or obtain a new skill entirely and level it to Rank 2 in one go. The second option didn’t sound too appealing, though.

The bronze-skinned orc—or the elite orc, as I called it—was a different magnitude of enemy compared to the orcs we faced before. It was massive, capable of shattering the support pillar holding up the staircase. Not only that, it was no simple enemy, either: it cut off Arisu’s path of retreat by getting rid of the staircase, and then blocked her path.

Currently, even with her Rank 3 Spearmanship skill, Arisu was up against an opponent that she couldn’t hold a candle against. With that said, Arisu’s

fighting capabilities were improved by leaps and bounds each time the rank of her skill rose. Considering the orc's burly frame, the two didn't appear to be so far apart in terms of rank. *I mean, thinking back on it, the puppet golem managed to at least buy a little bit of time before being obliterated, so there shouldn't be too big of a difference between it and Arisu.*

The biggest problem was the fact that this wasn't a planned fight but a random encounter, and we had been caught completely blindsided as a result. On top of that, this fight had started after we finished a series of battles and were completely spent. My MP especially. I was nearly out.

Wait, how much of my MP has recovered? We searched the rooms on the first floor, and then the second floor, which must've been about ten minutes at minimum. So then... my current MP should be around 11 or 12, I think? I had no room for calculation errors right now, so I chose the safer estimate and went with 11 MP. *If I summon another puppet golem, that's gonna leave my remaining MP at 7... Yeah, our chances aren't looking too hot. This is way too damn tough.*

There was some kind of link between me and my familiars, so I could tell intuitively that the two puppet golems I summoned earlier had both been killed already. The only familiar I had left was the raven, but I doubted its usefulness in this situation. Maybe it could serve as a distraction for a few seconds? It didn't seem like much, but even the slightest bit of time was super valuable right now. *Well, raven, I'll have you work hard here.*

What else did that leave me with? I thought over my options. There was always the option of improving one of my existing skills, or even taking a new one. Just this once, I disregarded future value in favor of current value. Right now, any skill was fine, even if it could only be used here and now rather than later down the line. Protecting Arisu was my top priority.

I entered question after question about my skills into the laptop. I could feel Arisu's gaze on the screen from behind my back. Her eyes held a mixture of emotions. The unease that it might be impossible to do after all, as well as the faint hope that I might just find a way for us to survive.

It felt as though a heavy pressure was crushing me, and I continued to ask questions one after another in an attempt to shake the pressure off of me. And after a while of searching, something stood out to me.

“There you are,” I muttered quietly.

A tiny line of thread that would guide us to the future, so thin and fragile that it could easily snap apart. But with this strategy, there was a chance for victory, if miniscule. A chance that both Arisu and I would live to see another day.

I turned around to face Arisu and began to explain the strategy.

I gave one final comment: “The timing is going to be everything.”

“But if we mess up even a little...”

“We’ll both die.”

Arisu gulped audibly, and her fists tightened into balls. Now, she was the one being crushed by the pressure. “I’m scared, Kazu-san.”

“I’m scared of losing you, Arisu.”

“I-I know.”

“So, win.”

“... I will!”

I smiled in response. *Yes, that’s the kind of reply I want to hear.* I nodded at her before selecting the skill. I clicked the confirm button, and in turn, decided our fates.

Arisu and I were returned to where we were before. Onward, to the place where we would either live... or die.

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 5	SUPPORT MAGIC: 2→3
SUMMONING MAGIC: 2	SKILL POINTS: 4→1



I found myself back at the grassy area behind the Cultivation Center. My feet were seconds away from launching my body off the ground and letting me dive into the nearby thicket, and I stumbled a few steps as I attempted to stop myself.

Glancing back over my shoulder, my eyes focused on the building behind me dyed orange by the sunset's fading light. A few moments earlier, I had been worried about being chased after by the orcs, but now that fear was long gone. All of the small-fry orcs had been taken care of by Arisu as a result of her choosing to stay behind and act as a shield.

The familiar raven I summoned earlier flew above me before descending onto my shoulder. My only remaining familiar in tow, I broke out into a sprint and dashed around the side of the Cultivation Center, heading for the entryway. I had to make it there as quickly as I could. My feet pounded as I ran with all my might.

“Physical Up!”

I enchanted myself with magic to make my pace even the slightest bit faster. With my Support Magic now at Rank 3, the speed boost that I was granted should have increased a small bit, and right now I needed all the little boosts that I could get.

Faster. Faster! My sprained leg sent waves of agony through me with each step, but I didn't even care. Caution to the wind, I forced my body to push forward.

Right now, Arisu was locked in combat with a powerful adversary, all alone. Up against a hopelessly powerful foe, she was resolutely challenging her opponent as she awaited my help. I wanted to save her, to hold her tight just one more time. I desperately prayed for our success in the back of my mind.

No, no more praying. I was going to turn our victory into a reality. My hands, my feet, and these skills I acquired... Using everything at our disposal, *our* power would bring us to victory.

I rounded the corner, staggering slightly as I forced myself to run in a straight line without losing any momentum. I could hear the sound of metal colliding with metal from inside—the sound of Arisu’s battle against the elite orc. *They’re fighting. Arisu’s still trying her hardest.* Relief, joy, hope,—a mixture of emotions flowed through me as I neared the entrance.

Mustering the last of my strength, I ran around the corner again. Ahead of me, I could see the wide-open doors. I threw all of the strength I had left in me into my legs and ran through the doors, revealing to me the battle unfolding inside.

Arisu just barely managed to dodge an attack from the elite orc’s huge axe, and the aftermath of the attack left her body reeling. She wouldn’t be able to avoid the next attack.

“Arisu!” I shouted. She was still stumbling, but she looked towards my direction at the sound of my voice. Her face lit up like a beacon when she saw me.

I ordered the raven familiar to fly straight at the elite orc; more specifically, right at its face. It would serve as nothing more than a distraction, but as long as it managed to buy a few seconds, it would be worth it.

Just as I predicted, the raven’s sudden appearance only served to anger the orc, and it slapped aside the raven in annoyance. The raven’s small form was launched away, and it slammed into the wall. I could feel the link between us be severed. That one blow killed it, but it had served its purpose.

“Summon Puppet Golem!”

Once it came into being, I had it assault the elite orc. This, too, was nothing more than a distraction. I ran behind the puppet golem, and the elite orc approached us with its massive frame. I could feel my body scream at me to run away as its intimidating form neared.

I desperately shoved aside my fear aside, and my gaze switched from the orc to Arisu, who lay fallen on the floor. We locked eyes. She was overjoyed to see me, and courage surged through me from somewhere inside my chest. Not even a hundred elite orcs could stop me now.

The puppet golem bravely struck the elite orc with its club. The elite orc didn't bother dodging, and instead smugly took the brunt of its weak attacks. Not a single scratch showed on its huge frame. *Damn it. So a base puppet golem with no Support Magic enchantments whatsoever is a complete waste, huh? I summoned it to use it as a disposable nuisance rather than an actual fighter, so I guess that's all that could be expected.*

Its sacrifice earned us several valuable seconds. I finally reached Arisu's side and touched her slender shoulder with my hand.

"Haste," I muttered.

A golden light enveloped Arisu's body, and she looked down at her glowing body in shock. Her body was covered in wounds, her clothes torn all over. Her skirt was basically nonexistent, and her panties were exposed for the world to see. But now, there was an overwhelming power dwelling within her—a power given to her by my magic.

"Go for it."

"Right!!" Arisu nodded at me and quickly stood up.

Right at that moment, the elite orc slammed its axe into the forehead of the puppet golem, smashing its body into pieces. The bronze orc looked this way, and when it saw Arisu and me, it bared its teeth in a ferocious smile.

However, Arisu and I only stared back at the orc in response, smiling ourselves.

"Fight like normal at first. Once I give the signal, go for the kill," I instructed.

"Got it!"

There was no need for us to have a strategy meeting now. The white room had served us well for that.

Arisu readied her spear and then kicked off the floor, rushing towards the elite orc. The elite orc lied in wait as she approached. It brandished the huge axe, planning on striking her right in the forehead like it did to the puppet golem. The orc appeared as though it had completely abandoned the idea of using Arisu as its woman. *Phew. I'm relieved that it abandoned that idea, at*

least. More importantly, it's dropped its guard completely. Sucks for you! A plethora of thoughts ran through my mind as I watched, but in any case... Arisu is my woman. You thought I would hand her over to a muscle-for-brains like you? Ha! Not a chance!

The elite orc did not dodge Arisu's spear strike. No, more like it *couldn't* dodge. She was much quicker than the orc anticipated. My magic was turning the tides of battle.

Haste. That was the name of the spell I'd acquired by leveling up my Support Magic to Rank 3. Unlike Physical Up, which only provided a boost to your legs, Haste provided a boost to the target's entire body. This boost of agility, naturally, also encompassed the speed of her spear thrusts.

Arisu's Rank 3 Spearmanship skill, combined with the effects of Haste, fired out a spear thrust that was comparable in power to an attack from a Rank 4 skill. The spear gouged deeply into the belly of the elite orc, and blue blood scattered in the air. In a fit of rage, the elite orc counterattacked with its ax, but Arisu nimbly leaped away from the orc. Her movements during evasion were quicker than they were a few moments ago.

The orc angrily swung its gigantic axe in a wide arc before giving chase. Arisu avoided all of its attacks with calm footwork and stabbed at the orc. Blue blood danced in the air once again. This time, its left shoulder was pierced.

This is great. She's keeping up with the elite orc. Everything was going according to plan. Though, from what I'd found out about Rank 3 Support magic in the white room, this was a matter of course. The real issue was what happened after this.

Even if Arisu's movements were now quicker due to Haste's effects, right now she didn't have enough power. Superficial attacks like this would never deal a fatal wound to the orc, and that wasn't the only issue. Arisu was also losing steam. Her entire body was laced with scratches and cuts, and blood was oozing from the wound on her stomach. Those wounds were sapping at her physical strength every moment. If it came down to a battle of attrition, she would be the first to fall.

Naturally, I wasn't about to allow that to happen. Despite the "Elite Orc" nickname I'd given it, its body was essentially the same as those mob orcs, and that meant it would share the same weakness: the throat. She just had to deal a blow to its throat.

Arisu had killed a number of orcs with that method up until now, and she was most likely aware of this weakness too. Nevertheless, she didn't dare aim for the orc's throat. This particular orc was way superior in skill to the others; if it realized what we were aiming for, it would grow wary of us. One sudden attack from the orc would completely kill any chance of success for us, hence why she chose to believe in me and concentrated on attacking its abdomen, shoulder, and legs. She was waiting for my signal.

Before long, Arisu was forced back. Her exhaustion caused her legs to tangle up, and the elite orc did not miss that opportunity. It swung its axe down sharply, and Arisu barely avoided being cut in half by rolling to the side. The elite orc stepped forward, and Arisu feinted an attack at its feet with the spear in an attempt to force it to reconsider, but it ignored her and continued charging.

Damn it!! An overwhelming urge to use our trump card welled inside me, but I couldn't—not yet. If I were to use that now, then we wouldn't stand a chance at winning. In the end, I wouldn't be able to protect Arisu. Thus, I grit my teeth and held back my urge to use it. *I'll believe in you Arisu. So please, just hold on!*

I wondered if my thoughts somehow reached her. Arisu avoided the orc's side-sweep attack by crouching down, and she rolled back before standing back up. She immediately took some distance. The orc charged savagely at Arisu, intent on finishing her.

Arisu glanced over at me. I nodded in response. *Yeah. It's now or never.*

"Go for it!!"

"Okay!"

Arisu began to charge at the elite orc as well. Her sharp movements, further accelerated by Haste, made her rush towards the orc as quick as an arrow. The orc stopped its charge midway, and brandished its axe. If she continued to charge at the orc, her head would surely be split in two by the creature's

gigantic weapon. However, Arisu continued charging in a straight line with no regard whatsoever.

Certain of its victory, a smirk broke out on the elite orc's face. And, right before that axe came barreling down...

"Reflection!"

I cast a spell, one of the new spells I'd acquired from Rank 3 Support Magic. It did not require any physical contact, a rarity among Support Magic, and could only be applied to nearby party members. It had a particular effect.

Directly in front of Arisu, a rainbow-colored, fan-shaped thin film materialized. The orc's downward swing collided with the thin film and then... rebounded in the complete opposite direction. The elite orc already boasted a preposterous amount of physical strength, and the power put into its swing caused the rebound to be all the more severe on its huge frame. For a moment, its body was rendered defenseless.

Arisu did not let this chance go to waste. Even while the huge axe grew ever closer to her, she didn't flinch for even a moment. She'd believed in me until the very end, and allowed us to reach this moment.

Letting loose a fierce cry, she thrust out her spear. The iron tip dug deep into the orc's throat, and blue blood gushed from its wound like a waterfall.

She had put her all into this thrust, with every last bit of strength remaining in her, certain that she would kill it. The spear pierced through flesh and bone before the tip stuck out of the back of its neck. The skill system might've seemed like something torn straight from a fantasy game, but the spectacle unfolding before us could not have been farther from one. Both people and monsters would perish all the same if their vital spots were destroyed. Arisu had proven this fact many times over in the hours leading up to this moment.

Thus, despite towering above us from an overwhelmingly superior position, the elite orc was felled by only a single blow. The orc raised its death throes, and its large body collapsed to the ground before it began to fade away.

"Oh," Arisu muttered, "I leveled up..."

The next moment, Arisu and I were warped to the white room.

Chapter 15: Testing Out All Sorts of Spells in the White Room

The scale of victory was tipped heavily in the elite orc's favor. Nevertheless, I faced that challenge so that Arisu would be safe.

I had spent a lot of time lately never trusting in others; that was how I had survived. I was terrified of believing in someone just for them to spit all over it. Despite these notions, I still chose to believe in Arisu. There was no way that I could let that monster hurt her or consume her. My stomach churned just thinking about it.

My decision to rescue her was a rash one, a choice born without logic, but I didn't have a single regret. And, as a result of my actions, I'd saved Arisu. I'd saved Arisu from the elite orc.

The achievement brought me such an overwhelming feeling of joy that, the moment we warped to the white room, I rushed over to her and brought her slender figure into a tight embrace.

"Wh-Wh-Wha? Kazu-san..." she stammered in surprise.

I drew back a little bit from her to get a look at her face. It was covered in red blood as she stared back at me.

"I'm so glad. Everything *actually* worked out."

"Are you telling me that this strategy we staked our lives on was half-baked?" Arisu's gaze turned stone-cold.

"To be honest, I thought we had less than a thirty percent chance of victory. Our success was all thanks to you trusting me."

"If I just needed to trust you, then our chances of victory were always one hundred percent." Arisu beamed. Her smile stretched across her entire face. "If

I chose to believe in you and ended up dying anyway, I would be happy. That's what I thought."

"But... why? Why would you feel that strongly?"

"Because you've never let me down, not even once."

That's just because you were useful to me. I swallowed back the words. I had come to realize that those words were nothing more than self-deceit at this point, an excuse I defaulted to so that I could trick myself into thinking I didn't care. The words may have rung true before but not right now. My reasons for saving her were not based on her usefulness alone.

As if to confirm this, Arisu stared at me with misty eyes. She hesitated, her expression full of determination, before slowly opening her mouth. "Let me tell you once more, Kazu-san: I love you."

Rather than answer her, I instead brought my lips to hers. Arisu wrapped her hands around the back of my neck and responded passionately.

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We separated from each other, and I once again looked down at Arisu. My partner collapsed to the floor in a heap, and let out a tiny laugh as she looked up at me.

"I'm completely spent."

Now that I took a closer look, her appearance was a lot more tattered than before. The shirt part of her uniform was ripped wide open, leaving her chest area exposed. Her skirt was no longer anything but shreds connected by thin lines of fabric, and there were tears in her underwear too, through which her soft skin could be seen. Her clothing wasn't the only casualty, either. Arisu's body was also laced with wounds throughout, and the skin on her arms and legs was peeling, blood flowing from her injuries.

Following Arisu's lead, I sat down on the floor in front of her.

"I would ask if you're okay... but the answer to that is pretty obvious, huh?"

Arisu gave a tiny smile as though to reassure me. *Did my expression look that worried to her? Or did she do that just because?*

“These wounds are nothing. Healing Magic will make them disappear in almost an instant, after all.”

As if to prove her point, Arisu began to cast Heal on her arms and legs. A blue light shone on her limbs, and her wounds faded away in the blink of an eye. Fifteen uses of Heal later and Arisu was looking as good as new, save the clothes.

“See, all better.”

“Yeah, but even if you heal your wounds here, as soon as we go back your body’s gonna be covered in them again, you know?”

“Well... you have a point.”

Guess it doesn’t matter either way. In any case, there were some things that I wanted to discuss here regarding the future, and we needed to figure out what we were going to do with Arisu’s skill points.

Oh, that’s right. The reason we were even in the white room right now was due to none other than Arisu’s level up.

I had leveled up just before the fight against the elite orc. The difference in experience points between Arisu and myself was two orcs’ worth. Any acquired experience points were divided evenly between the both of us due to us being in a two-man party, meaning the elite orc was at the very least worth four orcs in terms of experience.

Considering how damn strong it was, four individual orcs would be muuuch easier. Frankly speaking, it felt stronger than even *ten* orcs. All things considered, I never wanted to fight one of those things ever again.

Presently, Arisu was Level 5, and her skills were Spearmanship (Rank 3) and Healing Magic (Rank 1). She also had three skill points to spare. Arisu had demonstrated time and time again that her fighting potential would increase exponentially by increasing the rank of her Spearmanship skill even once. Perhaps focusing yourself on one skill set was a strong fit for this skill system.

However, that was true only if you had people to cover you for your weaknesses. There were only two of us at the moment, and we had to account for everything. Focusing on one skill set would provide you with unmatched strength so long as you were fighting on your terms. However, this method would leave you vulnerable when met with an unexpected situation, like the one that had happened this time. Irregular cases such as these would be extremely difficult to deal with.

This time, Arisu had to use Heal on herself fifteen times before the wounds left from her fierce battle with the elite orc were healed. Before, she only needed to use Heal three times back when her shoulder was injured, and even before then when she healed the little scrape on the back of my hand, I think she only used it once.

Was the effectiveness of Heal growing weaker? Hardly. To describe it in game terms, our HP was increasing with every level we gained. The question-and-answer session with the laptop from a while ago had hinted as much. Back then, I had suspected that our HP might have been rising along with our MP, but experiencing for myself firsthand left me with rather strange feelings.

Perhaps we were steadily deviating from the human standards we once held ourselves to. We may have been transformed into monster-esque beings. No, I was certain of it. There was no other feasible explanation for how Arisu had taken blows from a monster as strong as that elite orc and come out with all of her limbs still attached. I was grateful that she was safe, of course, but... what was going to happen to us from now on?

“Kazu-san? Is something the matter?”

I must have had quite the grimace on my face. Arisu was looking up at me in confusion. I hid away the inner turmoil within me and grinned at her.

“I was just thinking that your appearance is rather revealing right now, is all.”

“Huh? Ah... N-No, this is...!!”

As though finally realizing the state she was in, Arisu’s face turned bright red, and she hurriedly hid away her crucial spots with her limbs. *Hey, Arisu, don’t you know a man is a creature that gets very excited when they see you hide yourself in embarrassment?*

“Umm... Do, um... Do you want to see?”

“Uh, well...”

I turned to face the other away, an embarrassed smile plastered on my face. The gentleman in me forced me to push the desire to leap at her back into the depths of my mind. However, Arisu looked at me with upturned eyes.

“If you’re the one looking, then... I don’t mind.”

Her bashful tone made me swallow my saliva reflexively. Arisu’s body shrunk slightly and she looked embarrassed as she saw me ready to pounce, but she didn’t look away from me.

“Ahh, listen, Arisu. As soon as a man hears those words, he turns into a wolf, you see...”

Arisu reached out her hand and grabbed onto mine before pulling me towards her. Before I knew it, my body was hanging over hers.

Her cherry red lips approached and latched onto mine. “Where’s this bad wolf you speak of?” she whispered.

Right here.

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Skipping forward a bit, we were able to discover some new and important things during the time when two melded into one.

With the Remove Pain spell from Rank 1 Healing Magic, there was no need to worry about any pain even if it was someone’s first time. Truthfully speaking, I thought about stopping halfway into it because Arisu was hurting. However, she was a smart girl and had studied her own skills to the extremes. She convinced me to continue by explaining that she would be fine if she casted Remove Pain, and, in fact, the spell really did put in work. I’d like to believe that we did a decent job, all things considered. The experience *was* both of our first times, after all.

On a side note, I believe it should be mentioned that Remove Pain only eliminated excessive sensations of pain, and one’s senses would function as per

usual otherwise.

The second thing that I had discovered was that MP would recover little by little if you were to spend an absorbent amount of time in this room. The reason for this discovery was because, despite being certain that I'd completely run out of MP, I wanted to conjure up some water to use to wash our bodies and had used Summon Water (a Rank 1 Summoning Magic spell) to attempt to do just that. As it turned out, my MP had recovered to the point where I was able to use Summon Water several times over without any issues.

Based on past experience, any MP that we recovered here would be reset back to its initial value upon returning back to the real world. Here in the white room, however, magic could be used as you pleased. *This could prove useful for magic-based experiments.*

The first portion of water that I conjured immediately fell to the floor and flowed off into a drainage system that I couldn't quite see. Unperturbed, I cast Summon Cauldron (also a Rank 1 Summoning Magic spell) and used the large pot that appeared to store the water created by Summon Water. Once finished, we used the pot of water to wash off our bodies. Watching Arisu rinse off made my fighting spirit rise once more, and my great efforts to get ourselves clean went to waste, but we'll leave that story for another time.

Currently, Arisu and I were leaning our backs against the wall of the room together with a white silk cloth that I conjured with Summon Cloth, a Rank 2 Summoning Magic spell.



“Hey, Kazu-san,” Arisu said. “Do you mind if I ask you something personal?”

“Something personal? There’s nothing really noteworthy about me.”

“Well, um, I was just wondering... Did something happen between you and Shiki-senpai?”

There it is. I thought she might ask about it. A deep pain throbbed inside of my chest, and my body stiffened. Arisu reached out and gently brought me into her embrace.

“I don’t want to force you to tell me, but I want to know more about you,” she whispered, looking up at me with watery eyes.

Damn it. Showing me cute puppy-dog eyes like that is cheating.

“You might feel uncomfortable hearing it,” I warned.

“I know. But even so, I still want you to tell me,” Arisu insisted.

And so, I began telling her about my past: the person I hated with such passion, the poor treatment he had inflicted on me, how his behavior had pushed me so far up the wall that I became a complete misanthrope, and the reason behind making the pitfalls was so I could kill him—I explained everything. About how not only my class, but the *entire* school was condoning his actions. And about how Yukariko Shiki was forced into quiet submission through the same social pressure.

My tone was filled with indifference. “Logically, I don’t think I have any right to resent her. I mean, going along with the status quo was only the natural thing to do. She wasn’t exactly a person with very much influence, after all.”

While I was explaining everything that had happened, I used the opportunity to put my thoughts surrounding the situation in order. Was Shiki-san wrong for going along with the status quo? No, I didn’t think so. I still couldn’t find it in myself to agree with it but that didn’t mean I should irrationally detest her either. Moreover, she was in a critical condition right now. There was no need to kick her when she was already down.

My mind flashed back to the tortured expression she had shown back when Arisu lifted her up. She appeared to be ridiculing herself. “Guess I deserve this,

huh?”

That said, I still thought I had the right to punish her. There were methods for this. I finally had power now. If I really felt like it, I could even get rid of Yukariko Shiki for good.

“Would you hate me if I were to take revenge on Shiki-san?”

“I wouldn’t. I don’t have any right to hate you for that,” Arisu answered, her face tense.

“Oh? And here I took you for more of the saintly type.”

“As I listened to you speak, I began to feel more and more disdain for the high school students, to the point that I now want to smack them...” Arisu clenched her fist tightly in front of her chest. “Remember how I said I was a quiet, docile girl?”

“Kind of, yeah.”

“That was also partly due to the fact that I’m not athletic. I was weak, so I stayed quiet and didn’t do anything to stand out. Even when I saw someone being bullied, I just pretended to not have seen it. I’m... no different than Shiki-san.” Arisu looked at me with a regretful expression, as though seeking forgiveness from me. “You hate me now, too... don’t you?”

Rather than reply, I instead reached out with both arms and grabbed Arisu’s head, pulling her into my embrace.

“You didn’t do anything to me, Arisu. You don’t need to think about the things beyond your realm of control.”

“O-Okay.”

“And I don’t hate Shiki-san, much less you.”

“I know.”

“I’m going to have to reconcile with her as much as I can, so long as she wants to do that. Reconciling would be better for the future.”

“The... future?”

I began to give Arisu a simple explanation about our current situation. The place we were in now might not be our original world. We had drifted to another one, and right now, we knew that there was at least one pressing threat: the orcs.

At present, our struggle to live was unassisted in entirety. Or perhaps, our sole ally was the someone, or something, that created the white room. Well, in reality, we had no way of knowing whether the creator of this room was an ally. Furthermore, we had no way of knowing if it was possible for us to return home.

And finally, if the surviving students did not work together, even our immediate survival was in jeopardy of failing.

“In order to level up, as well as come to this room, you have to kill an orc.”

“Completely impractical under normal circumstances.”

“Yep. But if I support them, like I did with you, then the story changes. Starting tomorrow, I’m going to ask the people who want to live if they want to level up like you. If they can get even one weapon skill, then our chances increase greatly.”

“If everyone does their own part, then I...”

“You should focus on protecting yourself. Moreover, we need to think about what will happen when we act independently.”

“You mean we’re going to separate from the group?”

“No, not exactly. For example, let’s say you and I go together to the middle school building. We wouldn’t be at the Cultivation Center, so the people that stay behind...”

“Oh, so that’s what you’re getting at,” Arisu nodded. “In order to survive, you have to fight, right?”

“Yeah. Maybe not everyone, but definitely a few.”

In all likelihood, the Cultivation Center would become a base for us in the future. Although I wasn’t sure how many people were among the survivors that Tamaki mentioned, so long as we could protect them until they reached Level 1,

then the immediate issue of leaving our base with no guards could be solved by tomorrow.

Tomorrow, indeed. Night had already fallen. While there was a spell called Night Sight under Rank 5 Support Magic, going out in the dark was dangerous regardless.

Most of all, Arisu and I were both dead-tired. I wanted to call it a day and finally relax.

“First thing’s first, about tomorrow—if we take supporting everyone into the equation... it seems better to get Healing Magic up to Rank 2.”

“Rank 2 Healing Magic...? Ah, I see. It’s for Flower Coat, right?”

“Yeah.”

We had come across Flower Coat, a Healing Magic Rank 2 spell, during the middle of one of our sessions on the computer. This spell, in basic terms, temporarily inflated a target’s HP. How useful the spell would prove to be was up for debate, but just having the spell as insurance would set people’s minds at ease.

“And then we’ll build up our power and eventually make our way to the high school... right?” Arisu confirmed.

“I don’t have a clue as to how many people are left in the high school. But if that man is still alive... I won’t forgive him.” I clenched my fist tightly. Hatred coursed through my veins.

“Um... who exactly is this person you hate so much?”

“Huh? Oh, guess I didn’t tell you. His name is Shiba Sasou. His father is actually one of the people on the board of directors, and...” I rambled on for a while, slandering and cursing him throughout. “Anyway, Arisu, you need to make sure to be wary of that guy... hm? Hey, Arisu?”

I looked down to find Arisu with her eyes cast downward, as though her mind was roaming elsewhere.

“Are you okay?”

“Huh? Oh, y-yes.”

Arisu looked up with a panicked expression. She seemed to be a bit tired but that was a matter of course. Just a little while ago, she was fighting for her life. It came as no shock that the life-or-death stakes of the battle had exhausted her.

“Sorry, that boring talk must’ve put you to sleep.”

“N-No, not at all... I’m okay, it’s just...” Arisu trailed off, and she hurriedly shook her head.

Maybe she thought I was offended by her doing that? Well, I’m not. Right now, I’m happy just gazing at your face.

Then I remembered something. “Oh, by the way...”

“Yes?”

“Once we’re out of the white room and back to reality, you’ll go back to being a virgin again. So basically, as long as we do it inside of this space, every time will be your first...”

“... Kazu-san.” Arisu squinted at me angrily. “Do you take pleasure in causing me pain?”

“Huh? No way... I mean, you *are* pretty cute when you cry, but that is a bit different. Okay?”

“Why is your tone suddenly so stiff?”

“Uh, well, you see, um...”

Arisu observed me silently as I began stumbling over myself before letting out a big sigh, after which she glared at me with upturned eyes.

“If you really want to, okay. I’d like to please you. However...”

“However?”

“Please give me some time to think about our relationship in the future.”

“Ah... yeah. I kinda got swept up in the mood. Sorry,” I apologized earnestly. In my heart, I thought it was a reward, but I still apologized.

LEVEL: 5	SPEARMANSHIP: 3
HEALING MAGIC: 1→2	SKILL POINTS: 3→1

Chapter 16: And So, Night Fell

Upon leaving the white room, Arisu and I found ourselves back in the Cultivation Center's lobby. The elite orc's body had vanished in entirety, and the only thing occupying its previous spot was a blue gem.

Hm? Is this like one of those magic stone things you see in games? I could only guess it was some kind of crystallized form of a monster's magical power. I walked over to the blue stone and placed it inside my pocket before I turned to face Arisu once more.

Her appearance was back to the tatters it was in before. My gaze drifted up to her eyes, and upon noticing me, she blushed slightly, and her lips turned upward in a tiny smile, one more out of an awkward reflex than pure happiness. She was acting rather shy.

We must've been staring at one another for a little while because a high-pitched voice broke us out of our stupor.

"Oooh, Arisu! And Kazu-san!"

It came from the top of the balcony. Tamaki was leaning over the balcony, both her hands waving back and forth. Looking closer, I noticed that tears were spilling from her eyes. She was sniffing but still animatedly waving at us.

"I'm so, so glad you guys are alive! I heard a really loud crash, and then suddenly everything went dead silent! You really had me worried there!"

Her absentmindedness made me smile bitterly. *What was your plan if we were both defeated and the elite orc was the last man standing? Well, whatever, I guess.* I chalked it up as her being so worried about us that she couldn't help but come check, and I joined Arisu in waving back at her.

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There turned out to be seven other students hiding themselves on the third floor alongside Tamaki. Every single one of them were middle school students—all girls.

I informed them of the three girls and the two boys who met unfortunate ends, and that the only one who managed to survive being captured by the orcs was Shiki Yukariko. Considering the circumstances, I was surprised that seven others also managed to hide.

“The two first-year students right there brought me to safety when I arrived here after separating from Arisu!” Tamaki chipped energetically, sticking out her chest in the process.

When I pressed for details, she explained that she and the two first-years chose not to go to the first floor where they ran a high risk of running into an orc. Instead, they climbed a nearby tree and threw a rope from one of the branches to an open window on the third floor to climb into the building.

Apparently, all of this was done under the guidance of the Tea Ceremony club members, who peeked out of the third-floor windows to help them. *Sure, Indiana Jones might’ve pulled off some acrobatic stunts out of nowhere, but seriously?!*

“So, there are only girls here?”

“Other than Tamaki-chan and myself, everyone here is a member of the Tea Ceremony and Culinary clubs,” Arisu replied.

There was some basis in that—a lot of the clubs that had rooms in the Cultivation Center had far more girls as members than boys. Therefore, it was only natural for there to be far more female students here.

That being said, I kinda wish there was a man here, junior or not. I could rely on him for more brute force work.

Besides, being the sole guy with a bunch of girls around was a problem in all sorts of ways. A situation such as this could only be called paradise in works of fiction, not reality... Oh well. It’d be wise not to get too greedy in times like these. I would just have to hope that there was a man out there somewhere that succeeded in escaping.

I looked outside to find that it was getting very dark—and fast. It wouldn't be long before it was pitch-black, but we couldn't afford to create any light. The illumination would stand out inside the dark forest, and if the orcs found us now, we'd be screwed.

"Ah, we should close the front doors for the time being. And then..." I suggested, trailing off when an intense feeling of dizziness assaulted me. My legs gave out from underneath. Arisu tried to support me before I collapsed but found herself crumpling alongside me as though her body suddenly went limp.

"Ha... ha ha ha. Are you okay, Kazu-san?" Arisu asked.

"I should be asking you that..."

We took a look at each other and weakly grinned. As soon as the moment of tension faded, the fatigue that had built up throughout the day came crashing down on us.

"Ohhh, geez. You guys need to get some rest. Leave the rest to us, okay?" Tamaki reassured us.

"Sorry, Tamaki-chan. We'll leave the rest to you all," Arisu said.

I supposed getting a little bit of rest would do us some good. I leaned back on the lobby wall alongside Arisu and shut my eyes. The moment I did, I felt the sleep demons pounce on me, and everything went black.

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When my eyes fluttered open, the aroma of incense sticks hung in the air around me as though at a funeral. My surroundings were illuminated by a dim light. *Candlelight? Ohhh. This level of light shouldn't be noticeable from outside so long as the front entrance is shut tight.*

"I decided to burn some incense. That awful stench wasn't doing anyone any favors."

A voice entered my ears from somewhere close by. When I raised my face to see who it was, I found Shiki Yukariko sitting near me, staring motionlessly at

me. She was wearing a high school jersey. *Must've been something left behind by one of the Tea Ceremony club members*, I soon realized.

But why is she the only one here? My inner doubts must've surfaced on my face, as Shiki Yukariko flashed an understanding but bitter smile.

"Arisu-chan told me to watch over you for a bit. She said Tamaki-chan and the rest of them were going to take a bath," she explained.

I looked to my side to discover Arisu was no longer beside me as she was before. *Ah, so they went to bathe, huh? Setting that aside, did they actually get the bath to heat up? Maaan, I'd kill for a bath right now.*

"Sorry to burst your bubble but it's all cold water," she quickly said as if reading my mind.

Figured. Damn. Either way, a cold bath wasn't bad. I was grateful for the opportunity, if anything. Right now I was covered head-to-toe in sweat, mud, and orc blood. My entire body itched. It didn't matter if it was chilly or even ice-cold; I'd take whatever I could get. Well, perhaps not as far as ice in a bath; I didn't want to get sick.

"I was given first turn for a bath, so now I'm free to watch you."

Given first turn, huh? The reason being... My mind flashed back to the moment where we first discovered her. No one in their right mind would ask to go before her after seeing her in that state.

At any rate, the fact that we had the luxury to even take a bath meant that the Cultivation Center was truly a safe place to be. With my immediate worry soothed, I heard my stomach grumble. Shiki Yukariko pulled out a CalorieMate bar from her jersey pocket and handed it to me.

"The smell of hot food would be dangerous, so this is all we've got," she explained. "Eat up."

"Right now, this is plenty."

True to my words, the CalorieMate bar was a feast. The bar was gone before I knew it, and I licked the crumbs off of my fingers before asking, "Did someone have this on them?"

“There’s a cellar below this building that’s full of emergency rations meant for disasters. I took a brief look down there and, to give you a rough estimate, I think about ten people could live off of those rations for a year or so. The other stuff is canned goods and related things. The water in the tank should be enough to cover us for a long, long time. I also found a generator that runs off of gasoline. Noise isn’t something we need more of now, though, so I didn’t turn it on.”

A wise decision, I thought. Her quick thinking left me almost speechless. *And to think she went through something so terrible only a few hours ago...* The energy she exuded now was a sight to behold.

“Next, the corpses have all been moved to the back room on the first floor. Let’s bury them tomorrow morning or sometime soon. As for the rest... Hey. What’s up? You’ve been staring at me for a while now.”

“O-Oh, my bad.”

“Well, I guess it’s fine,” Shiki-san spoke as she combed her fingers through the hair on the back of her head. “I’m sure you know, but I’m only putting a brave face on right now. I wouldn’t be able to stand it unless I did something to distract myself.”

“So that’s why... Sorry for prying.”

“No need to apologize. Had you not saved me, I might just be another corpse in that room right now. Or maybe I would still be stuck in hell. I’m grateful to you. So, thanks.”

“You should be thanking Arisu, not me. The moment the elite orc showed up, I opted to abandon you.”

“I was told about the situation. Your reaction was normal. Besides, if we’re talking about forsaking people, then I’m the one who should be apologizing to you for all this time.”

“You’ve got a point.” I nodded weakly at her statement. She was right. After all, the reason she was saved by me was due to none other than the result of the situation’s flow of events. Her reason for abandoning me was the same as

mine. There was not much one could do but select the best choice when stuck in the flow of events.

Even if I bring that up now, though, there wouldn't be much point.

"Don't act so abject," she said. "You have power now, don't you?"

"So I take it that you've been told about magic and skills?"

"Arisu-chan talked about them, yeah. And there's a 'white room,' too, or something? I was rather skeptical of it all but I don't have a choice but to believe it. She healed my wounds right in front of me."

"She did, huh..." I could only offer up words of appreciation inside my head towards Arisu for saving me the time of explaining.

"So, what will you do now?" Shiki-san asked. "You could even force me out of this building and throw me at the orcs if you felt like it."

"There's no way I'm gonna do that."

"I'm aware. If you were someone so cruel, there wouldn't have been any need for me to be blaming myself for a while now."

Oh, so that's it. I finally understood where she was coming from. She had never disregarded her own actions. She was simply powerless, unable to do anything to help.

"Well, that's how it is. So, if you'd like, I'll let you hit me just one time if you can forgive me afterward. How does that sound?"

An unexpectedly muscle-brained idea for her. My expression morphed into one of surprise as I took in what she uttered.

I quickly shot down the idea. "I'm not gonna hit you."

"Hmm, then, how about flicking my forehead?" Smiling mischievously, Shiki-san pushed out her forehead towards me... and I caught the trembling of her shoulders in the corner of my vision.

It didn't take me long to realize the reason. She was pushing herself way, way too hard, yet she still wished to be her usual cheerful and upbeat self.

I forced a grin and flicked her forehead lightly.

“Geez. That wouldn’t have even hurt a fly, you know.”

“You’ve already been through so much. Besides, if we’re talking about painful things, then I’ve already caused a lot of pain today.”

“That’s true. You killed a whole lot of orcs, haven’t you? Thanks for putting in so much effort.”

If we were being honest, Arisu was the one who was doing most of the head-on fighting. She was the one who deserved the credit... though I supposed all’s well that ends well enough. I was plenty tired myself. There were things I needed to do before I fell asleep again.

“Give me a bit. I’m gonna go cast an alarm magic,” I declared and suddenly stood up. The moment I did, Shiki-san let out a shrill whimper and shrunk away from me. “Oh, um, sorry.”

“... I’m sorry.” She tried to make herself look as small as possible, and when she looked up at me with upturned eyes, she smiled at me, but I saw the hurt in her expression. “I’m... going to try and do my best...”

I couldn’t bring myself to say anything in return. I simply made a wide berth around her and opened the entranceway door.

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The world outside of the Cultivation Center was bathed in total darkness. I stepped out into the darkness, and closed the door behind me. Looking up, I was greeted by a night sky full of stars.

Without any light coming from the surroundings, that was to be expected, I supposed. Even so, I found it quite refreshing to be without the fluorescent lights that normally illuminated the area around the dormitories and school.

Both the sky I was looking up at, as well as the Milky Way, were a sight to behold... and it was at that moment that I noticed something. The significance of my discovery was immediately put at the forefront of my thoughts.

“There are... two moons...” The words slipped through my lips in an almost groaned mutter. “Now I know for sure. We’re not in our world anymore.”

Another world. The proof was in the pudding... or in this case, the sky. After taking a moment to examine the sky closer, I noticed the arrangement of the constellations seemed to be a bit different. I didn't know much about astronomy, so I couldn't say for sure... but I had never seen stars in these patterns before.

How long have I been staring blankly at the sky like this? I suddenly recalled my original reason for being out here.

“Oh, right, I need to set up some protection with magic.”

Among the Rank 2 spells in Support Magic's repertoire was one designated as Alert Territory. Unlike the other spells in Support Magic, Alert Territory was to be casted on a specific place. The spell would give me, and only me, an audible warning when a designated thing or person passed by.

After a moment's hesitation, I made it so that if anything larger than a child crossed a certain line around the Cultivation Center, it would warn me. I set up this spell in each direction around the Cultivation Center. As far as how large the Cultivation Center was, it took me four uses of the spell to surround the entire building.

The spell lasted twelve hours or until I canceled it, whichever was shorter. It wouldn't be a problem for me to keep it up until morning.

Having finished with my original objective, I looked up at the night sky once more.

“Why did we come to this world?”

I wondered if the day would ever come when that question was answered before I shook my head to dispel the thought, heading back inside the Cultivation Center.

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In the one in a million chance an orc found its way inside, the first floor was too dangerous to rest on. As such, we all decided to sleep on the third floor. The girls all slept in a large Japanese-style room, and I was holed up alone inside of a small Western-style room.

A tiny part of me was hopeful that Arisu would pop in for a nightly visit, but I didn't have the energy to wait for her. The minute my head rested itself against the pillow, I was out like a light. I'm sure Arisu did the same as me. She must've been absolutely exhausted from fighting on the frontlines.

The long, long first day finally came to a close. And so...

The even longer second day began.

Chapter 17: Daybreak

I had a dream. In my dream, *he* was looking down at me as I kneeled on the ground, defeated.

“What an idiot,” *he* sneered. “You can’t even protect the woman you love.”

His gaze switched from me to somewhere beside me. My eyes listlessly followed his until I saw what he was looking at.

A girl lay collapsed there. A thick spear was pierced into her chest, skewering her into the ground. That girl was Arisu. I looked down at her from my position, at her lifeless eyes, and her bloodstained body rooted to the ground.

I watched as the lips on her ashen face began to move. “It was a mistake. Following you was a mistake. It was your decision that killed me.”

Oh, so that’s how it is. Immediately I grasped the current situation, and looked up in a daze to see him still sneering at me. *Once again... I lost to him, didn’t I?*

“No matter how far you go, you’ll always be trash. She died, and it’s all your fault.”

Yeah... Arisu died... and it’s all my fault. I made a single mistake, and everything came crashing down because of it. But even then...!

I clenched my fist. I grit my teeth, and I lifted my chin up.

“But even then... I’ve decided I won’t run away. This time, I swear...” I glared up at *him* as he laughed loudly, and then....

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Once upon a time ago, before electricity even existed, man was said to rise with the morning sun and rest with the evening sun.

My eyes opened before dawn, possibly in part due to falling asleep as soon as I got into bed. I took in a deep, rough breath before deciding to get up. I'd sweat a bunch throughout the night, and I had the feeling I'd been dreaming a moment ago. I was pretty sure it was a nightmare.

"Guess that dream was pretty awful." I sighed. At any rate, yesterday was a disaster. Our everyday lives were suddenly put to an end. In just a single day, everything changed completely like some kind of nightmare—one that never came to an end. Today would be more of the same.

I crawled out from the bed. My body ached all over from the muscle pain, but I believed I was better off due to the fact that I'd been tempering my body by digging those holes recently. Arisu was probably having it a lot worse than me right now.

Downstairs, the girls were already moving about. The savory smell of *katsuobushi* flakes was drifting in the air. When asked about it, I was told that Shiki-san proposed that we should recover our physical strength with some breakfast, even if the smell bore the risk of attracting the orcs to us. The stoves in the culinary room might've been out of commission without any gas, but apparently we had a portable and refillable gas stove on hand. Even with the situation the way it was, I couldn't help but find it wonderful that we had a member of the Culinary Club with us.

As fruit of their efforts, we were rewarded with bowls of miso soup and some instant rice, as well as instant curry. The girl in the Culinary Club apologized for giving us such a simple breakfast, but I didn't mind. Curry was a feast for us Japanese. With hunger as our guide, we stuffed ourselves to the brim with breakfast. I wasn't the only one feeling up for seconds; following Arisu's lead, the others reached for more too.

"Today's game day," Tamaki chirped. "We gotta build up our stamina!"

Ah, I see. They're all aware of it. Everyone present appeared to be fully aware of the situation we were currently in, as well as the grim reality we would have to face from now on. Thanks to the warm meal we'd stuffed ourselves full with, we were all in high spirits now.

Once breakfast was over, our first order of action was to hold a meeting in the time before daybreak to discuss our plans for today, as well as spread information between us. Our place of choice was the council room on the third floor. The first and second floors were both devastated by the orcs and thus would need to be cleaned before they could be used, so naturally, we gathered on the third floor.

We sat down in the chairs surrounding the council room table, and I looked over at everyone present. Arisu and I locked eyes. A grin appeared on my face, and Arisu gave me a slightly confused expression before returning an awkward smile.

Hmmmm? Is it just my imagination, or are things more awkward today than yesterday?... Nah, it's probably nothing. Yeah, everyone's here with us right now, so she just wants to seem more distant.

It was natural. The situation we were in was constantly changing. The phase where Arisu and I were fighting alone was coming to an end. That wouldn't be enough to ensure our survival today. I had confirmed as much back in the white room. Well, if Arisu and I continued to act alone, then there was a possibility we might survive somehow. But even if we did, that wouldn't protect Tamaki, Arisu's best friend. The two first-year middle school students that saved Tamaki's life yesterday would be left to fend for themselves.

Pulling myself together, I looked over at everyone once again before beginning to speak. "Firstly, I'd like to make sure that everyone has heard from Arisu about the scenery beyond the mountain."

"I saw it with my own eyes," Tamaki replied.

When I asked her what she meant, she explained that she could see it from the rooftop.

"What can you see?"

"The huge plain."

My response was rather subdued. "Oh... yeah."

The roof of this building was higher up than the tops of the trees. The sight beyond the mountain must've been clearly visible from up top.

“I had some free time while we were holed up here, so I went up to the roof and looked around. It gave me quite the shock. The scenery had changed completely from before.”

“What’d you think of it?”

“I thought ‘Oh, have we come to a game world?’”

Tamaki’s way of thinking was much more direct than mine.

The world of a game. Yep, we have everything needed already. There are orcs, a gigantic grassy plain sprawling as far as the eye can see, and even a cutscene where a huge bird picks up an elephant...

Game world or not, it didn’t matter what we called it. The important part was that they were already aware of the reality of the situation we found ourselves in. This wasn’t Earth anymore. We were in another world.

Tamaki continued. “That’s not all, either. When I looked out from the window in the middle of the night, there were two moons.”

“Yeah, I saw that as well,” I said.

“The constellations were completely different too.”

“Are you familiar with constellations and space stuff like that?”

“No, I heard about it from Arisu.”

I glanced at Arisu. She nodded in response, smiling sheepishly.

“I like myths and stuff like that,” she said.

“Kind of like a *chuuni*, huh.”

“*Chuuni*? What’s that?”

Arisu tilted her head, puzzled. *Oh crap!*

It dawned on me that I had sounded like a huge nerd right then, and I looked around to see several of the girls grinning at me. Tamaki was among them. Her blonde pigtails shook as she howled with laughter.

Ahh, dammit all. Yeah, yeah, laugh it up. I cleared my throat, and returned to the matter at hand.

“Well, moving on. I’m sure everyone here is aware that we are no longer on Earth, am I correct?”

The girls all nodded. A few of them were making crying faces, but such was inevitable. If crying could help us make it somehow, then I wanted to cry, too.

Honestly speaking, it felt as though I was the one leading the meeting. I suppose there was no avoiding that, though. As of now, there were only two high school students here: Shiki-san and myself, and Shiki-san was acting reserved towards me, hence her handing over the role of leader to me.

Try as I might, I still had some ill-will directed towards Shiki-san, in the sense that being directed around by her would not be an enjoyable experience. Maybe I was just fussing over the small things. *Well, truthfully, I can admit that I hold quite the grudge.*

In any case, discussing how selfish I was could wait for another day. At the moment we were in a meeting. I had to keep an open mind.

“We are in another world. After that earthquake, our entire school, and even the whole mountain, were moved to another world. We’re castaways—foreigners to this other world,” I stated matter-of-factly. “Also, the orcs have begun invading this mountain. If we take into consideration the time, I think it’s very unlikely they climbed the mountain after the earthquake. They came from the top of the mountain. There must be some kind of warping device there, like a warp gate or something.”

I didn’t know for certain if this was actually the case, but I was sure that they were using some kind of special method to move. With there being something as unbelievable as magic in this world, it would come as no surprise for something such as warp magic to exist. Hell, it was even possible they could’ve come by an airship or something.

“The orcs’ aim is unclear, but there is no doubt that they are our enemies. For safety’s sake, you should consider every building on this mountain to be occupied by the orcs. As for allies... It’s best we consider there to be none. It’s possible there are some adults or students hiding away somewhere, though.”

If there were any adults left then they might be holing themselves up somewhere, or perhaps they fled into the forest. If we were to try and join up

with them, we would have no choice but to clear out the buildings one by one.

With that said, yesterday was a terrible situation. Even the Cultivation Center had had about ten orcs waiting inside, and I doubted that was the main force. What's more, there was also that bronze-colored orc that came later: the elite orc, or so I'd dubbed it. If that was the only one then I could rest easy, but it was for the best that I stopped making such optimistic assumptions.

We had to consider the enemy to be powerful. We needed to act on the assumption that there was more than one elite orc, and the regular orcs numbered at around a hundred, if not hundreds. There may even be ones stronger than even the elite orc out there.

In any case, not having a clear idea of what we were dealing with was scary. Perhaps I ought to do some scouting first. Before that, however...

"I think everyone here should get themselves to Level 1, if possible."

I heard the sound of several people swallowing their saliva at once.

"Everyone will take turns killing an orc. Arisu and I will incapacitate the orc in some way, so all you guys will need to do is stab it with a spear. At any rate, once you reach Level 1 and acquire a skill or two, you can take minimal measures to defend yourself in the unlikely event that an orc attacks you. We're not going to force you to fight. Once you're Level 1, you don't have to fight if you think it's impossible for you. With that said, there is a huge difference in the safety margin between Level 1 and zero."

Should they choose to continue to fight afterward then I would support them, of course. Arisu and I would eventually reach a wall sooner or later if we continued to fight alone. That much had become clear to me in yesterday's battle. While moving in small groups would certainly increase the efficiency of gathering experience points, should something go amiss, recovering from there would prove to be extremely difficult.

In yesterday's case, the erroneous factor was Arisu ignoring the order I gave. Logically speaking, I should've abandoned Arisu at that moment. Fortunately, we managed to pull off a victory, but I didn't ever want it to come down to the wire like that again.

We needed insurance. It didn't matter whether I could trust them with my life or not, we needed partners. I wanted people who could support myself and Arisu whenever necessary; to the point that I would pay any price for a few people. Moreover, if we were to make the Cultivation Center into a base, we would also need some people to defend it.

Now that I thought about it, it could only be called fortunate that I was able to sleep in a bed last night. I wasn't sure if I even could've slept safely outside, much less gotten a good night's rest.

"I'll do it."

I guess I should've expected as much. The first person to raise their hand was none other than Tamaki.

"I don't want to have to run away anymore. Besides, I don't wanna have to be protected by Arisu all the time!" Tamaki joked and turned to grin at Arisu.

Arisu strained a smile before replying, "I'm fine with protecting you."

"No way, I'll be the one to protect you! Not the other way around!"

After making her grand declaration, Tamaki turned to face me.

"That's how it is, so I'm gonna be joining your party, Kazu-san."

"Aah, but my party's going to be the main force, so it'll be extremely dang—well, if you insist."

I was almost certain she'd even risk her life to protect Arisu. There was a chance she'd cut corners when it came to protecting me, but as long as Arisu liked me, I didn't think she would betray me.

No, wait a second. What if Tamaki's in love with Arisu? And by that, I meant in a sexual sense, naturally. In fact, I'm beginning to suspect that she might be very jealous of me...

I stared at Tamaki's face.

"Hm?" Tamaki tilted her head innocently. "What's up? Ooh, did you possibly fall in love with me?"

"Wha—huh?"

Arisu made a face as though she hiccupped and alternated her gaze between Tamaki and me. Arisu's self-appointed best friend looked back at her, grinning.

"Aah, Tamaki," I began. "If you could refrain from causing mis—"

"Huh? Wait, don't tell me... You want both me and Arisu?!"

"Okay, listen here."

Arisu's demeanor changed into what seemed like restlessness, her face turning red before changing to blue. Tamaki went on to tease us some more but I ignored her teasing remarks. *Yeah, I think it's safe to leave her be.* The possibility that she might be a lesbian remained, but I didn't think there was any reason to pursue it any further. She probably wasn't that type of girl. *Frankly, I just don't feel like thinking any deeper on this topic.*

"And the rest of you?"

"I'll do it, too," replied Shiki-san. "I never want to go through something like that again... However, I'll have to pass on joining your party, Kaya-kun. Frankly, I'd like to avoid fighting against the orcs as much as I can, but the idea of being powerless irks me just as much. So, please, only get one orc for me. Sorry."

Naturally, I understood her reasons for wanting to avoid direct conflict. The next person to raise their hand was one of the first-year students that rescued Tamaki yesterday.

"Um, I'll do it."

"Err, you are...?"

"Mia Tagamiya. I would like to join your party too, Kazu-senpai."

Mia Tagamiya was a petite girl whose frame, fewer than 150 centimeters tall, was even smaller than Arisu's. Long, glossy black hair extended down to the shoulder, and her eyes seemed a bit glossy. She was also a victim of baby-face syndrome.

In fact, I even questioned whether she was actually a middle school student, or an elementary student masquerading as one. *Well, as a first-year student, she would've been an elementary school student up until about half a year ago, so maybe she's still in her growing phase?*

“Magic... interests me.”

“Ah, so that’s it? If you fight with magic, then your physique won’t matter. But still, Mia... can I call you Mia? It’s going to be dangerous regardless of what you fight with.”

“I’m aware of the danger.”

I looked deep into Mia’s eyes as though to determine whether she was messing around or not. Her heavy eyes stared back at me. *Hmm, it’s hard to tell.*

“I have an older brother in high school.”

“An older brother?”

“A third year in Class 2.”

“I don’t remember there being someone with the surname Tagamiya.”

“... I see.”

“So you want to meet him again, huh? And to do that, you want power?”

Mia responded with a nod. *I see, so she’s a brother-con, is she?*

“Even if my brother’s a complete idiot, he’s still my brother. I’ve got to protect him.”

... Signs are pointing to “no.”

Honestly, I hoped that everyone in the high school would be dead by now. Her brother might also know about me, too, and that meant it was possible that rumors about how pitiful of a person I used to be would be spread to everyone here through her.

That being said, there was hardly a point in thinking about it so deeply at this point in time. She still seemed to be willing to fight even after witnessing yesterday’s horrific tragedy. It wouldn’t hurt to watch her for just today, at least. Whatever the case, if worse came to worse, I needed to have Arisu and Tamaki on my side. Thinking about it on those lines, the only other party member I needed besides Arisu and Tamaki was Mia. Even if Mia changed her mind, we wouldn’t lose so long as it was three against one.

“At the very least, I cannot approve of investigating the high school right now. With that said, I do think we will eventually need to go there. We’ll search around the school when that time comes.”

“That’s fine. Waiting around silently... is something I hate.”



“I’ll be counting on you, then,” I replied. At any rate, I wasn’t sure if she could kill an orc. Once she went through that rite of passage, so to speak, I would have to ask her once again whether she wanted to join my party.

Like I brought up earlier, I didn’t think everyone here had the guts to kill an orc. My estimation going into it was around half of them at best, however, this apprehension of mine was soon proved incorrect. Starting with Mia, hands went up one after another. In the end, everyone vowed to kill an orc. It appeared as though yesterday’s tragedy had sharpened everyone’s will more than I imagined.

“All right. Then, to start...” I turned to face everyone before loudly declaring, “Let’s dig a pitfall!”

The only person whose expression didn’t turn blank at my statement was Arisu.

Chapter 18: Hole Digger

The morning sun rose into the sky from beyond the horizon.

To start with, I decided to dig a hole beyond the Cultivation Center in order to make a grave, as well as get some digging practice in. Despite outward appearances, I had a bit of experience in this field. As fruit of my previous labor, I'd gotten the know-how on how to dig a deep hole both speedily and efficiently. Feel free to call me the Hole-Digging Master.

It was necessary that we dressed in easy-to-move clothing, so I asked everyone gathered outside to put on the gym uniforms that were inside the Cultivation Center's storage area. The uniforms' designs were old-fashioned and out of date. Apparently, they were supposed to be disposed of originally, but a mistake or something caused them to be instead abandoned in the back of the storage area.

To reiterate: instead of shorts, they were briefs. *How long has it been since these were abolished due to PTA pressure?* I wondered. The clothes themselves looked to be in good condition, though...

Arisu looked up at me bashfully, squirming in embarrassment. "Umm, does seeing this make you happy?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Every boy loves a girl in briefs, right?"

"And where'd you hear that from?"

"Tamaki-chan."

I watched Tamaki speed off like a rabbit. *I'm gonna remember this, you hear?* The other girls were looking at us, grins spread across all of their faces. *Yeah, yeah, laugh it up.*

"We'll be using shovels, so it'd be better if we had some jerseys, if possible. You wouldn't want to get injured in the middle of digging, would you?"

“If someone does get hurt, then Arisu-chan can heal them, can’t she?” Shiki-san interjected. She had a huge smirk on her face. *Ahh, this little...*

“We’re going to fight the orcs after this.”

“Still, it’s no good. Today’s going to be pretty warm.” Shiki-san wrung her fingers through her hair, shaking her head afterward. “Besides, a plain old jersey isn’t going to protect us from an orc’s axe strike, you see? Therefore, it would be better for us to be dressed more lightly. Don’t you agree?”

I found myself unable to argue with her logic. I was going to be leaving the vanguard to Arisu and my familiars, after all.

“Well, just make sure to be careful,” I added before shrugging my shoulders. Saying anything more didn’t seem like it would help, so I left it at that.

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I cast Mighty Arm on everyone, increasing their physical strength. At Level 5, even if I cast Mighty Arm on eleven people at once, my MP would make a full recovery in twenty minutes or so. The effects would last from around an hour to an hour and a half, so even with eleven people, I could endlessly reapply the spell without having to worry about my MP running low.

Currently, everyone was equipped with a shovel, all of them found in the depths of the Cultivation Center’s basement.

I started out by showing the ideal way to dig with a shovel, and then I let them copy me. I watched over everyone as they dug, teaching them to be more efficient as they went. The first hole they made was, put simply, terribly misshapen. *Oh well, this is just practice. The hole’s good enough for a grave.*

Yeah, you heard me. A grave. More specifically, a grave for the five people killed in the Cultivation Center by the orcs.

We put the corpses in the hole and filled it back in before sticking a tree branch into the ground as a sign. I softly placed my hands together. I was wondering if we’d also have to dig a hole to deal with excrement but we ended up unearthing an emergency-use temporary toilet from the storage area, and decided to install it in the lobby. Why inside, you ask? Well, installing it outside

wasn't the safest of options. There was no telling when the orcs would come knocking on our door.

Doing all of this took an hour and a half, making it 7:30 in the morning.

The main event was from here on out. I had us relocate to a spot a bit into the forest, where we began to dig the pitfall for real. They dug this one faster than expected, perhaps due to the fact they were working together, or maybe they were more or less getting used to the process.

While the girls were in the middle of digging, I decided to summon a puppet golem as well as a raven. It might've just been my imagination, but the raven seemed to have a fiercer expression than the day before.

No, it's not my imagination. This guy's definitely different from yesterday. The raven's beak was sharper, and a sharp glint flashed in its eyes as it glared at the surroundings. Though its mannerisms weren't as overbearing as a king's, I could tell it was stronger than before. *But why...?*

Oh, of course! The answer was right in front of me. Summoning Magic's spells were strengthened in a way not unlike the spells belonging to Support Magic were when the rank of the skill was increased, or so it appeared.

In other words, the familiars brought about by Summoning Magic would be strengthened when the rank of the skill was increased. *Of course, there's no telling if the strengthening effect is all that worthwhile...*

I made a mental note to remember this. There was now another factor to weigh when I thought about whether to increase the rank of either Support Magic or Summoning Magic.

I sent Arisu out to do a little scouting, giving her my raven familiar for a travel companion. That way, if she needed to contact me, she could give the raven a slip of paper to carry in its mouth back to me. Although incomparable to the speed of email, it was the best we could do.

Forget carrier pigeons; carrier *ravens* were the new norm.

"Could you go and survey the middle school main building, student dormitories, the staff building, the gymnasium, sports grounds, tennis courts, and so on and so forth? Make sure to do this from the safety of the forest,

though. There's no need to get excessively close—just get a rough idea of everything from the safety of the forest.”

There was just one thing I needed to strictly emphasize to her.

“Don't jump out to save anyone no matter what. Even if you see them about to die or something equally horrible.”

“B-But!”

“If you die, I'll lose my reason to live. If you were to disappear, I'd probably follow right behind you.”

I couldn't tell whether my order was pathetic, cowardly, or a mix of the two... if you could even call it an order. Honestly, it was more like me begging her. However, if I didn't go to such lengths, then Arisu was sure to act on her sense of justice—such was my thought process. A suitable shackle was needed in order to encourage her to restrain herself, and if she was content with me then I was more than happy to be that shackle.

I didn't want to lose Arisu. Yesterday, she told me to take care of Tamaki. When she said that, did she mean that, even if she died, she could just be replaced by Tamaki? That way of thinking was far too self-sacrificial. Dangerously so, even.

In her current state, she would throw her life away for me at a moment's notice. Thus, to put a stop to that, some kind of shackle was needed... and so, I declared to her in overly-exaggerated fashion, “I'll die if you die.”

Arisu stared at me with wide-open eyes. “Umm... what if I were to change my mind, and betray you in a horrible way?” she asked, dubious.

A smile formed on my face and I laughed at her nonsensical comment. Her honest and way-too-serious character traits were something I understood well. Arisu? Betray me? No way in hell. Even me, the person with a *great* distrust of others, trusted her enough to know that much.

“If that day ever arrived, I would commit suicide and leave you with enough regret for a lifetime. And as a hostage... how about I take Tamaki with me?”

Arisu sniffled, starting to cry. “K-Kazu-san, y-you...”

“No, sorry, that was too far. It was a joke.”

“Th-Then I have to be prepared for something horrible like that to happen if I betray you?”

“Well, don’t betray me, then.”

Arisu gave a firm nod, a stern expression etched on her face. I was sure it would all be fine... I really wanted to believe as much anyway.

There were no orcs to be found, perhaps a result of it being so early. Maybe they were still sleeping. *Well, if they are, good. Just sleep away until our preparations are all set.*

In the meantime, I cast Repair on the weapons we obtained from the orcs defeated yesterday, cleaning the rust off. Although among our weapons collection were spears, axes, and swords, I wanted everyone to default to using spears. Striking with a long-handled weapon from afar would be the safest option, which should lessen their fear a little.

In no time at all, the raven returned with a message from Arisu in its beak. I took the piece of scrap from the bird’s beak, and read it out: “There’s an orc by itself. Can I bring it over?”

I wrote “Sure” on the paper and put the scrap back into its beak before watching the raven fly off to where it came from.

“It won’t be long before Arisu returns with an orc. We’re not gonna use the hole this time. Let’s take a few steps back and hide in the shade of the trees.”

I summoned another puppet golem and cast the simple trifecta of Keen Weapon, Physical Up, and Mighty Arm on both of the golems. Arisu approached from the distance, weaving in and out between the trees. Behind her, two orcs gave chase with an ax in each of their hands.

Hey, this isn’t what we agreed on! Right as that thought crossed my mind, Arisu turned to face the orcs and launched a sharp stab at one of them. The orc’s throat was pierced clean through by the spear tip, and the orc fell to the ground. Soon after, it turned translucent before disappearing entirely. Once the orc vanished, a gem appeared in its place on the ground.

The other orc drew near Arisu and swung down its axe. Arisu evaded with nimble footwork before turning around and breaking into a sprint once more.

Ah. As promised, it's now by itself... Not quite what I thought you meant by that, but good work.

"Sorry, there was another hiding in the shade...! What should I do?!" Arisu yelled out, drawing closer to us in the process.

"Oh, right. Could you render it immobile?"

"Got it! I'll go for the legs!"

Arisu stopped in front of me and spun around, and then readied her spear towards the approaching orc. The orc seemed to not care that its companion was killed mere seconds ago and closed the distance.

Arisu took a step forward and launched a thrust at the orc's kneecap. Her thrust pierced through without a hitch and destroyed the orc's kneecap completely, causing the pig-human to collapse to the ground in a somersault.

Without a moment's delay, Arisu thrust her spear at the other kneecap and destroyed it, too, following with another two quick thrusts to both of its shoulders. The cracking sound of shoulder bones breaking echoed out.

"This should be good, right?"

"Y-Yeah... Damn, nice job."

The orc writhed on the dirt. I ordered the two puppet golems to pin down the orc's arms, and then looked back. I could see everyone looking this way with blank faces, hidden in the shade from the trees.

"Th-That's so disgusting," Shiki-san stammered out, her face twitching.

Well now, aren't you carefree? I thought to myself. Yesterday she'd gone through something horrible, yet she still had room to complain about the methods used here?

I turned my gaze back to the orc struggling pathetically on the ground. *Ick. So revolting. Who would do such a thing?... Huh? Arisu? No waaay.*

Well, enough with the jokes. For the most part, we didn't care about appearances. However, this was for our future. So that we could live.

"All right, so, who wants to be first to level up?"

Two hands shot up. One was Tamaki, and the other was Mia, the first-year. The faster of the two was Mia, if by a hair. *Hmm, so the youngest is up first? Well, gotta start somewhere, I guess.*

"Go ahead, Mia."

"Mm."

As I spoke, I handed a bamboo spear to Mia, the smallest member of the group by far. Her response was lacking in content and there was little change in her expression but she must've been nervous still. Her tiny hands were shaking as she held the spear.

On a side note, the reason I gave her a bamboo spear instead of an iron one was because I thought it would be too heavy for her to handle.

"It's best to aim for the throat, but if you stab it enough it'll die regardless."

"Mm!"

Arisu casted the Rank 2 Healing Magic spell, Flower Coat, on Mia. Flower Coat was a spell which covered a target's entire body in a thin, foggy, sakura-colored veil which would absorb impacts. During the testing phase, we discovered the veil would come off with a light spear thrust from Arisu. To put it in game terms, the veil gave you an additional 5 HP points or so. Kinda. Not really. I didn't actually have any clue how much 5 HP was actually worth, I just made it up on the spot. Point is; it would give them some comfort, if temporary.

Following my advice, Mia stabbed at the orc over and over as though the orc had wronged her, nothing deterring her from her repeated thrusts. The only time she staggered was when one of the orc's legs kicked her as it thrashed around, but thanks to the Flower Coat spell, she got right back to it.

Around the twentieth or so stab, her thrust just so happened to pierce into one of the orc's eyes. The orc's body twitched once and then finally fell still, its corpse beginning to vanish. Mia's body stiffened for a moment.

“I’ve leveled up.” She turned to face me and continued. “As discussed, I’ve learned Earth and Wind magic.”

Chapter 19: Sneaking a Peek into the Girls' Dormitory

I respected Mia's choice in magic. In the meantime, there were several general outlines being presented to me in regards to the main party.

Although it wouldn't be immediate, the eventual party would be composed of the following members: Arisu, Tamaki, Mia, and me. Arisu and Tamaki would be the vanguard, and the rearguard would consist of Mia and me. While there was no need to emphasize skills for fighting at the front, having some was better than none. Being in possession of a magic which made it easy to run away wasn't too bad, either.

Neither Earth Magic nor Wind Magic had any sort of direct firepower spells, at least not at Rank 1. However, it wasn't as though there were no uses for the magic available—there were all sorts of easy-to-use, support-class spells to make up for the lack of direct offense.

With that in mind, her choices were fine. Now that Mia was Level 1, it was Tamaki's turn.

From here on out, we would use the completed pitfall trap to kill the orcs. There was no need to dig any more now that this one was finished; we could simply reuse the trap by carefully concealing the hole.

Arisu went out and lured in an orc, ensnaring it in our trap like a rabbit. Thereupon, the orc was stabbed until it was turned into experience points for Tamaki, and she leveled up, acquiring both the Rank 1 versions of the Swordsmanship and Strength skills.

After Tamaki came Shiki-san's turn to level up. Her choice of skills were Reconnaissance as well as Throwing, both Rank 1, of course. The Reconnaissance skill she picked made it easy for her to disguise pitfalls. It appeared the higher rank the skill was, the more efficient your ability to set up snares and other hunter-esque traps. Her reason for choosing this skill was not to act and move like an actual scout, however.

“Fighting is impossible for me. So, I’ll run away with all I’ve got,” she boasted, puffing out her chest. *Now that’s some jiggle...*

The other skill she chose, the Throwing skill, was based on a different reason.

“We’ve got plenty of carving knives and stuff like that. I’ll put my faith in those before a weapon plundered from an orc.”

Or so she proclaimed. *She has a point*, I agreed. Her actions were dictated by logic through-and-through.

The magic Mia picked up was quick to show its worth. Ground Binding—this Earth Magic spell was extremely effective at rendering opponents immobile, and worked by manipulating the grass on the ground, wrapping it around opponents’ ankles. The spell would force orcs to stop moving, and if the spell worked well, they would even trip and fall over. After that, once Arisu took care of the hand holding onto their weapon, anyone could kill the orc with a decent margin of safety.

It kind of felt like the orcs were starting to be the prey, but when I thought about all the horrible things they’d done up to this point, those feelings disappeared entirely.

Once three more people reached Level 1, I imagined they’d be fine even without me there and thus went out to do some scouting, taking Tamaki along with me to serve as a guide. According to the information Arisu gave me, there were hardly any orcs moving around in the early morning. There was no way of knowing for sure unless she got a bit closer, so she wanted to close in on the building a bit further...

However, I promptly put an end to her suggestion and then declared that I would go out scouting myself.

The first place we went to was the closest to the Cultivation Center—calling it close was a bit of a stretch, though. One ten-minute walk through the thicket later, and we were there: the girls’ dormitory. As its name implied, it was a three-story tall building where all the girls in the middle school stayed. The building was square-shaped, each side spanning about sixty meters in length.

If I remember correctly, the high school had about one-thousand three-hundred people attending, and the middle school only around seven hundred. Assuming an even gender ratio, that means about... three hundred and fifty girls? They couldn't all be accommodated unless the building was as large as this, I supposed. *Setting all of that aside, though...*

The girls' dormitory, huh? Err, it wasn't like I had any malice. No ideas at all bounced around in my head at the sound of those words. Not a single one, I say! None at all! Even if I ended up raiding the girl's dormitory, it would just be to free the nearest place from the orcs, nothing more.

Raiding the girls' dormitory. It had a good ring to it. What came to mind was a man peeking out his face from the thicket around the girl's dormitory, peeping at the interior through a pair of binoculars. Currently, that man was me. During peacetime I would be just another pervert but right now we were in an emergency situation, and that called for daring methods.

"Kazu-san, you're acting like a total perv."

"Listen, Tamaki. This is all part of the plan."

However, every window on the building was blocked off by curtains. The interior remained unseen. *What to do... Hm?* One of the windows on the third floor was smashed. *I think I might be able to get in through there.* I opted to summon a raven.

And now, to unveil one of my new spells: Remote Viewing! It was something I'd learned from Rank 3 Summoning Magic. This spell allowed me to see things by sharing the vision of the target I cast the spell on. The spell paired so well with the raven familiars that I was almost certain that the spell was created for this very purpose.

This spell would grant me the target's vision until I canceled the spell. My own body, however, would be left completely defenseless in the meantime. It was not to be used without someone there to guard me.

With that said, I asked Tamaki to please keep a good eye on my surroundings.

On that note, there was a reason that Tamaki chose to acquire the Strength skill. It seemed she wanted to use the huge axe we took from the elite orc after

killing it yesterday. In fact, when she attempted to lift the heavy weapon after acquiring the skill, it turned out she could handle it well enough that she wasn't swayed by the sheer weight of it, albeit with a bit of difficulty. Everyone had stared at her in amazement, shouting out stuff like "Whoa, that's crazy!"

However, an absurdly large weapon like that would just get in the way of our scouting, , so right now she instead was equipped with an iron sword, a suitable weapon for her. Thanks to Repair, I had already removed the rust, restoring the weapon's original sharpness. Tamaki looked a bit down from having to leave her giant axe behind, but she would have to make do without it for now.

I had my doubts about leaving my protection to anyone other than her and Arisu. Tamaki's true nature was still a mystery to me, but I didn't see her as someone to hurt a person important to Arisu, namely, me.

And so, using Remote Vision, I gained the perspective of my raven. The raven flapped its wings before soaring into the air. *Whoa, this is so cool!* Flying in the sky felt so amazing. I wanted to enjoy myself like this whenever I had some free time. *Not sure when I'm ever going to get any, though.*

The raven flapped its wings before descending onto the fence surrounding the top of the roof of the girl's dormitory. Upon landing, all of the other ravens gathered on top of the roof flew up, scattering and flying away. *Did they realize my raven was a fake? More importantly, what even made them gather on top of this roof in the first... place...*

My thoughts came to a sudden halt. There were several human-shaped objects laying on the roof, all corpses. They were all girls, their bodies numbering six in total. Their corpses had served as a feasting ground for the ravens, and bits and pieces were scattered about, half-eaten. I desperately attempted to hold down my breakfast as it attempted to escape me.

As luck would have it, it wasn't long before the raven soared up into the air once more. While this magic allowed me to share visibility, I couldn't give the raven orders or anything of the sort. The raven found the broken window on the third floor and flew inside.

A girl's corpse was lying right inside of the room, just before the window. Her neck was bent in a strange way, and, sure enough, her lower half was exposed.

If I had to guess, she had broken the window in an attempt to escape but was then caught, raped, and finally killed. *I hope she didn't suffer too much, at least.* I put my hands together in prayer for the girl whose name was unknown to me. I was sure Tamaki saw me put my hands together from beside me, but she remained silent.

As per my order, the raven shifted its focus to searching the girls' dormitory.

Unlike yesterday, today I had plenty of time. In the one in a million case that this raven was killed, it wouldn't affect me in the slightest. That said, I had no idea whether the enemy was aware of the existence of familiars...

I mean, orcs are pretty stupid, ya know? Pride, perhaps. I wonder, does that count as a flag? S-Surely not. We're fine. Probably.

The raven descended to the floor and walked down the corridor shrouded in darkness. There was nothing that moved from what I saw. This magic had no sense of hearing, so even if there was someone out there groaning or something, I would never know.

The raven made its way down the first floor. It went over to a door that was opened up half-way, and happened to peer inside.

The room appeared to be the dining hall. I saw several thick orc feet, and also caught sight of the figures of a few girls occasionally twitching, almost convulsing.

"There're some people still alive, right?" Tamaki whispered in my ear. Perhaps her sharp eyes caught the change in my expression. Her breath tickled my earlobe, and her small yet soft hands wrapped around mine as I clenched my fists in anger.

"... How'd you know?"

"Seeing that look of frustration on your face gave it away completely."

"... I see."

"Do you think... we can help them?"

If they were still alive then I wanted to get them out of there, but... there was a problem. A big problem.

One of the orcs was sporting a bronze-colored coating.

“There’s an elite orc,” I groaned in a low voice.

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Tamaki and I returned to our orc-hunting companions for the moment. We needed to discuss what to do about the girls’ dormitory.

Our return was perfectly timed, too. Everyone had reached Level 1. With that finished, there were now nine people at Level 1. Level 5 was still a title reserved for only Arisu and myself.

Now that everyone had leveled up, I wanted everyone to go further beyond and reach Level 2. I knew from experience that once you got a weapon skill up to Rank 2, a mere orc wouldn’t be a match for someone. If we wanted to clear the girl’s dormitory and rescue the survivors inside, however, there wasn’t enough time to do that.

Presently, there was only a few minutes before nine in the morning. It wouldn’t be long before the orcs began moving about.

“This might sound cruel, but if we don’t have a fool-proof plan for defeating the elite orc, I’m against going to the girl’s dormitory,” Shiki-san argued. While I was in agreement in regards to her assessment, I was a little hesitant to agree with her.

Come on now, me. You know why you don’t want to agree. My hesitance was nothing more than an effect of my narrow-mindedness. It appeared as though Shiki-san was acting as the entire group’s mental support pillar whenever I wasn’t present. Even Arisu trusted her judgment towards everything except for when it came to combat.

Shiki Yukariko herself was a person attentive to her surroundings by nature; she gave off the impression of a leader. Except for when it came to me anyway. She just averted her eyes whenever she caught me suffering.

Argh, just give it a rest. You’re just searching for a reason to complain now. That didn’t matter in this situation. I had to swallow the bitter pill and cast my complaints aside for now.

“Of course, I’m also taking into account the possibility that the students still alive in there are your friends. With that in mind, I believe we should take a cautious approach to this.”

As of this point in time, everyone here besides Shiki-san and myself were all middle school students. The earthquake had struck on a Saturday during after school hours, which meant that everyone would be in the dormitory unless they had afterschool club activities. It was highly likely that there were people important to them trapped there like their friends, classmates, roommates, juniors or seniors, and so on.

Though, that was if we assumed they were still alive.

I suddenly came to a realization. *Oh. So that’s what she’s doing.*

Shiki-san was taking it upon herself to act as the bad guy instead of me. That may have been her one show of kindness. Or maybe she simply thought it best if I didn’t take on that role myself right now.

No, there’s no “maybe” to it. That’s definitely the case. She appeared to have an abundance of knowledge about manipulating someone’s emotions, at least compared to an average guy like me. The only reason I was acting as the leader right now was because I was Level 5, nothing else.

In this situation, nothing else was as reassuring as sheer power. This was something that she, no, *everyone* understood well.

I looked over at Arisu. Maybe she sensed all of the ugly things going through my mind right now. She quietly snuck over to me, and took my hand in hers.

“I’ll follow your lead, Kazu-san.”

“Ooh, you two are so trusting in each other. You lovebiirds,” Tamaki teased.

I lightly drove my fist into the crown of her head. Tears formed in the corners of her blue eyes, and she crouched down while holding the top of her head.

“Aaagh, Arisuuuu! Kazu-san’s bullying me,” she whined.

“You reap what you sow,” Arisu replied, stone cold.

I turned away from the two of them, and looked for any other opinions. The first-year student, Mia, shot her hand up.

“My idea isn’t something we can base a plan around. Is that all right?”

“Sure, I’m all ears. Doesn’t matter what it is,” I said.

“There’s a Rank 2 spell under Earth Magic called Heat Metal.”

Thanks to my back and forth question sessions in the white room, I was familiar with the spell. The effect of the spell in question was that it heated up metal. Using it on a sword or some other object would cause it to heat up, making it impossible to hold and force the opponent to drop the weapon.

“Oh, so that’s what you’re thinking of. It doesn’t matter how strong the elite orc is if it can’t hold onto a weapon, right?”

“Mm-hmm,” Mia nodded.

Having plans such as “make do somehow with magic” being thought up was very pleasing to see. Our range of tactics had expanded greatly.

In any case, this Mia girl was surprisingly calm for her age. Coming across a girl like her was an unexpected boon.

I crossed my arms and thought about it a bit deeper. Earlier, Mia skillfully used her Earth Magic and was great at helping the others level up. It looked to me like she was pretty brave.

“All right. Let’s get you and Tamaki to Level 2 as soon as possible.”

I quickly came to the decision that it would be difficult to attack the girls’ dormitory right now. The grim reality of Arisu’s strength and mine was that we really weren’t all that much. A single mistake was all it would take to have yesterday repeat itself.

Our high-stakes gamble might’ve paid off yesterday, but there was no way it would work every time. Increasing our combat strength was an urgent goal. It was time for us to assemble our main party, though slightly earlier than I planned to.

Frankly speaking, I wanted to get the average level of everyone up to Level 2 or higher first, but there didn’t seem to be any time for that.

“Arisu, did you happen to find a place with four or five orcs hanging around?”

“This is only an approximation, but earlier, there were about three or four orcs sleeping in the storage room next to the tennis court. I’m pretty sure they’re awake now, though...”

Hmm. That might be our best bet for now.

“It’s settled then. Let’s go power level!”

“Power... level?” Arisu’s head tilted in confusion. “What’s that?”

“Ah, it’s a gaming term. Power leveling is essentially when a strong person takes a weaker person and forcibly raises their level.”

Considering our current situation, the term was most-fitting in my opinion.

Chapter 20: The Main Party

We made our way back to the Cultivation Center for the time being. Once we arrived in front of the entrance, I took a piece of chalk and marked a line on the ground in front of the building and asked the group to dig a hole there. Once they were finished, the hole sat a meter in front of the building, spanning ten meters by one meter, and it was two meters deep. It resembled a simple trench, or an empty moat.

The hole was not going to be concealed in any way. The grass around the entrance was already trampled and the ground was mostly barren. Even if we tried to conceal it to some extent, a mere second's glance was all it would take to see through the illusion.

Then why construct it? It would inhibit the orcs' path and make it easier for us to defend the Cultivation Center.

"Even if we fight in the entryway, it'll get tough if we get overwhelmed by sheer numbers. With this in the way, they'll have to approach one at a time from both sides. It should be a lot easier to protect ourselves even with our limited number of people."

"True, but if we make something so flashy in front of the building, won't they figure out that we're using the Cultivation Center as a base?" Shiki-san challenged.

"They're going to catch on sooner or later. Therefore, we should strengthen our defenses while we still can," I replied.

She nodded, convinced. "Assuming we drop stuff from the second or third floor, this will make it easier to aim," she added.

"Oh, good point," I agreed. "The Throwing skill might prove helpful."

"You think so, too? All right, everyone, let's dig another hole. Give it your all!" After giving a burst of encouragement to the girls, who were looking a little

exhausted already, Shiki-san quickly picked up a shovel and took the initiative in digging the hole.

Hmm, she's got a good form. With some more experience, I imagined she could become a master hole digger. *All right, looks like I can leave the excavation to them.*

Afterward, the four of us—Arisu, Tamaki, Mia, and I—split into groups of men and women (that being said, I was the only man) and stripped out of our gym clothes soaked in sweat. I wiped off the sweat on my body using a wet towel and changed into an unused school uniform that was being stored in the storage area. I wasn't sure how discreet the orcs were when it came to picking up scents, but it was best to be on the safe side.

Once we finished cleaning up, the four of us formed our party with one goal in mind: to become the elite force in the near future. A red ring materialized around Tamaki's and Mia's right-hand pinkies.

"First, we'll quickly raise your levels once. After that, we'll consult in the white room," I said.

"Sir, yes, sir!" Tamaki saluted, a joking expression crossing her face. Mia simply nodded in response. Then Tamaki added, "Sooo heyyy, Kazu-san?"

"... What is it, Tamaki? Got something to share?"

"You think I can wield it? That gigantic axe, I mean." She pointed toward the corner of the Cultivation Center's lobby area where we'd left it leaning against the wall.

"You really want to use it, huh?" I mused.

"Back in the olden days, all the famous individuals always said, 'Strength is everything,' yeah? It's all about that *POWAH!*" Tamaki exclaimed.

"I see English isn't your strong suit."

Hmm. Well, if she's swinging around that axe, then none of the smaller orcs can get very close to her without being turned into pork cutlets, I reasoned. Personally, I wanted Tamaki to understand the importance of restraint, but Mia

being paired up with her would probably prevent her from doing anything too crazy.

“Tamaki, just make sure to protect your junior, Mia.”

“Leave it to me! I’m quite a capable woman, you know!”

She actually seemed like she’d take good care of Mia, so I decided to believe her for the time being.

Our group of four moved through the forest to the tennis court area that Arisu had mentioned earlier. Exactly as Arisu reported, the sound of heavy snoring was coming from within the storeroom.

“Tamaki, Mia. The two of you will wait here. Mia, if an orc happens to run out of here...”

“Stop its movements with Earth Bind, right?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

Mia was rather quick-witted, thankfully. I had the raven peer into the small shed before we went in.

“There are four orcs, all of them asleep,” the raven croaked in a voice audible only to me.

“Any humans?” I asked.

“None.”

I gave a signal to Arisu. Prepping her spear, she rushed into the shed by herself.

Thirty seconds passed and then Arisu exited the small building. No problems arose during her breach and clear.

“Wha? You finished them off already? Whoa.” Tamaki gawked at Arisu in surprise. As proof of her conquest, Arisu held out four of the red gems that the orcs turned into after death.

“Oh, and, um, there’s a corpse inside...” Arisu added.

“Leave it there for now. Got it?” I said.

She hesitated, but she gave me a nod. I felt sorry for the person who died but we couldn't afford to give a burial to everyone we came across.

"Only four more to go before Tamaki and Mia level up now."

Now that our party was composed of four people, that meant the number of orcs required for a level up had doubled. That being said, with the future in mind, this short-term loss was bound to have a huge return later on.

"Where to next?" I asked.

"There is a locker room not too far from here," Arisu answered. "Though, I'm not sure if there's any orcs in there or not..."

It wasn't long before we got a confirmation; there were indeed orcs in the locker room. Four, to boot. The exact number we needed.

These ones were awake, so I sent in two puppet golems after Arisu to act as her rearguard. Unsurprisingly, Arisu went unmatched again. One attempted to make its escape but found itself wrapped in Earth Bind's constraints before Tamaki dealt with it.

"Oh, a level up," Mia muttered. Arisu, Tamaki, Mia and I were all warped to the white room.

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The first thing Tamaki did the moment we finished warping to the white room was to rush over to take a peek at Arisu's status screen.

"Oh, lookie here! Everything about Arisu is on this screen! Whoa, you're really Level 5?! So strong!"

Arisu turned to look at me. I could tell from her facial expression that there was something that she wanted to say to me.

Okay, so maaaybe this was the exact same harassment I'd done to her yesterday. I'm sure she was trying to tell me that Tamaki and I were on the same level. I know, I know. I'm sorry.

"Now for Kazu-san... Whoa, you're Level 5 too!"

There was no log that displayed the questions asked in the past or anything of the sort, and I didn't really have any problem with her examining my status to begin with, so this didn't bother me.

Next, Tamaki examined the room.

"There's four of us here now yet not a single thing's changed still, huh? Other than the number of desks, anyway," Tamaki muttered.

"Yep, looks like it," I replied.

"So, how did it feel to have sex in a bright place like this?" Tamaki suddenly asked.

It was my turn to gawk in Arisu's direction.

"I'm sorry. She kept asking leading questions until, well..." Arisu's face went beet red, and she shrunk back apologetically.

I glanced at Mia, who said, "What very useful information I just acquired."

"I'd rather you forget it," I muttered.

"I'd like to learn more, if possible... through practice." Mia stared at me with a dazed expression. "Getting some experience sounds good."

"That kind of skill's one you don't need to be getting any experience for," I affirmed.

"Not even for a virgin as lewd as me?"

Her comment made me swallow on reflex, and Arisu glared at me from the side, tears in the corners of her eyes. I put both of my hands up in an act of surrender.

"It's only natural for Kazu-san to ogle other girls. He's a healthy young man, you know? You'll have to give up on keeping him to yourself," Tamaki added, throwing in an unneeded comment.

Ha ha, this girl... I tried to drop my fist on the top of her head in vengeance, but Tamaki was quick to seek shelter behind Arisu.

Arisu, on the other hand, took a firm hold on both of her shoulders and presented her to me as a tribute.

“Please give her a piece of your mind, Kazu-san,” Arisu stated.

“Aaaah! Arisu’s turned traitoor!” Tamaki cried.

“Well said!” I praised Arisu before giving Tamaki’s head a light knock.

“O-Oof! N-No matter! As I see it, Kazu-san *loves* boobs, so of course Arisu will win,” Tamaki said.

“You’re still stuck on that?” I fired back.

“I will never bow down in the face of unreasonable violence!” She flashed me a thumbs-up, and I could practically imagine her saying, *No sirree!*

I sighed. *Well, this is better than everyone being down in the dumps after seeing that corpse, I guess.*

There had been a boy’s corpse in the locker room we’d fought in only moments prior. His chest was torn open, neck bent at a strange angle. Tamaki’s chipper attitude was probably an act while she was attempting to distract herself from the cadaver.

Well, I think that’s enough of that.

I clapped my hands, gathering everyone’s eyes on me. “All right, everyone, listen up. Let’s hold our strategy meeting.”

Getting a sense of tension in the air was necessary. The results of this meeting would either cause us to live or die, after all. The air needed to be palpable.

“To start, both of you have reached Level 2.”

“Yep, we’re working really hard,” Tamaki bragged, sarcasm dripping from her words. “Truth be told, we’ve been entirely dependent on you and Arisu, Kazu-san.”

“Don’t worry,” I assured her. “From now on, I’ll be relying on you, Tamaki.”

“Mm, sorry, just grumbling to myself. So, I should increase the rank of my Swordsmanship to 2, right?”

“And I am to get Rank 2 Earth Magic?” Mia confirmed.

I nodded. “The four of us are going to raid the girl’s dormitory. Sound good?”

All three girls nodded back at me.

“Okay, so onto the entrances to the dormitory. There’s just the front entrance and rear entrances, right?” I asked.

“Ohhh? Aren’t you well-versed in the layout, Kazu-san. Did you perhaps try to sneak in to do a panty raid?” Tamaki teased.



“Just an educated guess, is all. It looks the same as the high school boy’s dormitory.”

“Oh, so that’s how.”

Furthermore, as far as I’d seen through my raven a short while ago, the building’s interior was nearly identical to the high school’s second boy’s dormitory. Even if we rushed into the girl’s dormitory, I—the sole outsider and male of the group—would have no issue navigating the building. A rather convenient development, all things considered.

Raiding the girls’ dormitory... No, don’t think about it. Alarm bells rang in my ear. I shook my head to clear away the thought.

“You were thinking about something pervy again, weren’t you...?” Tamaki glared at me with reproachful eyes. “Oh, geez. I guess you can’t help it.”

“Why do you look so pleased when you say that...?” I grumbled.

Well, whatever. I shrugged my shoulders and returned to the subject at hand.

“Let’s keep the strategy plain and simple. Arisu and I will create a diversion at the front entrance. Tamaki, Mia, you two will sneak around to the back entrance. If any orcs rush out from there, crush them. I want to reduce their numbers as much as possible before we head in. If you can manage, don’t let the orcs escape.”

Of course, from what I’ve seen so far, I find it hard to believe an orc would run away without attempting to cross swords with whoever it stumbled upon...

“And if the elite orc shows up?” Tamaki asked.

“If the elite orc comes out of the front entrance, Arisu and I will deal with it. I’ll call out to you when it shows up, so rush over as quickly as you can whenever you hear me. If it goes out the back, don’t pay it any mind. Just run.”

“Should I stop its movements with Earth Bind?” Mia spoke up.

“I’d rather you not.” I promptly vetoed the idea. “I’m not sure of the detailed specifications of magic used on enemies, but from a game’s perspective, strong enemies have a tendency to resist debuffs. The same case may apply here.”

“Debuffs...?” Arisu tilted her head at the unfamiliar term.

Ah, whoops. Slipped into gamer speak. “Basically, making it weaker. It might be strong enough to ignore that,” I said, simplifying it for her.

“Oh, I see.”

“Hey, Kazu-san,” Tamaki called out. “Are there any spells that strengthen resistance?”

“Oh, now that you mention it, yeah, there is. There’s a spell called Clear Mind in Rank 1 Support Magic.”

“Mrr.” Mia raised a groan. “Clear Mind... Tuner Synchro?”

“What’s that?”

“It’s nothing,” she muttered dejectedly. I wasn’t really sure of what she was talking about, but I guess the name overlapped with some game, anime, or manga perhaps. *Whatever, not important.*

“Wait, I can look it up,” Mia suddenly spoke up before sitting down in front of her own laptop, hands speeding across the keyboard. She had written a list of questions in no time at all.

She’s so fast!

As Mia typed up a list, we spent our time making idle chit-chat.

“Hm, so I’ve gotten a rough idea about magic. There are multiple situations where magic is ineffective.”

Mia had finished compiling the answers she’d received in her interrogation about the attack-type system of magic that belonged to this mystifying skill system.

The spellcaster must set an individual as the target when firing magic spells at an enemy.

Basically, this meant you had to be able to see your opponent to be able to use it.

If the spell falls under the missile-type magic category, then it will fly in a straight line toward the target.

On top of there not being any sort of homing ability, there was also a chance the spell would miss if the intended target was moving at high speeds. Obstacles that lay in between the target and caster were also at risk of being hit instead of the spell's intended target.

Direct-type spells, on the other hand, will take effect instantly regardless of distance. Consequently, this means the opponent cannot avoid these types of spells.

Missile-type and direct-type were both names I'd temporarily granted the differing types. All of the information above was in regards to the process by which the invoked spell reached the enemy. Once the spell reached its target, it was then determined whether or not the target could resist the spell.

Depending on the type of spell used, the element(s) required for resisting may differ.

For example, if Earth Bind—a Rank 1 Earth Magic spell—was used, if the target were to pull their foot away the moment the magically-imbued vines attempted to wrap itself around the target's footing, the spell would not restrain the target.

Now aware that her ace-in-the-hole might not always restrain the target, Mia's face twisted as though she'd bitten down on a bitter-tasting bug.

Clear Mind will amplify the target's resistance of attacks that target the mind.

There were a few spells that targeted the mind, an example being Sleeping Song, a Rank 1 Wind Magic spell. There also were charming spells, and plenty of others, apparently.

What's more, there were even some monsters that could use special abilities similar to these types of spells. *Scary.*

Clear Mind is also capable of assisting one in overcoming fear.

According to Mia, the moment she and Tamaki had heard the elite orc's cry, fear had rooted them both to the spot.

That made sense. The reason Arisu and I were able to move immediately was either due to luck or having already fought enough battles that something as minor as a roar wasn't that frightening.

Even if the magic successfully affects a target, there still remains a possibility that the target will forcefully break themselves out.

Take Earth Bind, for example. A monster with great strength could tear off the winding vines, freeing itself from the binds. Against a monster like the elite orc, Earth Bind was not looking like a great option.

Hm, I see. I'd garnered a rough understanding from the explanations provided. However, with the methods of resistance listed out like this, the Heat Metal spell's superiority became abundantly clear.

According to information we now had, increasing your resistance to magic that applied itself to objects, such as Heat Metal, was quite difficult. With that said, Heat Metal was a missile-type spell that shot out a beam at its target, meaning there was always the chance it could be avoided.

The elite orc's gargantuan strength meant nothing if it couldn't hold onto its own super-heated weapon during the battle. Even in the million-to-one chance that it decided to keep using the weapon, the orc's movements would grow duller, if nothing else.

Oh, hey, wait a second...

"This just came to mind, but Mia, if its weapon is made of wood..." I began.

Mia and I both glanced at one another with faces of realization. The handle of the elite orc's axe that we'd faced yesterday—the weapon that was now a part of Tamaki's arsenal—was made of metal, hence my lapse in realization until now.

"If it's made of wood, then Heat Metal won't have any effect," Mia said, crestfallen. Her shoulders dropped in disappointment. "I hope this next elite orc wields a weapon made of metal."

"Me too." We both looked at each other and sighed.

"I should've noticed this sooner." Mia sulked.

“No, I should’ve noticed this from the get-go...”

Damn it all. It felt like I hadn’t grown at all since yesterday.

TAMAKI	
LEVEL: 2	SWORDSMANSHIP: 1→2
STRENGTH: 1	SKILL POINTS: 0

MIA	
LEVEL: 2	EARTH MAGIC: 1→2
WIND MAGIC: 1	SKILL POINTS: 0

Chapter 21: Battle to Take Over the Middle School Girls' Dormitory

Thus, our strategy meeting came to a close.

"Um, Tamaki-chan, could we chat for a minute?"

Before we departed from the white room, Arisu took Tamaki to the corner of the room. The two were whispering together.

What are they talking about? I wanted in on their conversation. Not knowing what the pair was discussing spiked my anxiety. Of course, I couldn't exactly just walk over there and eavesdrop. Mia appeared to have noticed my inner turmoil and tugged on the hem of my clothes.

"Don't. Girls have their own secrets."

For whatever reason, Arisu and Tamaki both looked so serious, and the occasional glances they were sending my way during their conversation was not helping my growing concern.

"So, while they share their secrets, I'll tell you one of mine," Mia offered.

"Oh? Go on."

"Arisu has a weak spot on the back of her ears..."

And how the hell do you know that?

That thought must have shown on my face, because she said, "From bathing together."

"Hmm, I see, I see. Very interesting."

What other juicy secrets are there? Keep 'em coming. I brought my ear closer to Mia's face. I guess she must've been a bit too loud, though, as Arisu stormed over here, face as red as a tomato, and glared up at me. Without saying a word, Arisu reached out and pinched both of my cheeks.

Ow! Pain notwithstanding, Arisu was cute even when angry. A grin spread across my face before I knew it, causing Arisu's eyebrows to wrinkle further in irritation. Silently I lifted up both of my hands, surrendering.

"Sorry, I'll try to keep the teasing to a minimum," I apologized, as unconvincing as it may have been.

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All right. Tamaki's ranked up her Swordsmanship, and Mia's done the same to her Earth Magic.

After exiting the white room, we immediately moved into action. Unlike earlier when I'd scouted out the place, there were three orcs lingering around the immediate area to the entrance of the middle school girls' dormitory. *These guys must be lookouts.*

Though, these guys were just loitering around instead of actually guarding the area. Every so often one of them would yawn. *Are they stuck standing in that place on the elite orc's orders?* I wondered. In either case, it seemed almost certain the orcs were more active later in the morning rather than earlier.

"The number of orcs going outside is increasing, huh..." I murmured.

It was already nine-thirty in the morning. It was only a matter of time before they found out that human survivors were using the Cultivation Center as a base. This was the main reason that I wanted to crush as many elite orcs as we could before then.

While I was unsure whether to consider it a blessing or a curse, each school building was isolated from the rest by thick forest, and that meant noise didn't travel far thanks to the surrounding trees. The girls' dormitory in particular was placed in a location a bit more isolated than the rest, most likely to deter crime. Orcs who had based themselves in the other locations were sure to never realize we were here even if we made some noise.

With that in mind, I wanted to exterminate all of the orcs residing here before they learned about us. We needed to reduce their numbers while we had the chance.

I conjured a raven and two puppet golems, reducing my maximum MP from 50 to 41 in the process. There were four of us in our party. Having this many would make it difficult to cast several Support Magic spells on everyone, so I'd have to choose carefully who I wanted to buff.

First up: myself. I wasn't a frontline fighter, so giving myself only Physical Up to boost my escape speed would be sufficient. Mia's boosts consisted of both Physical Up and Smart Operation, a Rank 2 Support Magic spell which increased the power of magic-based attacks. Arisu, Tamaki, and the two puppet golems were given the usual triple combo of buffs (Keen Weapon, Physical Up, Mighty Arm).

The Haste spell had a short time limit and would wear off accordingly after about a minute to a minute and a half—the current limit imposed by my Rank 3 Support Magic, so I held off on casting it just yet. I'd bust it out once again once the elite orc showed up.

Everyone's buffs are active. My remaining MP should be about...

MP: 25/41

At first glance, it did seem as though I still had some MP to spare. However, Haste and Reflection, our ace-in-the-holes, both expended 3 MP per use. If I needed to use them in rapid succession, I'd be running on fumes in no time.

For Arisu's side of things, I had her cast Flower Coat, a Rank 2 Healing Magic spell, on everyone present, save the familiars. At most it would serve as insurance, but even that small—if temporary—peace of mind was better to have than not.

"Let's revise our strategy," I started. "We'll defeat those three orcs over there first. The two in front of the entrance are your opponents, Arisu. I'll have the puppet golems back you up."

"Got it."

"The leftover one a little separated from the others is yours, Tamaki."

"Y-Yeah, leave it to me." Tamaki lifted up the gigantic axe, which was even taller than her, with both hands and nodded with a stiff expression. The sound

of saliva being swallowed rang out. She'd done a complete 180 from the cheerful air put on display back in the white room. Her teeth were chattering.

She must be nervous. This is her first real battle, after all. Is everything going to be all right? I fretted. *No, I can't worry now. I just have to give it my all.*

"Mia, if any orcs try to escape, bind them in place."

"Roger!"

I waited for the moment to come when the two orcs lounging around the entrance were closest to us and gave the order.

"Okay. Arisu, head out!"

"Got it!"

Arisu emerged from the bushes in a sprint. I ordered the two puppet golems to follow after her. Tamaki charged at the orc a few paces away from the others after a brief moment of hesitation, screaming out in a roar as if to encourage herself to push forward.

... Screaming? Really? So much for stealth. It didn't really matter in the end. The sound of battle meant it was only a matter of time before the orcs inside the girls' dormitory realized they were under attack.

Still, she couldn't help but scream, huh? I couldn't blame her. This was her first time going up against an orc that wasn't already in a sorry state. Back when I saved Arisu, even I'd lost myself in the fight the first time I went toe-to-toe with an orc. If I remembered correctly, I'd screamed loud enough myself that it could've been mistaken for a war cry. Up against a beast like that, how could you not let out a guttural yelp?

Wait, what about Arisu? I tried recalling her first fight. She—well, how should I put it? She was strangely... quiet? Or, calm, I guess? *Arisu is an exception to this rule*, I concluded. *Yeah, no mistaking that.* Now that I looked back on it, she'd been amazing from the start, especially in spirit. That's how I saw her. *It's probably for the best that I don't compare any of the others to her. Okay, back to the fight.*

Tamaki rushed toward the orc, weapon at the ready. Unlike Arisu's first bout, Tamaki's Swordsmanship skill was Rank 2. Even fighting normally should've resulted in a sure win for her.

However, Tamaki's downward slash was a bit off-center. It collided with the orc's shoulder rather than its middle. The orc's right arm was severed from the base, sword and all. Blue blood spurted from the open wound, splashing onto Tamaki's face as a result.

"Eek...!"

She froze up. I couldn't read her expression from where I was, but I noticed the problem immediately. A bad feeling welled up in me, forcing me to fall to my knees.

Right arm now missing, the orc entered a semi-frenzied state and collided into Tamaki. Still stiffened up, she couldn't get out of the way, toppling to the ground.

"Mia! Attack that orc with magic!" I ordered.

"On it!"

I was hesitant to fire a spell into the midst of the melee due to the risk of friendly fire, but Tamaki risked being buried underneath the orc if nothing was done, and providing support would be rather difficult once that happened, I feared. *That orc has to die, and it has to die right now.*

"Stone Bullet!"

The shell-shaped stone Mia shot out pierced right through the orc's eyebrows. A splendid shot, as I expected from her. Despite her efforts, however, the orc still did not perish. It pitched forward and collapsed on top of Tamaki in a heap. Tamaki let out a shriek as the hulking mass fell atop her.

Meanwhile, the other side of the battlefield was... over. Arisu had killed the two orcs before I knew it. She hadn't even needed the puppet golems' help. *Yeah, that's Arisu for you.*

Nevertheless, the real problem was just getting started. Having heard the racket outside, a racket suddenly began to clamor out from inside the girls'

dormitory.

Shit. This isn't good. Not only would Tamaki be down for the count if this kept up, she'd drag down the whole team with her by forcing us to protect her. Tamaki was supposed to be the small fry orc's opponent, yet now...

"Change of plans. Mia, forget about the rear entrance. Stay here and devote yourself to support. I'm going to go to Tamaki."

"You got it."

The physical pressure of her first battle had proved too much for Tamaki. In the same vein, Mia had remained calm in the battle from the beginning, despite this basically being her first battle as well. I could rely on the young girl.

"Kazu-san, the orcs are coming from inside!" Arisu shouted before she noticed the situation. "U-Um, what's Tamaki-chan..."

"Arisu, line up with the puppet golems to cut them off! Don't let any of the small fry through!" I ordered.

"U-Understood."

A lone orc rushed out from the girl's dormitory, savage and enraged—just for Arisu to intercept. I gave the situation a side-long glance as I rushed towards Tamaki.

The orc laying on top of her had sent Tamaki into a state of panic. She'd let go of her axe and was smacking the orc with her fists whilst screaming. The orc had yet to vanish, but its body was limp and unconscious.

This is the worst type of cliched pattern. I whipped out a knife from my pocket. The blade was a basic survival knife, nothing special. I swung the knife down into the base of the orc's nape. The orc convulsed once, and then finally breathed its last.

Its figure began growing faint. The only thing it left in its wake after it disappeared completely was a red gem.

"Tamaki, can you stand up? Hey!"

I grabbed her hands and helped her sit up. She raised her head to look at me. Large droplets of tears spilled from the corners of her eyes, and a bit of snot

was dribbling from her nose. And, lastly, the front part of her skirt was soaked. *Well, to her credit, that was probably awfully terrifying for her. I'm sure she couldn't help herself.*

Tamaki jumped up and hugged me. Burying her face in my chest, she sobbed in a loud cry. At a loss for what to do, I stood there and stroked her blonde hair.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Over and over, Tamaki issued one apology after the next to me. "Don't throw me away. Please... don't throw me away."

"What? Hey, why would—"

The loud sound of a fanfare interrupted me right in the middle of my sentence.

Huh? What? I raised my head to see Arisu just finish killing the orc that had come out from the front entrance. *Ah, so that's it. I just leveled up. To be honest, this level up just might have saved us...*

Chapter 22: Tamaki's Past

The four of us warped to the white room.

Phew, what a relief. This might've just saved us. Frankly, I was rather glad we didn't have to fight the elite orc with our ranks this disordered. We would have stood no chance. As a matter of fact, my thoughts were already racing to find a way for us to retreat. *Perhaps one of Mia's spells can help us, or maybe I can keep the enemy in check with my familiars...*

Incidentally, four orcs had been killed in combat just now. *Considering the amount of XP I'd gotten earlier, that must mean...* If my calculations were correct, the elite orc that we'd brought down yesterday was equal to five orcs' worth of experience points.

Did that mean the orcs also had levels? And that the amount of experience points awarded was based on their level? For example, let's say the elite orc was a Level 5 orc. That meant it had ten skill points, so the orc had just enough skill points to obtain some kind of Rank 4 skill, maybe...?

Did the elite orc have the Rank 4 Swordsmanship skill? Or maybe some type of unique skill like "Orc-style Combat" or whatever? I didn't have a clue. If the skill system was a factor for them as well, then I'd lean towards the latter. That kind of herculean strength was *not* the type of strength you could reach by just upgrading the Swordsmanship skill.

If the levels and skills system in this world was all-encompassing, then it wouldn't be too unreasonable for there to be an "Orc" skill which increased your constitution for handling weapons, physical strength, and other things like that.

I mean, c'mon, that's just plain cheating. Think about the disadvantage this puts humans at... Actually, I reconsidered, *that's not entirely the case.* From what I'd seen so far, the orcs were, well, total idiots. Calling them muscle-heads would be doing them an injustice. They would readily fall straight into pitfalls

after being blatantly lured away, and wouldn't even turn around to call for their brethren.

For instance, if you asked a Level 0 me to defeat a Level 1 Arisu, I'd be hard-pressed to find a way even with the pitfalls. More accurately, she was rather perceptive despite her outward appearance. She might even notice the second I tried luring her.

But the average everyday orc? I imagined I could win so long as I had the right equipment and preparations. In fact, I had actually done as much already, though a mountain of good luck had been involved in that. *Point is, putting the right people in the right places is a strength of ours...*

Despite my better attempts to escape reality, Tamaki was still buried in my chest, and her tears had yet to stop falling.

I didn't think she was to blame for the situation. If anything, Arisu was just *too* amazing. My reference point for the ordinary person had been skewed. *Actually, if I think about it, even I felt that fighting up close and personal with an orc was not for me after my first bout.*

"I'm sorry. Please, don't throw me away."

I shifted my gaze downward to Tamaki, still repeating apology after apology. Her behavior didn't make sense. I looked at Arisu and Mia in an attempt to find help, but both of their faces were scrunched up. It looked like they might burst into tears at any moment. *Um, no, hold up. I'm the one who wants to cry here, you know?*

Tamaki remained glued to my chest. Her embrace was tight and desperate. I gently stroked her back in an attempt to soothe her.

"It's okay, calm down. We're safe now, you're okay."

I lowered myself to the floor with Tamaki. Well, "lowered myself" wasn't quite right; saying I was *dragged down* to the floor by her grip on my clothes was more accurate. *Oof. This must be the effects of her Rank 1 Strength skill. Her strength is practically inhuman.*

Wait a second. The gears in my head began to turn. *There might be Strength and Movement skills, but there's a distinct lack of any skills pertaining towards*

the mind. The realization had only come to me now, far too late to be of any help.

Having a weapon skill or Strength skill meant nothing if Tamaki's mind had yet to grow accustomed to battle like a soldier. The issue posed with fighting orcs was yesterday's story in my mind already. Right now, there was a more pressing concern...

"Hey, Arisu. Do you know why she's ended up like this?"

"Yes, for the most part."

"Mind filling me in?"

"Sure, but before I do..."

Yeah, I know. I needed to calm her down first. I gently stroked the top of Tamaki's head. Unlike Arisu, her hair smelled weirdly of citrus. *Hmm, did she put on some perfume or something beforehand?*

"Don't worry, Tamaki. I don't hate you enough to abandon you, okay? I won't do anything like throw you away."

True to my word, I never intended to be the first to turn my back on someone. So long as you had faith in me, I would put my faith in you too. *So, for the love of everything holy, please believe that*, I pleaded in my heart as I stroked her hair. The softness of her hair reminded me of the ears of rice that would grow in autumn.

Tamaki, however, displayed no signs of ceasing her crying fit anytime soon. A strong trauma was embedded deep within her was my guess. Something so scarring as to force herself to cling to her authority figure (currently me) and beg for forgiveness. A past spent trapped in oppression.

What a pain in the ass... was not what I thought. I was similar to her, shouldering my past trauma. Her and I were two of a kind. *In fact, if time allows*, I thought, *I want to learn about her past scars, and help her through them*.

Tamaki fell asleep after a while, still buried in my chest with her arms wrapped around me. I guess all the crying must've tired her out. I sat down cross-legged and lowered her head until it was laying on top of my thigh. My leg

was probably going to go numb at some point, but one quick cast of Remove Pain from Arisu and I'd be all good again.

Tamaki's body curled into a ball, almost like a cat, and she slumbered away with her arms still wrapped around my waist. Every once in a while, she'd grunt or groan in her sleep. *It looks like she's having a bad dream.*

While I was on the subject, it felt like I'd also had a nightmare this morning. Getting up today was just the worst. My past experiences remained bound to me even now, tormenting my heart all the while. I'm sure she was no different.

Again, I gently brushed her blonde hair. A relaxed sigh came from her in response as she slept.

"Arisu, Mia. Mind taking a seat as well?"

"Sure."

"Mm."

Both of them crouched and sat down in front of me, legs folded under them with the tops of their feet touching the floor, like they were making a W shape with their legs.

"So, could you tell me now? Just what happened to Tamaki for her to end up like this?"

"Um, so you see," Arisu began to speak after a brief moment of hesitation. "Before I start, do you mind hearing me out on a request of mine?"

"Ask me anything. There's not a single request I wouldn't listen to from you. So long as it's feasible, anyway," I added.

"Then, well..." Arisu swallowed once and nodded with her hands balled up in fists, working up her courage. She nodded once more before directing her eyes straight at me, speaking in a serious tone. "Please hear me out, Kazu-san. If Tamaki is okay with it, I want you to sleep with her."

"You *what*?" I sputtered out.

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Tamaki Ryuki was a foster child. I'd heard Tamaki mention this herself previously too. In fact, her blonde hair and blue eyes had made me believe she was a Westerner when I first met her.

"Tamaki-chan is an orphan."

She didn't know who her parents were. Apparently, she'd been abandoned long before she could remember anything.

For a while, there was a movement from the wealthy to take in orphans like her and raise them. During that time, Tamaki was adopted into one such wealthy man's home—the Ryuki family.

However, her new parents were *very* temperamental people. Anyone who saw them in public would think of them as kind and gentle, but even the tiniest thing would set them off, invoking a hellish wrath. In moments like these, Tamaki would always be scolded harshly: *"Someone like you is worthless. You are an unwanted child. I should have picked a smarter kid."*

"Wouldn't the people in charge of vetting potential parents refuse someone like that?"

"For the most part, he comes off as a really nice person... plus he keeps up appearances well."

Ah, I see now. So the Ryuki parents are the type that's really good at keeping others' view of them in mind. I was disinterested, though; this was another's problem to worry over.

But truth be told, it was someone just like that who had pushed me so far that I'd thought killing him was the only way out.

"Through it all, Tamaki-chan desperately gave it her all in her studies," Arisu continued. "She pushed, and pushed, and pushed herself... far too much. Tamaki-chan's a very straightforward, diligent person, you see. She tried her very best, pushing herself way past her limits... and, finally, she couldn't take it anymore."

Tamaki's heart broke. Ultimately, the expectations her parents pushed on her proved far too high a hurdle for her. Studying was out of the question; at one point, she even began to experience memory loss.

The Ryuki Residence threw Tamaki, heart still shattered, into this school.

“They abandoned her,” Arisu explained. “You might not know this due to being transferred into the high school, Kazu-san, but to wealthy people like them, this school... to put it plainly, it’s basically a mountain to throw away your kid at.”

Now that I thought about it, this school contained both a middle school and high school and was completely closed off from society. *I’m sure having a place where they could properly dispose of a child by spending a bit of money was rather convenient for them.*

“Wait, then there’s a lot of people like that here?” I asked.

“Yes. In fact, I’m one of those abandoned kids.” Her face devoid of expression, Arisu shrugged her shoulders. When I gazed at her in astonishment, an unusual, slightly cynical smile donned her face.

“I was also an orphan. There weren’t any high expectations placed on me like Tamaki-chan or anything along that vein, but they still wanted to put in this school for the time being. I didn’t really get along with my foster parents, you see.”

“Arisu...”

“Oh, but don’t worry. My parents were at least kind enough to pay the tuition fees up to university... And, besides, now that we’re in this situation, I don’t think it really matters anymore.”

Well, yeah, that’s true. Sighing, I gazed up at the white ceiling. *We’re in another world now, after all.*

“What about you, Mia?”

“My family’s normal. Both my mother and my father are normal. Their two children, however, are kind of nerdy.”

“Why do you sound like a character out of an overseas TV drama introducing herself?”

“Both of the parents feared their daughter was too far gone, and thus shipped her off to a boarding school with few sources of entertainment...” Mia’s eyes

turned distant, and she gazed up at the ceiling. “I still look back regretfully on the day where my parents discovered a mountain of erotic manga hidden behind my bookshelf.”

“And that happened... when you were in elementary school?”

“Huh?” Mia stared at me in surprise. “Isn’t that the norm these days?”

“Don’t go seeking approval from me. Like, I get that you’re at the age where you’re curious about everything, but a *mountain* of porn isn’t normal.”

Mia’s gaze then went from me to Arisu. Arisu’s face flushed deep red and she shook her head.

“In any case, I understand that you were getting your just deserts,” I grumbled.

“Yeah, I have to agree with you there,” Mia said.

“Did your brother also go to this school?”

“My brother brought a sexually explicit game to the elementary school, and it turned into a whole mess...”

So, Mr. Brother, you were the negative influence here. His ability to take initiative was enough for me to consider befriending him. Actually, on second thought, I’d rather not. Still, what an amazing pair these siblings make...

“What about you, Kazucchi?”

“... You’re just making up nicknames for me now?” I sighed. “That’s fine, I guess. Anyway, I took the entrance exam here. My score ended up being pretty high.”

The resulting consequence of that was having to go through that awful harassment. Honestly, looking back on it, I could only admire my ability to step on landmines back then. *At any rate, let’s get back to her.* My gaze fell to Tamaki, still deep asleep in my lap. I stroked her hair softly and she let out a comfortable sniff.

“So she had you, huh, Arisu? Her assertiveness helped you two become fast friends.”

“Yes, that’s true. I’d just transferred in at the time so I had no idea that Tamaki-chan was burning out. One time, I acted just a little bit coldly to her, and...”

“This was the result?” My comment was met with a nod from Arisu. Apparently, it was then that Arisu learned of Tamaki’s past.

“It seems whenever she thinks that she’s betrayed the expectations of someone she trusts, she just falls apart. Usually, she acts like she doesn’t have a care in the world.”

“Then that means... I forced her to take on a heavy burden.”

Tamaki and I had only just met yesterday evening. To be frank, I only thought of our relationship as an indirect one with Arisu acting as an intermediary. I could hardly imagine that she was so—how to put it... involved with me.

“It’s my fault,” Arisu managed to squeak out, head downcast. “I persuaded everyone by telling them that we had no choice but to stick with you after this. If they didn’t, they would die.”

“Erm, did you say that with the intention of helping me?”

Arisu nodded in response, and explained that she’d done so last night.

““So please, everyone, let’s do our best to help Kazu-san’ is what I told them...”

“... By chance, is that why everyone agreed to become Level 1?”

So that’s why. She must’ve held this conversation in the girl’s room while I was fast asleep in my own room. An unforeseen supporting strike. Arisu’s consideration delighted me. *Happiness aside... So that’s the reason the girls listened to me with such little resistance.*

“Oh, but I wasn’t the only one to vouch for you. Shiki-senpai did too.”

“She did?”

“Mm-hmm. ‘Kazu-san is an extremely patient and strong individual so long as you believe in him.’ That’s what Shiki-senpai told them...”

Was it her own type of atonement? Or is she perhaps plotting something?

“So that’s why she stressed out about not letting me down.”

She would find herself abandoned should she fail to meet the established expectations. Once she was convinced of failure, her emotions would overflow like a break in a dam.

What am I going to do with her...?

“You have to reassure her,” Arisu stated. “Tamaki-chan needs to believe that, no matter what she ends up doing, you’re never going to abandon her.”

“If that’s all I have to do, then can’t I take my time convincing her? Fortunately, we have all the time in the world so long as we’re in this place.”

“When I was trying to persuade Tamaki-chan back then, I had her pick up a knife and cut my arm with it. That was how far I had to go to get her to understand that I was fine no matter what she did. Though, the scars have faded already,” Arisu laughed.

The hell? How extreme is she? This was far more intense than I expected from her...

“After that, Tamaki-chan held out her own arm and asked me to hurt her, too... So we took turns hurting each other’s bodies,” Arisu explained. “The scars disappeared entirely when I used Healing Magic yesterday, though,” she added.

“If hurting one another’s enough, then can’t I just do the same?”

“Tamaki-chan and I had been through a lot by that point, so...” Her sentence trailed off.

Ah, so that’s what you mean. Arisu had been with Tamaki for a while yet she still had to take things to such extremes in order to convince her. As such, a much stronger connection would be necessary in my case.

“And that’s why you want me to sleep with her?”

“Yes.” Arisu nodded. Her expression was tense.

What a pain. I sighed.

Chapter 23: Arisu's Feelings & Tamaki's Heart

N*o*, Arisu's the one who thought this whole thing up. She won't let it go. She was determined, that much I was sure of. In fact, this determination of hers had been on full display since yesterday.

I sent a reproachful gaze Arisu's way.

"Erm... Are we aggravating you?" Arisu asked hesitantly.

"Did my expression make it seem that way?"

"No, it's just... I'm sorry if that's what I made you think. If my actions were to ever make you think that Tamaki-chan is useless, I'd..." Arisu's gaze fell, dejected.

No, it's normal to consider the possibility of being hated before considering anything else. I didn't dislike her for that, though. Arisu was an angel.

Confused and unsure of what I should say, my gaze switched from Arisu to Mia. She'd been silent throughout our conversation.

Mia stared at me blankly and tilted her head in confusion. "A harem is a guy's dream, isn't it?"

"That's not what you should be saying!"

"Oh, if you're worried about me peeking, don't worry. I'll turn and face the corner if you guys decide to do it."

"... Listen here."

"No, *you* listen. This is a real issue." Mia affirmed, raising up her index finger. "We don't know when we're going to die. One wrong move and we could find ourselves being raped and killed by an orc. As far as first times go, I'd much rather do it with a slightly interesting, cool-looking guy than a pig. You get that, don't you?"

And just who the hell is this “cool-looking guy” you’re talking about? Well, I’m sure she could only be talking about me. Setting that aside... How can you say something like that with such an earnest look?

“We’re gonna fight to make sure that doesn’t happen, y’hear?” I said.

“Exactly. So, in order to do that, convince Tamaki-senpai,” Mia replied.

I let out a groan, sending a scowl in Mia’s direction. She returned a sly grin and puffed up her tiny chest. *Ha ha ha. You’ve got the nerve to act like you’re all high and mighty. You’ll regret this!*

“For starters, Arisu, are you really okay with this?” I asked. “Your boyfriend would be getting it on with another girl, I mean...”

“I *am* the one who’s making the request, you know?” she shot back.

Fair point. I buried my head into my hands. *Ohhh, how did things end up like this?* It irritated me. Everything about this reeked of suspicion.

“When Tamaki wakes up, help me convince her with everything you’ve got. Does that sound good to you?” I asked. “I’d like your help.”

“Erm... Sure,” Arisu answered hesitantly. “Of course I will.”

Why do you sound so apathetic? Your tone doesn’t match what you’re saying.

“No way!” Mia cried out. “Arisu, you’re a fan of... NTR?”

“Huh? NT-what?”

Ah, another otaku term reared its head. I sighed. *Well, whatever. I’ll just make something up on the spot.*

Mia had a grin plastered on her face. *This damn girl.* I’d make her pay later for sure.

“Oh, it’s just a lame joke, y’know? Yeah.” My courage only went so far. I couldn’t possibly explain something like that to Arisu’s face.

“Umm, so, y-yeah, I can help. If I can, I’ll try to, um...” Arisu’s sentence cut off and her gaze fell downward.

What’s up with her? Was there something I said that I shouldn’t have? Actually, Arisu has been acting weird all day.

Granted, I'd only actually met Arisu *yesterday*, but her train of thought seemed different today compared to yesterday. I couldn't quite put into words what it was that felt off, but it felt like she was scheming something... like she was trying to steer me in a strange direction.

With that said, her actions didn't seem like the type to bring any harm to myself. I could nearly declare with certainty that there was no ill will in her actions. That was simply testament to how much faith I held in Arisu. Being brutally honest, I was heavily under the impression that she was hopelessly in love with me still.

"Arisu, look into my eyes."

"O-Okay."

"You made that request with me in mind, correct?"

"Of course."

Fists clenched tight, Arisu stared straight at me and gave a firm nod. *Ah, what a relief.* But if that was the case, then my concern only deepened.

My eyes closed and I fell into deep thought. *If she's this insistent*, I thought, *then perhaps she really is doing this for my sake.*

Putting aside whether or not this was morally right, something felt *very* wrong. Arisu was a good, honest girl. At the same time, however, she was also very much an idiot. The problem was, she seemed unlikely to tell me for what reason she'd come up with that idea...

Well, no harm no foul, I guess. Fortunately, her idea looked like it had a decent shot at working. If this one failed, we could always come up with another. *First thing's first, we gotta wait for Tamaki to wake up.*

We chatted with one another as time flew by, and before long, Tamaki rose up from my lap. Her eyes were half-open.

"Mmnggh?" She gazed up at me with upturned eyes.

"Morning, Tamaki," I said.

"Yeah, morning, Kazu-san..."

The gears in her head seemed to finally begin spinning, and Tamaki's face flushed a deep red. She separated from me in the blink of an eye before waving her hands around in a fluster, frantically shaking her head while stuttering out nonsense.

Arisu rushed up to her in a hurry and attempted to calm her down.

"U-U-U-Um, th-this isn't, I—I am, I..."

Ultimately, she buried her face in her hands and crouched down where she stood. I sighed and then moved over to where she was, crouching down to match her. I began stroking her silky-smooth blonde hair.

"Your hair feels nicer than Arisu's."

"Mrr." Arisu's cheeks puffed out in jealousy, as though this wasn't her idea to begin with. Seeing her jealousy on full display, a wave of relief washed over me. This gave me the opportunity to confirm that Arisu still liked me. Happiness welled up inside me.

For now, let's leave Arisu's ulterior motives for later. Currently, I needed to do something about Tamaki.

"I... I'm so sorry, for being so useless," Tamaki apologized. "Kazu-san, I... um..."

"Tamaki, listen up," I replied. "First thing's first, I love Arisu."

"Huh?" Stunned by my forceful tone, Tamaki looked up at me in surprise. Upon realizing I was serious, she nodded forcefully. "... Um, yes, I know."

"I don't want her to hate me. I couldn't stand it. Make sense?"

"Y-Yeah, I get it. That's the kind of guy you are, Kazu-san. I believe you."

"Then, the story's simple," I continued. "You believe in Arisu, don't you? So long as Arisu wants me to, I am *never* going to abandon you. Nice and simple logic. Makes sense, right?"

Tamaki's stunned gaze remained glued on me. Before long, it felt like she was burning a hole through me with her eyes.

"... Having trouble?"

"No, I understand," Tamaki replied. "But..."

“But what?”

“I wasn’t able to meet your expectations, Kazu-san. I froze up, and couldn’t do anything but pee myself.” Ashamed, Tamaki did her best to avert her gaze. Making sure to take as kind of a tone as I could, I began to speak.

“Look at me, Tamaki. That’s just not true.” Peering into the girl’s eyes as dark blue as the bottom of the sea, I continued, “There isn’t a person out there who’s good at something their first time. Arisu is no exception, either. She leaked during her first battle, too.”

“Huh?” Tamaki gasped quietly.

“What?! H-Hold on a second, Kazu-san!” Arisu caught on to my plan instantly and reached out her hand toward me. The redness spanning across her face reached even the tips of her ears.

Before she could stop me, Mia moved into action. She nonchalantly slipped behind Arisu and quickly pinned her arms behind her back. *Nice assist!* Honestly speaking, I couldn’t be sure whether Arisu had actually peed herself, but considering the reaction she’d just displayed... I think she might’ve just outed herself.

“This is something I read in a book somewhere, but apparently all the first-responder firefighters dispatched to the 9/11 emergency in New York all pooped themselves.”

“They did?” Tamaki raised her face and stared at me blankly. *Sniff.* Her nose sniveled.

“There’s this thing called hysterical strength. Apparently, it allows you to do things you normally aren’t capable of in emergency situations.”

“Y-Yeah. I’ve heard about stuff like that before... It’s all superstition, isn’t it?”

“No, it isn’t. My knowledge of this is superficial at best but, apparently, a body forced into the utmost state of tension will suddenly awaken this hysterical strength. This is all elementary in the world of psychology, or so I’ve heard.”

Perplexed, Tamaki implored me to continue. Her expression seemed to say, *What about it?*

“However, this hysterical strength momentarily cuts off all non-critical body systems. It diverts all of your strength towards the body parts absolutely necessary at the moment. Pooping yourself is merely the result of all the strength being sapped from your butt muscles and diverted to the parts in dire need of the energy.”

“... Umm, uhh...” Tamaki felt the front of her skirt with her hand. The damp feeling sent to her senses made her frown.

“And so,” I continued my explanation, my expression earnest. “Your body’s reaction is entirely normal, so you don’t need to concern yourself over it... I probably should’ve led with that, huh? At any rate, suddenly making a mess of yourself must’ve been hard on you.”

“I wasn’t that scared.”

“You don’t have to feel embarrassed about it.”

“I did *not* poop myself. Got it?”

“Either way, it doesn’t make a difference to me. Making one or two mistakes is only natural in my opinion.”

“... Huh?” Tamaki’s head bent to the side. Her expression turned blank, then angry, and finally scrunched up, tears gathering in the corners of her eyes. *What a plethora of faces she has. Well, I guess the reason they’re all being put on display is more or less my fault.*

To help enact my revenge on *him*, I’d read each and every book that I could get my hands on about military affairs and bodily functions—a necessary and worthwhile endeavor, as it turned out. While they hadn’t necessarily been of use in my original revenge, they *had* helped me take back Tamaki from her state of confusion.

“Sorry, but I heard about your past from Arisu. And, well, I want you, Tamaki.”

“Wh-Wh-What?! Th-That’s—nyah?!”

What’s with the cat sound? I mean, it didn’t bother me, but still. Also, I’d made a small mistake in my wording.

“I want your heart.” *No, that doesn’t feel right, either.* I raised my hand up to my forehead, groaning as I tried to properly rephrase it.

“Hmm, let me try that again. I want allies that I can trust. If you trust me, in the same way that you and Arisu trust each other, then I’ll trust you too.”

“U-Um, I...”

Tamaki put both of her hands on her cheeks, blushing as she looked up at me. *No, I told you, that was just a misunderstanding. I just misspoke earlier, that’s all it was. Don’t get wrapped up in your own delusion.*

“I know it was just a slip of the tongue, but, um, it made me happy.”

“I-I see.”

“If you’re fine with a girl reeking of pee like me, then... um, I’d like that, as inexperienced as I may be.”

“And so you misunderstood anyway.”

After giving a small bow Tamaki took my outstretched hand and got to her feet. Now eye-level with me, she smiled. “You’re not going to call me useless if I’m wrapped up in this misunderstanding, aaare you?”

“... So that’s how we’re gonna play, huh?”

Grinning mischievously, she turned to face Arisu. Despite giving the OK for the plan herself, Arisu was, for whatever reason, glaring daggers at me.

“Hey, heyyy. What’s wrong, Arisuuu? You’re making a face like your boyfriend just got taken from you.”

Swept up in the moment, Tamaki bopped Arisu’s shoulders.

“I-I don’t know...” Arisu turned away, sulking.

I let out a sigh and shrugged my shoulders, hoping to get back to the topic at hand, when I suddenly felt the soft sensation of someone’s lips brush against my cheek. Tamaki had stepped up to me and smooched me, catching me completely off-guard. The soft feeling of her lips on me lasted only a moment. She stepped back almost immediately, her face a dark red but with a devilish grin on full display.

“Heh heh, that’s all for now, okay?”

I stared back at her, my hand touching the place on my cheek where her lips had been only a moment ago.

I didn’t look in Arisu’s direction. I was too scared. It felt like a piercing gaze was coming from somewhere to my side, but I didn’t dare check. *I’m not going to look! You can’t make me! And why are you mad at me?! This was your idea!*





Okay, let's set that aside for now. I sat down in the chair in front of my laptop, a sigh escaping my lips. *What am I gonna do?*

I calmly reflected on the situation again. Tamaki was not someone exceptional by any stretch of the imagination. If anything, Arisu was just *too* special. Following this incident, I'd come to understand that in entirety.

I mean, think about it. Would a girl who could fight head-on against orcs and face down an elite orc without hesitation be considered the norm? Obviously not. Getting used to combat was a difficult path. Doing it all at once would be too much for her, but she had to get used to this little by little. Otherwise, she'd find herself in a tough situation later down the road.

With the future in mind, Arisu couldn't be the only vanguard against the elite orcs forever. Tamaki would have to grow as well.

The reason I was so fixated on Tamaki was because she had a strong desire to protect Arisu. In a fight against something as terrifying as an elite orc—practically fear incarnate—having the resolve to sacrifice yourself for another would turn itself into gargantuan bravery. I wanted to believe we were in a period of preparation for that end. So, to break this deadlock...

"In the end, the turn-my-familiars-into-sacrificial-pawns strategy is our best option."

That's our best bet. Turning around, my gaze met with Arisu's. Both of her hands were clasped together in front of her chest, and she stared at me with a concerned expression, as though worried about something.

"Hm? Is something wrong?"

"Um..." Arisu hesitated. "Kazu-san, are we not... good enough?"

"I wouldn't say that, but there's no way I'd treat you guys like sacrificial pawns. I just thought I needed to increase our range of tactics. Like, how are we going to deal with the elite orc we'll be squaring off against in a few minutes, for example."

Some solutions had been brought up already. Arisu would fight in the forefront against the elite orc and Mia would support her from behind with magic. This was our basic formation. In the previous strategy meeting, it had been decided that Tamaki would deal with the other orcs during their battle. However, therein lay the problem. Tamaki seemed to have regained her composure now, but I’m sure she was just putting on a brave front. We couldn’t expect her to feel perfectly fine in such a short time frame; as such, I wanted to call upon a more high-grade familiar than the puppet golem. I needed things I could freely make use of and lose without worry. I’d said otherwise to Tamaki, but if I was being honest, I felt far more comfortable fighting with familiars instead of people. *Far, far more comfortable.*

KAZUHISA	
LEVEL: 6	SUPPORT MAGIC: 3
SUMMONING MAGIC: 2→3	SKILL POINTS: 3→0

Pressing down on the enter key, we found ourselves back where we were before. The time for the final battle had arrived.

Bring it on.

Chapter 24: Final Face-off for the Middle School Girls' Dormitory

We returned from the sanctuary of the white room to the front of the Middle School Girls' Dormitory, still in the middle of combat. I quickly surveyed our surroundings.

Wrapped up in my arms was a tearful Tamaki. Not too far away, near the dormitory entrance, was Arisu and her posse of two puppet golems, weapons at the ready. Mia was keeping herself hidden in the nearby thicket.

Right then, a bone-chilling roar rang out from somewhere within the confines of the dormitory. Tamaki's grip on me tightened in response. Arisu assumed a fighting stance. I glanced over at Mia to see that she'd fallen over. Fear must have caused her legs to give out.

This isn't good. Our formation's in shambles right now, and the elite orc will be here any minute...

"Come over here, Arisu! I'll cast Haste on you!"

"H-Huh? But...!"

"Use the golems as disposable shields!"

At nearly the same instant as Arisu breaking out into a sprint in my direction, a bronze-colored orc rushed out from the dormitory entrance. The elite orc had arrived.

The rather bulky enemy raised its axe and gave a light swing, turning one of the puppet golems into a splintered mess with a single blow. Completely destroyed, the golem began to vanish starting from its upper body. The other puppet golem attempted to use its club to bludgeon the elite orc, but its efforts were in vain. *Yeah, that's about how I expected it to go.*

Arisu arrived at my side and I reached out and grabbed onto her.

“Haste,” I chanted. A golden haze began to shine around Arisu’s body. “Now, go get him!”

“Got it!”

The elite orc finished pulverizing the second puppet golem right as Arisu rushed towards the elite orc, iron spear at the ready. She stabbed with the spear at the elite orc, piercing the tip into its chest.

The elite orc let out an angry growl and swung its body to the side, causing Arisu’s petite body to be sent flying. As she tumbled to the ground, she used her momentum to correct her posture and rolled once before coming to a stop. She quickly got back to her feet.

The elite orc charged at her, but Arisu was ready to intercept its attack already thanks to the effects of Haste. Gripping the spear’s handle with both hands, she sent out a sharp thrust toward the orc’s leg. Blue blood sprayed from the wound and showered onto the grass. The hard blow dealt to its bare foot made the elite orc scream out in rage. The strike didn’t appear all that effective but nevertheless seemed to have prevented the orc from pursuing her. Arisu used this to her advantage and immediately put some distance between herself and the orc.

Good, very good. She was making full use of what she learned in yesterday’s battle, forcing the orc to fight at her pace. At the very least, she was buying time.

Meanwhile, I began to summon my newest familiar. “Summon Gray Wolf!”

A wolf sporting a coat of gray fur materialized beside me. Spanning what seemed to be over a meter and a half in length, the intelligent wolf stared up at me with tranquil, blue eyes. *I await your instruction*, its gaze seemed to say.

“Physical Up, Mighty Arm, Haste,” I cast onto the intelligent-looking wolf. Its fur changed colors from gray to gold, a side effect of the Haste spell. Three orcs burst out from the entrance of the girls’ dorm right then, albeit a bit later than planned.

I gently rubbed the back of the wolf’s head, pointing at the new challengers.

“Sic ’em, boy! Buy some time!”

The golden wolf barked once before charging at the three orcs, each of them armed with a sword or spear. The wolf leaped into the air and bit down on the shoulder of the orc leading the charge, dragging the monster to the ground with its teeth. The two other orcs moved to help, launching an attack in the wolf's direction. Sensing the incoming danger, the wolf cleverly gave up on attacking further and quickly leaped back to avoid the incoming spear thrust and sword slash.

Haste's effects meant the wolf's agility far outstripped its normal pace. It led the orcs around by their noses, making sure to only attack when an opportunity presented itself. That being said, even the wolf had its hands (paws?) full with maintaining evasive maneuvers, and had yet to land another attack aside from the opening blow—in fact, small cuts and scrapes were gradually building up on its body, tearing into its golden fur coat. The wolf would soon meet its end once Haste's effects expired.

"Can you stand, Tamaki?"

"Y-Yeah," she nervously replied. "... I'm fine. I can do this." Her face was deathly pale, but Tamaki clenched her teeth and rose to her feet. She looked my way and weakly smiled. "When we came back here, I immediately noticed how my skirt felt soaked. Back there, it had already dried, ha ha..." She grimaced as she looked down at her lower body.

"Think of it as a chance to leak whenever you want," I said.

"You want me to rub this on you?"

"There are a few people out there who would consider that a reward, you know?"

"What are you talking about, you perv," Tamaki giggled. Her hands trembling, she picked up the ax again. I put my hand on Tamaki's shoulder and cast Haste on her, coating her body in a similarly golden shine.

"You can be unsightly. You can be pathetic. It doesn't matter to me—I'll watch over you from start to finish. Now, go get 'em!"

I gave Tamaki a small push to her back, forcing her forward a step. She nearly tripped from the sudden movement and bent backwards to keep herself

upright, turning around to glare at me in protest. And then... she faced forward, straightening her back.

Swallowing nervously, she cried out, “Here I go! You better watch me!”

Tamaki charged forward towards the wolf as it struggled to match the orcs. The orcs’ full attention was focused on the wolf. Tamaki silently snuck up behind the orcs, swinging down her axe at one orc’s defenseless backside.

Her swing cut diagonally through the orc’s body, slashing its body in two from shoulder to opposite hip. Blue blood spilled from the two halves and the orc collapsed to the ground. The orc’s two buddies looked back in shock at Tamaki. Not missing the opportunity, the golden-clad wolf bit down on one of the orc’s shoulders and pulled it to the ground.

The other orc turned to face Tamaki, wary of the unknown but strong enemy it now faced...

Tamaki gave a fierce cry and swung the giant axe downward at the second orc. Her full power strike tore through the orc’s defenses like paper and bisected the creature vertically from head to crotch. The orc’s two halves fell in separate directions and dropped to the ground in a disgustingly bloody mess.

Tamaki panted heavily. She stood upright, unmoved after swinging her axe, bathed in the blue blood of her victims. Meanwhile, the wolf tore into the windpipe of the orc it forced to the ground, bringing its life to an end. A complete and utter victory. Mob Orcs: 0, Us: 1.

“That’s what I’m talking about! Good job!” I cheered.

“Oh... Kazu-san...” Tamaki turned to face me, her face dyed blue. “W-Was I useful?”

“Yeah. You did great.”

“Thank goodness.”

Tamaki’s smile, though clumsy, was as bright as the sun.

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Meanwhile, on the other side of the battlefield, the battle between Arisu and the elite orc was growing fiercer by the minute.

While finding it difficult to continue evading the elite orc's attacks, Arisu was keeping a cautious distance between herself and the orc. I'd been watching over her fight for some time now while still keeping a close eye on Tamaki, searching for an opening to make use of Reflect, but no such opportunity had presented itself.

Maybe yesterday really was just a fluke. Reflection was all about the timing. Arisu would be split into two if I chose to use the spell at the wrong time. Finding a chance to throw Reflection into the conflict was looking difficult without some psychological guidance, at least.

In that case, I simply needed to search for another way.

"Mia! Hey, Mia! Can you cast magic?!" I shouted out to Mia, who was still laying on the forest ground in shock. The elite orc's roar had left her too frightened to move, but at my shout she seemed to finally return to reality, quickly hopping to her feet... She sent a glance my way before her cheeks flushed red.

Ah... So she leaked, too? I wasn't about to blame her, though. That intimidating roar of the elite orc seemed to have a profound effect on severely out-matched opponents.

Ah, I suddenly noticed. Shouldn't we have cast Clear Mind on everyone before the elite orc showed up? What a blunder on my part. I was completely aware of the roar yet failed to take any countermeasures.

Oh well. Once we got back to the white room, I'd hold a meeting and apologize there.

"Mia, can you cast Heat Metal?"

"Mm-hmm! I'll do it!" She nodded before getting to her feet. Mia turned her open palm towards the elite orc's ax right as it attempted to swing it down at Arisu. "Heat Metal!"

A murky brown beam of light shot out from Mia's palm and struck the elite orc's weapon. The orc paid no mind to her attack and swung the ax down

anyway. Arisu managed to avoid the blow by a paper-thin margin, but the air pressure generated by the attack sent her flying, tumbling across the ground.

The elite orc tightened its grip on the ax handle, intent on chasing after Arisu, and tried to lift it... only to hear the sizzling of flesh being burned, a peculiar odor lifting into the air.

The brawny orc screamed out in pain before dropping the large axe.

“Arisu!” I cried.

“On it!”

Arisu leaped to her feet whilst readying her spear and charged at the elite orc. Shouting out a womanly cry, she thrust the iron tip at the orc’s bare chest. The spear pierced through the orc’s flesh easily, dealing a clean shot to its heart.

The elite orc’s cry reverberated through the air. It staggered backwards a few steps before, finally, collapsing powerlessly to the ground there and then. The bronze orc began to gradually fade, the only thing left in its wake being a blue gem similar to the one I’d seen yesterday evening.

“Ah,” came a mutter from everyone but me. “A level up.”

We were warped once more to the white room. *Y’know, come to think of it, defeating that elite orc probably netted enough XP for them to level up, I thought as my vision went white.*

Chapter 25: Earth Magic & Wind Magic

Back in the white room. Blushing furiously, Mia covered the front of her skirt with her hands before scooting away. *Ha ha ha, you fool! If you act so obvious, it only draws more attention to yourself!*

“Good for you, Tamaki. You’ve made a friend,” I snickered.

“Like hell I’m happy about it! You pervert!”

“Bwa ha ha!” I gave the kind of evil laugh you’d hear from a thug before turning to face Mia once again. I took a step towards her while making exaggerated hand motions. Tears spilled from the corners of Mia’s eyes as she backed further away.

“That’s in bad taste, Kazu-san!” Arisu stood in between Mia and I, cheeks puffed up. Her gaze fell slightly, and a saddened expression came over her. “I don’t like it when you’re like that...”

“I’m sorry. I won’t do it again, I promise, so please smile.” I bowed my head obediently in an attempt to appease her.

Arisu was cute whenever she got mad, very much so. That said, I didn’t want to hurt her feelings.

“Oh, I see. So Kazu-san’s weakness is Arisu!” Tamaki teased.

“Isn’t your weakness *also* Arisu?” I retorted.

“Hmm. A fair point! Looks like we’re comrades, huh?” Tamaki cackled with laughter.

Well, well, aren’t you lively for someone who stained their skirt a bit ago? Or so I thought, but her earlobes were red, and she was avoiding any gazes sent her way. If I had to guess, she was just doing her best to hide her embarrassment.

Her shyness made me want to go on the attack. I had to take a moment to restrain that desire welling up inside me. Not because Arisu was giving me a death stare, or anything.

“Erm, so, Arisu, I heard you leveled up.” I spoke awkwardly in an attempt to change the subject.

“... Yeah, I did,” she answered after a pause. “I think all of us did, apart from you.”

Tamaki and Mia should have needed the same XP amount to level up, while Arisu needed a bit more than the two of them. *Half an orc’s worth, maybe?... Calculating this is proving to be a pain.*

I decided to assume that one orc was equal to 60 XP. “Why 60?” you ask? Well, 60 just so happened to be the least common multiple of 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6. Those numbers were, from least to greatest, the number of people you could have in a party at any given time.

Currently, I was Level 6. That meant I needed 420 XP before my next level up. We had four members in our party, so each person would receive 15 XP for every orc killed. After my level up earlier, we had killed three orcs and one elite orc... which meant my current XP was at 120. Another 300 XP and I was certain to level up. Having just leveled up, Arisu’s stockpiled XP was completely empty. Tamaki and Mia needed 240 XP before they’d level up again, and both currently had 30 points stocked up.

Yeah, let’s calculate our levels like this from now on. Now then, back to the main topic.

“You should have 3 skill points right now, Arisu. Do you want to save them for later, or use them to raise the rank of your Healing Magic...?”

“U-Um, if I may...” Seeing Arisu be assertive about something was a rarity. When it came to picking and choosing skills, Arisu would always leave the decision up to me, so this was a first. However, I more or less understood why she wanted to choose this time. I had researched quite a bit about Healing Magic as well. Whatever she was looking for, I was sure that I wouldn’t be clueless about it, at least.

“There’s a spell in Rank 3 Healing Magic called Cure Mind. Even if you’re rooted to the spot by the elite orc’s roar, one use of this and it’ll be like it never happened. A-Also...”

“You want to help ease the burden of the emotional scars of any girls we come across, right?”

“... Right.”

I’m sure the point I highlighted was what she was really after. She, unsure whether she could get me to understand with only that explanation, had instead brought up the former reasoning so I’d go along with her suggestion. That was how I saw it, anyway.

A very crafty trick for you, Arisu, but not crafty enough! I also found this part of her cute. As Arisu stared at me with a beet-red face, embarrassed from being found out, I reveled in her cuteness. *She’s an angel.* I absentmindedly caressed her head, causing the blush on her cheeks to intensify.

Okay, so about that spell... I slipped into thought. The most prominent issue was whether Arisu would have time to cast Cure Mind on other people once an elite orc showed itself.

No, that’s no good. I shook my head. *If Arisu has enough spare time to do that then it would be better spent attacking the enemy instead.* This was, of course, under the assumption that we’d made sure to cast Clear Mind beforehand. *It’ll be a different story once Tamaki gets a bit more used to combat and can face down an elite orc head-on. For now, though...*

My gaze met with Arisu’s. Her hands were clasped tight in front of her chest, and she returned my gaze with a distraught look as I stared at her.

Yesterday, she helped Shiki-san. While she’d relieved Shiki-san of her physical injuries, I was sure Arisu was lamenting the fact she couldn’t do anything to help with her mental scars. This was only going to cause Arisu needless stress. I didn’t understand just how much pain had been inflicted on the girls, so I’d ultimately have to rely on her for that. Furthermore, while it felt awful to say, Tamaki and Mia wouldn’t be of much help in that regard.

If Arisu is saying that the spell is necessary, then I should trust her on this. Besides, a man like me is incapable of truly understanding a woman's trauma.

"All right," I agreed. "Let's raise your Healing Magic."

"Thank you so much, Kazu-san!" A smile bloomed on Arisu's face, one so pure that it brought joy to my face simply by seeing it on hers. *Ahh, damn, she's just too cute.* A wide smile made its way onto my face. Tamaki and Mia were watching us silently, but I chose to ignore that.

Oh, but... I was currently being swept up by my emotions. Perhaps this was interfering with my ability to make sound judgements. *Shit*, I cursed inside my head. Making a decision I might come to doubt later down the line would weigh too heavily on me later.

Try as I might, the shoes of a leader were just too big to fill. I was not equipped with the ability to lead people. *Among our current ranks, the only people that can do something like that would be...*

I fell into thought. Or so I'd like to say, but the answer was obvious: the one and only Yukariko Shiki. There was no doubt about it—she was a natural born leader. Disregarding my personal apprehensions about her, letting her act as the mediator was for the better.

But then that raised another question: would I be able to follow her orders?

It would be difficult, that was for sure. My heart was warped, and I was aware of this. I couldn't be honest about what I thought, and this was bound to cause some anxiety in the current situation.

Matters of the heart were complicated, especially if they were your own. Normally, you could simply ignore those who refused to cooperate. However, the term "normally" didn't apply to our current situation. These were hard times. Limited human resources, limited friendlies, and limited means. Was it really permissible for me to have the luxury of fussing over personal feelings when taking action?

"Tamaki, Mia. What are you guys planning on doing with your skill points?"

"I think I'll save mine. I want to raise my Swordsmanship skill to Rank 3 as soon as I can."

“I...” Mia hesitated before continuing. “I’d like to hear your opinion on whether I should increase the rank of Wind Magic, or save the points for now to increase the rank of Earth Magic later. Also, if you could conjure up a cloth with Summon Cloth, I’d be most grateful.”

“A cloth?”

“To, um... *hide it...*” Mia’s voice grew so quiet that I wasn’t able to catch the end of her sentence.

The petite girl cast her gaze downward, tears in her eyes. *Oh, that’s why.* I nodded. She wanted to get out of her soiled underwear and skirt. If we were going to be here for a while, it only made sense that the two girls wanted to strip out of their uncomfortable garments as soon as possible.

I summoned two large cloths using the Summon Cloth spell and handed them over. They each took one and wound them around their waists before they removed their skirts and underwear, hiding the soiled clothing behind them. Once they were finished, they sat down.

I was scared of what Arisu might do if I looked so I kept my gaze elsewhere, ruminating about what I should do. The sound of clothing rustling behind me wrecked my concentration, but I managed to keep my focus on Mia’s enquiry. *Hmm, yes, let’s see... Which would be better to raise, Earth Magic or Wind Magic?*

“Wait, you didn’t even *use* Wind Magic once in this fight, did you?” I asked.

“I was planning on making a smokescreen with Smog if we needed to escape.”

Smog was a Rank 1 Wind Magic spell that created a thick fog to hang over the surroundings. As stated, she was going to invoke the spell if we decided on fleeing. Looking at it from another angle, however, this meant using the spell would prove difficult unless you were on the run. And, unless you came equipped with some infrared night vision equipment like the kind used by the military, your field of vision would be reduced considerably. Some kind of accident was bound to happen.

“Also, if we need to perform a surprise attack, I can use Sleeping Song to put the orcs to sleep.”

“Rather than have you cast that with your low MP, I think it’d be better to let Arisu simply catch them off-guard... I wanted to lure them out with the sounds of combat.”

“In the future, once my level goes up and my MP surplus increases, Sleep will be useful seeing as it’s a Rank 1 spell.”

As she said, Rank 1 Wind Magic did not possess any strong, direct attacks. The two other spells in Rank 1 Wind Magic’s repertoire were Air Blast and Soft Landing, the former buffeting an opponent with fierce winds to push them away and the latter reducing the rate at which you fell. Either one could be very powerful depending on how you used the spell, in my opinion, but as far as this battle was concerned, I was leaning more towards other options. As for Rank 2 Wind Magic...

“I’m certain that Silent Field will prove extremely useful if we go on the offensive down the line.”

Silent Field was a spell which could use either a person or an object as the target; it created a space in which sound did not travel. If the spell’s target moved, so did the spell itself. The radius was about three meters. This spell would allow everyone in a party to move and act without creating any footsteps, so long as they stayed inside of the field as they moved. You could shut out the sounds of combat, or even perform silent but deadly assassinations like the ones in period dramas.

“Other than that, there’s the direct-type attack spell, Sonic Edge. Of course, Earth Magic is also capable of launching direct attacks, so it’s nothing new,” Mia said.

“All right. And if you decide on saving the points for later to increase your Earth Magic’s rank, what does Rank 3 have in store for us?” I asked.

“There’s one spell rather suited for you, Kazucchi: Earth Pit. A spell that digs a hole.”

“That’s it!” I shouted, suddenly thrusting my finger out towards Mia. The unexpected movement made Mia shrink back in surprise, nearly giving me a glimpse of the contents hidden behind the white cloth wrapped around her lower half.

“You just tried to peek, didn’t you? Pervert.”

“Listen, I wasn’t trying to...”

“*Per. Vert.*”

The three girls in the room shot me looks that could kill.

“I’m sorry.” Unable to hold my ground to their numbers, I quickly conceded and gave a gallant bow.

“That’s that,” Mia gave a cheeky grin as she dismissed me. *Damn you!*

“Ahem,” I cleared my throat to get us back on track. “Arisu is going to increase the rank of her Healing Magic. For you two, though, I think you should save your points for later. Your levels are still low, so I’d rather you guys focus on one skillset for now.”

No one objected. The previous battle must have instilled a sense of powerlessness in Tamaki and Mia. Both of them looked eager to catch up to me and Arisu as quickly as they could.

“All right, I think that wraps up this meeting.”

Our party returned to the regular world.

ARISU	
LEVEL: 6	SPEARMANSHIP: 3
HEALING MAGIC: 2→3	SKILL POINTS: 3→0

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

Mia	
LEVEL: 3	EARTH MAGIC: 2
WIND MAGIC: 1	SKILL POINTS: 2

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Sending in a raven first to scout out the place, we set foot inside of the girls’ dormitory, exercising caution as we moved.

Our first place of interest was the dining hall. An offensive odor reached our noses as we stepped inside, making us all frown in disgust. Destroyed remains of chairs and tables were everywhere, and the center of the room was cleared out. A pile of naked girls was formed there. As far as I could tell, there looked to be about fifty people stacked up in the pile.

No, “people” isn’t the right word. “Bodies” is a more accurate term. Every single girl strewn in the pile standing in the center of the room was dead. Arisu, our vanguard, gasped in shock. Tamaki and Mia stood motionless and gazed at the appalling scene before them at a loss for words.

“Is everyone... dead?” Tamaki let out a shocked murmur.

“No.” I shook my head. “Look there.”

I pointed to the wall. About ten girls were laying there nude, collapsed against the wall. I could just barely make out the rising and falling of their chests.

“They’re alive!” Arisu shouted out as she broke into a sprint towards them.

<Another World Survival: Min-maxing My Support and Summoning Magic will continue in Volume 2>

Back Matter

Author: Tsukasa Yokotsuka In the middle of doing some admiral tasks on a certain ship-girl training web browser game, the thought of wanting to create a story on **Let's Become a Novelist** crossed his mind, and he began to write stories. Flash forward to the present day, and... the admiral tasks have been completed less and less recently (as of August 2014).

Illustrations: Manyako

A freelance illustrator hailing from the Saga prefecture, and currently residing in Tokyo. Their work mainly consists of novel and game illustrations (as of August 2014).



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